African American Opera Singers, 1850-1950: Ambition, Uplift, and Performance

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African American Opera Singers, 1850-1950: Ambition, Uplift, and Performance
by
Elena Arredondo Farel

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of Washington University in
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Elena Arredondo Farel

Washington University in St. Louis

May 2022
For David.
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

African American Opera Singers, 1850-1950: Ambition, Uplift, and Performance

by

Elena Arredondo Farel

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

Music

Washington University in St. Louis, 2022

Professor Alexander Stefaniak, Chair

This dissertation explores African American engagement with opera in the United States between the 1850s—when Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, dubbed the “Black Swan,” drew comparisons to white superstar Jenny Lind—and the 1940s, when Black singers began to access “white” stages such as the Metropolitan. I foreground how musicians who knew they would never receive a fair hearing acted not just as singers, but as entrepreneurs, managers, composers, and collaborators in order to create careers for themselves. In order to do so, these singers navigated a complex set of aspirations and realities. Black opera singers engaged with ideologies of racial uplift, contemporary attitudes toward class and gender, uncertain divisions between “high” and “low” performing arts, and racism within the culture of classical music. Within and beyond musicology, African American opera gives us a chance to productively synthesize and transform the studies of opera, American studies, and African and African American studies.

In this work, I examine and contextualize case studies which provide multi-layered spaces in which to analyze performers’ activities and agency. Chapter One studies Black music historiography from the 1870s through the 1930s. These authors engaged with artistic canons and ideologies of racial uplift while creating an alternate narrative of classical music which centered
Black musicians’ histories, successes, and potential futures. In Chapter Two, I examine the performance strategies and career choices of the nineteenth-century African American Queens of Song, several Black women who performed operatic standards and ballads in concert. Through their efforts, these women created a possibility of the Black prima donna in the American imagination. Chapter Three focuses on Sissieretta Jones, known as the “Black Patti.” Her public career was the longest of all the Queens of Song: a decade as a concert singer, followed by almost twenty more years on the vaudeville stage, singing operatic excerpts as the frontwoman of the Black Patti Troubadours, an entirely Black troupe. Jones’ own scrapbook and the complex archive generated throughout her long career enable a particularly close look at how she created performing opportunities and her image as a glamorous, yet respectable prima donna. In Chapter Four, I explore how Black singers turned particular works from the operatic canon into professional gateways. I argue that Black singers were often given roles which resonated with contemporary racial stereotypes, and then re-interpreted them as acts of resistance. In chapter Five, I analyze Jules Bledsoe, who made his reputation with the musical Show Boat, and how he navigated race, sexuality, and black masculinity in opera through his performances and compositions. Although Bledsoe has been marginal in studies of Black classical musicians, he opens a window into the lived experience of Black men on the operatic stage.

These case studies all emphasize the malleability of performance: even the most ironclad giants of the canon are subject to the directors who stage them, and even more so to the performers who bring them to life. Through centering these performers and their choices among the currents of the world in which they lived, commonalities arise between their choices and the work that performers still do today. Whether or not their names are remembered, or their voices are recorded, their impact remains.
Introduction

“Happy Birthday Leontyne! America’s greatest Aida turns 93 today. Here’s a salute we gave her for her 90th.” –NPR Classical Facebook Page, February 10th, 2020

“America’s greatest Aida.” Over her long career, Leontyne Price sang any number of roles, including her early-career success as Bess in *Porgy and Bess*; performing both the title role in *Tosca* and *The Magic Flute’s* Pamina on the NBC Opera Broadcasts in the late 1950s; her Metropolitan Opera debut as Leonora in *Il Trovatore* in 1961; and Cleopatra in Barber’s *Antony and Cleopatra* which inaugurated the Lincoln Center theater in 1966. And yet, what first came to an NPR writer’s mind more than thirty years after her retirement was *Aida*.

When Leontyne Price emerged on the operatic scene, she joined a century-long legacy of singers, directors, writers, teachers, and entrepreneurs who had worked to create a space for African American performers on the operatic stage. This is at the core of this dissertation: how Black opera singers have created stages for their own artistry, and how audiences both Black and white have reacted. I explore the prologue to the more famous breakthroughs in the story of Black opera singers, such as Grace Bumbry at Bayreuth or Marian Anderson at the Met, from the 1850s—when Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, dubbed the “Black Swan,” drew comparisons to white superstar Jenny Lind—to 1940s, when Black singers began to access “white” stages such as the Metropolitan Opera. I foreground how musicians who knew they would never receive a fair hearing acted not just as singers, but as entrepreneurs, managers, composers, and collaborators in order to create careers for themselves. In order to do so, these singers navigated

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a complex set of aspirations and realities, closely entwined with seismic changes in the United States cultural landscape from the Civil War to the Civil Rights movement. They engaged with ideologies of racial uplift, performing music considered a pinnacle of Western culture and a route toward celebrity and success—and at the same time navigated what scholar Jennifer Stoever calls the “sonic color line” and racism within the culture of classical music. In addition to these historical frameworks, which lie at the heart of my analyses, African American opera singers negotiated contemporary attitudes toward class and gender as well as uncertain divisions between “high” and “low” performing arts. They balanced personal, professional, and cultural stakes: at once deeply invested in their own careers as opera singers, opera as an art form, and what art could do for their communities.

Opera is, in some ways, especially suited for this work of navigating cultural formations. Its position at the intersection of popular and elite culture, its spectacle and melodrama, and its reputation as “foreign” to English-speaking countries all created a space at once central and yet borderline, reflecting the culture which canonized it, but never ceasing to test boundaries.

Daphne Brooks’ *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* centers on what Brooks dubs “Afro-alienation,” a theory by which marginalized performers convert that alterity into specific strategies of cultural performance. Brooks argues:

Afro-alienation acts invoke largely anti-realist forms of cultural expression in order to call attention to the hegemony of identity categories. This strategy also provides a fruitful terrain for marginalized figures to experiment with culturally innovative ways to critique and to disassemble the condition of oppression. Generically diverse and dissident, Afro-alienation acts draw from the tactics of heterogeneous performance strategies—in visual media, Victorian magic, religious, classical, and secular song, breeches and drag performances, transnationalist musicals, spiritualism, and modern dance—in order to defamiliarize the spectacle of “blackness” in transatlantic culture. In particular, these acts rewrite the ubiquitous master narrative of minstrelsy, with its colonizing and constrictive
figurations of grotesque and immobile “blackness.”
Brooks does not specifically invoke opera, but the genre is a textbook “anti-realist form of
cultural expression,” involving visual media, song and dance, costume, “magical” effects—
everything Brooks lists as tactics for these acts of alienation and creation. Opera’s archetypal
stories, broad-stroke plots and characters, and accepted lack of realism made it the perfect field
for Black singers and actors to take on expanded roles and to portray themselves as artists and as
Black people in ways different from the limited stereotypes of minstrel performance.

My goal is to foreground the voices of these figures whenever possible, heard through the
extensive archives they created as writers, performers, and curators of their own legacies. These
voices are important to opera studies, to studies of American culture and musical life, and to
work in the music of the Black diaspora and on Black performance. They are also, I believe,
important for themselves: for performers who sought a spotlight which was more often than not
denied them, and for the labors they undertook and the successes they found along the way.

Scena

The singers and writers whom I consider here navigated some of the biggest, most
disruptive cultural shifts of their time. Global transformations of culture occurred throughout the
Victorian Era, Gilded Age, World War I, the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, and World
War II. In particular, the cultural changes in this period in art and music, and in attitudes toward
race and gender, bear on all the chapters of this dissertation, and thus I want to sketch out the
landscape in which these musicians built their careers. Racial uplift ideology, gender, colorism,
the shifting business of music, and the ever-present specter of minstrelsy all informed how these

2 Daphne Brooks, Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910 (Durham and
musicians developed their professional identities.

Ideologies of racial uplift were fundamental to how African American audiences approached classical music. Black community leaders first formulated these principles after the Civil War and Reconstruction, a period often referred to as the nadir of race relations in the United States. Being “free” was necessary but not sufficient—not when that freedom came with no equal treatment under the law or in society. African American leaders developed a rich infrastructure to support a broader push for social advancement: neighborhoods, churches, and schools which aimed to create a new generation of Black professionals and citizens. The early HBCUs were critical to the community as a whole, and to Black engagement with classical music in particular. They laid a foundation for Black musical scholarship, and their choirs and Jubilee Singers, modeled after Fisk’s famous troupe, gave African American composers and conductors a set of performers to work with. Kira Thurman describes how German Romantic music became inculcated at the HBCUs, modeled after the instruction that their early faculty had gotten at integrated conservatories such as Oberlin and the New England Conservatory of Music. The programs at Fisk, Howard, Spelman, and Morehouse had choirs and orchestras, taught music theory and history after the latest German methods, and hosted “Mozart evenings” and “Wagner evenings” as social and cultural events.\(^3\) This was one part of the constellation of strategies referred to as racial uplift. Historian Maurice Hobson explains the central conceit of the movement, as well the inherent elitism which formed part of the approach:

This movement grounded itself in self-help as service to the Black masses. In this the Black elite and middle classes attempted to distinguish themselves from the Black masses as agents of civilization by cultivating “positive” images of Blacks to challenge perceptions of pathology and contempt held by Whites. A central assumption of racial uplift was that Black material and moral progress would diminish White racism.

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However, the shortcoming was that the emphasis on class distinctions and patriarchal authority, as racial uplift, was inextricably linked to the same pejorative notions of racial pathology that Whites held against Blacks.  

Different philosophies and applications of uplift are often simplified into the debates between W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington in the 1890s and 1900s. Each man was a complex, multifaceted writer, and there were more schools of thought regarding uplift than what they espoused, but DuBois and Washington clashed publicly enough that their respective approaches to uplift shaped overall discourse. DuBois focused on the importance of a thorough liberal arts education, such as the one he received at Harvard, especially for those he deemed the “talented tenth”: middle-class potential leaders in the Black community. Booker T. Washington turned to industrial education for a larger number of African American students, especially in the South, pulling oneself “up by the bootstraps” economically as a prelude to social equality. Black classical musicians, as highly visible symbols of education and achievement, appealed to both of these ideologies—as one would expect, they aligned with DuBois in the value of the “liberal arts,” and yet writers such as Amelia Tilghman and J. Hillary Taylor simply expanded Washington’s practical, self-help focus to include music.

Music, especially “classical” music, served multiple purposes for artists and writers who advanced the cause of racial uplift. In his book *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943*, Lawrence Schenbeck argues that many of these figures championed European musical culture in order to contradict conceptions of Blackness rooted in minstrelsy, as cultural luminaries encouraged both white and Black Americans to adopt middle-to-upper class, educated European

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models over a “rouglier” or “inferior” American folk culture.⁵ Almost all of the writers and singers in this dissertation were at least somewhat invested in the development of classical music, and many were passionate advocates of the Western European musical tradition. Thurman argues, “German art music also allowed Black Americans to envision a musical world beyond the United States. The aesthetic and professional choices of Black classical musicians cannot be reduced to a binary pole of assimilation into white America on one hand or the cultivation of an ‘authentically’ Black identity on the other.”⁶ “Racial uplift” was a broad group of ideologies, with competing definitions, and throughout this period it was marked in different ways.

African American music educators did not always consider opera the most ideal vehicle for this uplift. Oratorios, choral pieces, art songs, and instrumental works were the core of HBCU music curriculums. Thurman writes that these departments did not consider opera “respectable enough” for middle-class students, especially Black women.⁷ It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that opera in America became a respectable form of “high art” and educated, upper-class taste. Jenny Lind’s 1850 tour of the United States was the turning point in this transition, creating a possibility for opera singers to be “respectable” in the public imagination. Mid-nineteenth-century, middle-class society expected women to be pure, pious, domestic, and submissive, the “light of the home” rather than public actors.⁸ However, upper-and middle-class whites excluded Black and working-class women from this pedestal, as well as women such as opera singers who displayed themselves in public. In contrast to the dominant

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⁷ Ibid., 36.
⁸ This ideal has been summed up by Barbara Welter as the “Cult of Domesticity” or the “Cult of True Womanhood” in “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860” *American Quarterly* 18 (2): 151-174. Frances Cogan complicates the hegemony of Welter’s cult in *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), but neither definition of nineteenth-century womanhood looks kindly on opera singers or upon women of color.
stereotype of stage women, Lind was conspicuously pious, singing religious music and giving the proceeds to charity; she was pure and unimpeachable in her conduct; and she was very, very white. However, Jenny Lind provided template which both white and Black women could use to perform genteel, feminine artistry. Black women engaged with this model of musicianship as well: they studied music, taught, and used classical and operatic music to portray genteel femininity within the private sphere of parlor performance. Of course, women of color had to grapple with additional institutional obstacles and public prejudices. Blackface minstrelsy, for example, had become the preeminent form of popular culture in America over the last two or three decades. The predominant “Black women” on stage before the Civil War were the white men in blackface and drag who portrayed noxious stereotypes of “Mammies” and “Jezebels” during minstrel shows.

Despite these challenges, African American women carved out an ever-increasing public space for themselves as musicians. By the time of the Harlem Renaissance, in New York, Chicago, and other urban centers, church organists, piano teachers, and “classical” vocal soloists were integral parts of middle-class Black communities. Organists and music teachers, mostly women, played just as fundamental a role in their musical communities as teachers of Western art music and musical racial uplift. Teaching music lessons was one of the few ways in which a middle-class woman could earn a respectable income, and playing the piano or organ for church and civil events was a way in which professional female musicians engaged publicly with their communities. And, although being a chorus girl was by no means a “respectable” occupation, several African Americans used the unexpected venue of the vaudeville stage to present

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10 See Chapter 10, “‘She takes up music as a profession’: Career Women,” in Bailey, *Unbinding Gentility*, 171-98.
themselves as opera singers, using a performance genre associated with dance and spectacle to promote classical musicianship.

African American and white audiences alike had race at the forefront of their minds as they listened to African American vocalists. For example, both Marie Selika (chapter two) and Sissieretta Jones (chapter three) dressed in the persona of the African Queen for concerts and shows, modeled after the role of Selika in Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine*. Both women performed opera as part of variety bills with Black companies—and were accused of “selling out” by Black critics who wanted to see them remain strictly classical concert singers. Yet Otheman Stevens, reviewing the Black Patti Troubadours in Los Angeles, wrote, “when they seek to get away from their racial traits, there is a pathetic sadness to their efforts, as their limitations are harshly denoted.” Jules Bledsoe (chapter 5) was hailed as a Harlem Renaissance man-about-town by New York African American newspaper. But when he performed in a tuxedo, one anonymous reviewer referred to his suit as a “waiter’s costume.” These performers were situated in a place where African American concepts of class and success directly conflicted with white audiences and racist tropes about the “proper” way for Black entertainers to present themselves in public, most of which derived from minstrelsy.

Another pervasive way in which racism, sexism, and class bias against and within African American communities affected Black vocalists was the phenomenon of colorism—society in general, both white and Black, treating lighter skin, straighter hair, and more European features as more attractive and desirable. This was a major factor in the reception of Sissieretta Jones and the other Queens of Song, as these women were dubbed in nineteenth-century media:

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2. Scrapbook of Jules Bledsoe, Box 17. Jules Bledsoe Collection. Also cited in Chapter 5. The name of the newspaper is not preserved in the clipping, and thus I cannot say the race of the writer with certainty.
Teresa Reed observes that critics were much more focused on the skin and hair of the darker Jones and Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield than they were on the appearances of singers such as the Hyers Sisters or Marie Selika, who had lighter skin and straight hair.13 Throughout the period of this dissertation, white critics and audiences found lighter-skinned women with obvious “white” heritage easier to take seriously as performers of “white” classical music. The popular media of the time further reinforced this ideal. The theatrical and literary phenomenon of the “tragic mulatta,” explored in Chapter Four, fixates on a woman who looked essentially white, but was still legally Black, as an object of both heroic and villainous desire in popular entertainment. Darker-complexioned women played stereotypical maids and mammies, such as Aunt Chloe in both the novel and numerous adaptations of Uncle Tom’s Cabin or Hattie McDaniel’s portrayal of Mammy in Gone With the Wind. Especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Black communities regarded lighter skin as a key indicator of the middle class: one facet of the complicated cultural tangle which inflected African American engagement with classical music.

Race, class, and gender also affected how Black artist performed in a changing musical market. Outside of minstrelsy, classical vocalists found success in popular opera: during the early and mid-19th century, opera troupes performing translated, adapted versions of canonic classics were part of the patchwork of popular travelling entertainment as well as minstrel shows. The Queens of Song fit into this part of the cultural landscape, buoyed by opera’s increasing cultural capital, but not yet shut out by primarily white institutions. Katherine Preston’s work shows that travelling and local opera companies in the United States provided a field in which talented women could be stars, directors, and managers, wielding creative and entrepreneurial

power in a way unheard of in other businesses.\(^4\) Black women had more barriers to their access, but Nellie Brown Mitchell and the Hyers Sisters both served their companies as prima donna and manager combined. However, by the early twentieth century, opera was firmly ensconced as “high art,” with no place for African Americans on primarily white stages.\(^5\) Opportunities for touring opera performers and troupes dried up, especially for singers of color. Meanwhile, vaudeville emerged as a major marketplace from the late nineteenth century until it was hit by the Great Depression and the burgeoning film industry in the 1930s. Thus, between World War I and World War II, Florence Cole Talbert, Caterina Jarboro, Jules Bledsoe, Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and more went to Europe for further training and what they hoped would be more friendly audiences. However, the steps taken in Europe in the 1930s were reversed with the advent of World War II, when most African American singers in Europe—especially those in Germany and Austria—returned to the United States ahead of Nazi aggression.

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield faced a very different world in the 1850s than Sissieretta Jones did in the 1890s or 1910s, or Jules Bledsoe did in the 1920s and 1930s. But these different cultural landscapes were not independent of each other: they built on and inflected each other. All of these singers performed opera at a time when Black singers were systematically barred from mainstream operatic stages. They influenced each other either directly, as when Nellie Brown gave Flora Batson her first break as her understudy, and when Maud Cuney Hare’s 1936 \textit{Negro Musicians and Their Music} directly quoted James Monroe Trotter’s 1878 \textit{Music and Some}

Highly Musical People. These influences could also be more indirect, as the fame of Sissieretta Jones inspired Abbie Mitchell and other young women in the nineteen-aughts to aspire to the mantle of the “Black Patti,” or how Marie Williams’ assumption of the stage name Selika and the role of Meyerbeer’s African queen likewise influenced how Florence Cole Talbert and Caterina Jarboro played Aida in the 1920s and 1930s. By exploring these singers, we can understand one way in which performers and audiences grappled with these thorny realities being staged and navigated before their eyes and ears, and the range of ways in which they responded to this musical and cultural landscape. Both the words of the writers and the works performed by the singers were part of African American artists’ creative and professional strategies to take the stage and to be heard.

Dramatis personae

This dissertation focuses on several case studies, as well as the intellectual backgrounds of canon formation and Black music historiography during the focus period. I draw together methodologies and scholarly conversations from three fields: opera studies, American culture studies, and, more broadly, studies of the music of the Black diaspora. Within opera studies, I build upon the analyses of Susan Rutherford, Rachel Cowgill, and Hilary Poriss, as well as other work on operatic performance practice and European prima donnas, considering how performers of color in the United States inflect their conclusions.16 Black singers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries knew about and modeled themselves after their white European counterparts, and even if they did not, audiences made the connections, dubbing performers the “Black

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Mario”, the “Bronze Melba”, or the “Black Patti.”

This work also engages with the scholarship on Black opera which has emerged in the last decade. Naomi André’s *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* and the edited multiauthor volume *Blackness in Opera* are fundamental to this area: André’s work chronicling, analyzing, and contextualizing Black opera and its critical and scholarly reception is foundational to this dissertation.\(^{17}\) Although her main focus is on repertoire in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, André acknowledges the importance of the nineteenth century in the first chapter to *Black Opera*. In her 2021 book *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms*, Kira Thurman has studied African American musicians in Germany and Austria during this same time period. Her performer-focused scholarship is a model for my own, and the information on Black singers in Europe provides a valuable counterpoint to my discussion of their activities in the United States. Lucy Caplan and Kristen Turner have both written dissertations and articles on African American opera, including Harry Lawrence Freeman and the Drury Opera Company, and their work complements mine. There is still a huge amount of work to be done in the fields of simply figuring out what happened—the outlines of singers’ careers, the repertoire of recitals, what happened to musicians after they faded from print spotlights—as well as the analysis of what this meant and continues to mean for opera and music, as well as race and gender, in America.

My contribution in this work, which focuses on some specific singers, their repertoire, and the histories built around them, is meant to complement other work that primarily focuses on performers in different contexts, and the scholars who focus primarily on composers, works, or operatic portrayals of Black characters. In particular, I use repertoire in order to understand

singers and their agency, and how particular works—such as *Aida*—influenced the careers of the people who performed them. Part of this understanding is a broad interpretation of musical canons and their influence: not just canonic *works*, but also the larger norms, ideologies, biases, and unwritten practices of operatic culture. Singing techniques, gender performance, and ideologies of high art are just as influential as works in the performing world which Black performers faced.

In this dissertation, I use the terms Black and African American to refer to the artists whom I study.\(^{18}\) However, I have sometimes found it necessary to quote historical primary sources which use different terms, some of which we regard today as either dated or noxious. In the late nineteenth century, “colored” was still considered polite terminology, as in Washington, D.C.’s Colored American Opera Company or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. In the early twentieth century, “Negro” became the preferred term, in works such as Alain Locke’s anthology *The New Negro* or the National Negro Opera Company. I only use these terms when referring to organizations or titles, or quoting writers from these time periods. Occasionally, I have come across reviews that use offensively racist language, and I only quote them to illustrate just how nasty and openly expressed the prejudice against Black artists often was. When language itself has been used as a tool for violence, the language to describe that violence becomes charged, and it has been my goal throughout to treat these artists with the respect they deserved and were not always granted.

*Libretto*

I have primarily based my research on archival sources, many heretofore unexplored.

Sissieretta Jones’ scrapbook at Howard University’s Moorland-Spingarn Research Center and Bledsoe’s extensive archive in the Texas Collection at Baylor University both offer important information about these singers’ work and worlds, as well as how they sought to shape their own legacies. I have augmented these collections with material from the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Columbia University, the collections of the Library of Congress, and numerous digitized collections of African American newspapers. These materials include published sheet music, unpublished manuscripts, programs, news clippings, photographs, and in the case of Bledsoe, his personal letters and journals. This variety contextualizes a picture of artistic practice and reception.

My goal with these archival materials is to center the voices and the agency of my subjects: to foreground their on-the-ground perspectives of what their art meant, and how their initial listeners regarded them. Since, with the exception of Jules Bledsoe, they were not recorded, “hearing” is an act of reconstructing sound through reviews, letters, and scores. The repertoire performed by these singers—especially the music written for them, such as the “Selika Grand Vocal Waltz of Magic” and Bledsoe’s compositions—give a sense of their musical strengths and weaknesses. Interviews and even personal letters are always mediated with some sense of their audience, but they also provide some sense of how these performers saw themselves, their art, and their legacies. Saidiya Hartman’s work provides one model for elucidating people and their stories from archival silences.19 My goal is to foreground primary sources associated with these musicians and their colleagues, collaborators, and listeners as much as possible, in order to better understand how they saw their artistic and cultural significance.

As I have attempted to recover these voices, I am also indebted to theorists of the aural

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construction of race and Blackness in music. For African American performers, critical reception is often tainted by racist expectations for African Americans onstage, while Black writers levelled approbation at performers perceived as setting African Americans back or not holding themselves to the standards of role models. Reviews and retrospectives must then be read critically, bearing in mind the prejudices and journalistic standards of their days. Jennifer Lynn Stoever’s *The Sonic Color Line*—especially her discussion of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield— informs both my discussions of cultural archetypes and operatic reception in the mid-nineteenth century.²⁰ Daphne Brooks’ *Bodies in Dissent* also theorizes Black bodies in performance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how race and gender play into “spectacular” performances. While Brooks does not specifically focus on opera, her analysis suits *Aida* as well as it does *In Dahomey*. Nina Sun Eidsheim’s work on Marian Anderson in *The Race of Sound* is directly applicable to how opera singers navigate the perception of a “Black voice” as it intersects with operatic training and a classical vocal affect.²¹ This work informs my understanding of nineteenth-century critics as I unravel insights about voice and performance from heavily raced and gendered prose. Julia Chybowksi points out that “sonic Blackness,” the “sonic color line,” and Matthew D. Morrison’s “Blacksound”²² all emphasize the importance of music in creating perceptions of racial and cultural difference. Many of these scholars focus particularly on “Black” musics—blues, jazz, and other popular American genres. However, this negotiation of sound and race is just as important for “white” art music. Chybowski insists:

> In so far as their authors all acknowledge the legacy of nineteenth-century musical performance on later periods, they also (however inadvertently) point to the importance

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of minstrelsy’s (mis)treatment of Greenfield’s musical career. Knowledge about Greenfield’s career and reception is fundamental to our understanding of nineteenth-century US musical culture and its legacy.\textsuperscript{23}

I expand Chybowski’s point, which Thurman also makes in her work, throughout the period of this dissertation: from Greenfield, to Sissieretta Jones and the other Queens of Song, to Jules Bledsoe and the operatic ventures of Theodore Drury’s Drury Opera Company and Mary Cardwell Dawson’s National Negro Opera Company. Although these figures are marginalized within histories of opera today, they were highly prominent in their own time. They advertised in mass media, generated volumes of written discourse, and sang before massive audiences: Jules Bledsoe, for example, performed \textit{Aida} in front of over 5,000 people in the New York Hippodrome in 1933, and even more in the Cleveland Stadium the previous year. They embodied high-society glamour despite the restrictions of Jim Crow. These stories are important for the history of classical music culture in America, studies of Black diasporic music, and performer studies in opera. They are also important because these writers, composers, and singers spent their lives working to have careers in music, navigating stereotypes, genres, and gender roles in any number of creative ways in order to create stages in order to perform. That work has been underrepresented, and deserves to be acknowledged.

\textit{Scenario}

Chapter One examines Black music historiography and other writing about classical music from James Monroe Trotter through the 1930s. These works are important for this dissertation in three ways. First, I use them for biographical material and initial reception for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century figures. Second, especially in the twentieth century, these

works circulated among Black middle-class communities and musicians, including the singers I explore in subsequent chapters. Third, they create a window into the cultural worlds, both social and artistic, from which they came. I also argue that these works engaged in a counter-narrative similar to that of Black singers taking on “white” roles or prima donna personae, through their direct engagement with and refutation of the mainstream general music histories which were popular during the same time period. These authors engaged with artistic canons, racial uplift, and mainstream prejudice, while creating an alternate narrative which centered Black musicians, their histories, their successes, and their potential futures.

In Chapter Two, I examine the nineteenth-century Queens of Song both individually and as a group in order to examine their performance strategies and how they built stages for themselves. I leverage the model of Katherine K. Preston’s *Opera for the People: English-Language Opera & Women Managers in Late 19th-Century America*, extending her analysis to Black performers. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Anna Madah Hyers, Emma Louise Hyers, Nellie Brown Mitchell, Marie Selika, Amelia Tilghman, and Flora Batson made different choices in their very different careers, but they faced many of the same obstacles, including racism, sexism, and lack of mainstream institutional support. Through their efforts, these women created a possibility of the Black prima donna in the American imagination, which made the role achievable for later stars such as Caterina Jarboro, Marian Anderson, and Leontyne Price.

Chapter Three turns our focus toward a single figure: Sissieretta Jones, known as the “Black Patti.” Her public career was the longest of all the Queens of Song: a decade as a concert singer, followed by almost twenty more years on the vaudeville stage, singing operatic excerpts as the frontwoman of the Black Patti Troubadours, an entirely Black troupe. Throughout both parts of her career, Jones consistently comported herself as an operatic prima donna, exposing
cracks in the formulation of race as it applied to an opera star. Jones’ own scrapbook and the complex archive generated throughout her long career enable a close, multi-faceted look at Jones and how she created her image and performing opportunities.

Chapter Four analyzes the repertoire performed by Black singers and Black companies. *Aida* and *L’Africaine*, with their specifically Black title characters and secondary baritone roles, were perhaps obvious choices, as is reflected in NPR’s characterization of Leontyne Price. Other operas with characters of color—*Carmen, Madame Butterfly*, even *Cavalleria Rusticana’s* Sicilian cast—also play a major role in African American opera history, as do *Rigoletto, La Traviata*, and *Faust*. I theorize that these roles were available to Black singers because they were adjacent to stereotypes of Blackness from minstrelsy or the melodramatic theater. The process by which these roles became accessible and acceptable for Black singers is closely connected to the changes in racial and gender roles during this same period, and fluctuating consideration of opera, or certain operas, as popular entertainment or high art.

Chapter Five considers the life of Jules Bledsoe, the originator of *Show Boat’s* “Old Man River” and the first man to play *Aida’s* Amonasro alongside a white cast in the United States. Although Bledsoe has been marginal in studies of Black classical musicians, he opens a window into a largely unexplored topic: the lived experience of Black men on the operatic stage. In this paper, I argue that Bledsoe’s engagement with new and canonic roles, his vaudeville and concert performances, and his musical compositions navigated ideals of racial uplift and exacting, contradictory stereotypes of Blackness, masculinity, and artistry, and that all of the different facets of his career were part of his attempt to be perceived as a leader in both the African American and the musical communities.

In different ways, all of these chapters emphasize the malleability of operatic
performance: even the most ironclad giants of the canon are fundamentally subject to the
directors who stage them, and even more so to the performers who bring them to life. Through
centering these performers and their choices among the currents of the world in which they lived,
commonalities arise: the similarities between their choices and the work that performers still do
today. In fact, the choices they made, and the space that that created for Black opera
performance, influence African American spaces in opera and American opera in general even
today. Whether or not their names are remembered, or their voices are recorded, their impact
remains.
Chapter 1
Setting the Stage: African American Writers, Popular Music Histories, and Opera

Introduction

The spectacular messiness of opera precludes any attempt to consider it in a vacuum. The blending of genres and of art forms requires a large-scale group effort, and the study of African American participation in opera requires a similarly broad view in order to make any sense of its scope. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, upper-class audiences lifted Western art music to the pinnacle of high culture, while ragtime, blues, and jazz became the sound of American popular music. The creators and cataloguers of African American music history, a scholarly tradition less than a century old, set themselves to the task of consolidating, clarifying, and uplifting their tradition even as tradition itself was in flux. The importance of racial uplift, the value of the old, the potential merit of the new, and the delicate dance of combining them create a distinctive thread of African American music history and historiography which influenced contemporary scholars and performers and still resonates today.

These works serve to make explicit the cultural work African American singers were doing on stage. They offer a view into how the African American intelligentsia viewed music history in general, and the classical and operatic traditions specifically. Describing nineteenth-century music criticism, Leon Botstein writes that understanding music in late-nineteenth century Europe requires “that one consider, first, how music was talked about, written about, and taught
through language.”¹ This applies to African American classical musicians as well. These writings
chronicle and codify the musical and cultural expectations which performers negotiated. As their
authors chronicled the history of Black music and their hopes for its future, they also offer a
sense of the cultural stakes at play in claiming this territory, and the weight that the expectation
of racial uplift through cultural and musical excellence placed upon skilled performers.

These works took part in the emerging genre of the popular general music history, both
upholding and undercutting its conventions. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Western
“classical” canon solidified among ideals of “high” art and Austro-German universalism. The
piano—now relatively inexpensive and widely available—became a symbol of the expanding
middle class, which also created a wider readership for books and magazines.² Botstein observed
the nineteenth-century of cultural classical music was successful partially because it
democratized access to the arts while retaining the sense of prestige: “A sense of democratic
triumph was associated with the broadening of participation in a cultural form linked historically
to privilege and aristocracy in both patronage and active practice.”³ Music scholars then set
about educating these new listeners about how to properly appreciate these monuments of
European tradition. As Botstein summarized, “Without edifying reading material for the public,
music might remain stigmatized as a mere craft.”⁴ These works presented a very specific
hierarchy of music as “knowledge” to literate audiences seeking to expand their cultivation,
which ascended from the lowest and most “primitive” to the pinnacle of the Austro-German

³ Botstein, “Listening Through Reading: Musical Literacy and the Concert Audience,” 138.
⁴ Ibid.
symphonic tradition. There were only two possible places for people of African descent. Pre-1900, there might be a dismissive aside about “primitive” music in an early chapter. By the 1920s, when Black music was considered synonymous with modernity, one might read a reference to spirituals or jazz, but “popular” or “modern” music was not their concern.

Black writers advocated for Black music’s role within rather than beneath mainstream hierarchies, which would prove that it was both equal and integral to the mainstays of high culture. For example, Black singers such as Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, and Marian Anderson integrated spirituals into concerts of arias and art songs. Black writers emphasized their importance as part of African American heritage, and a foundation for essays into large-form classical works, such as the spirituals found in R. Nathaniel Dett’s 1932 oratorio *The Ordering of Moses*. Spirituals, Lieder, and opera are not separate genres in these works: they are part of the same continuum of artistic achievement, and the reflections of these authors on spirituals are important for how they perceive tradition, artistry, and the prospective value of vocal music.

African American writers had to take on many roles, just as African American performers did, as they fought for visibility with what were essentially performative works of virtuosic scholarship. They were not merely academic historians. Many were musicians, teachers, and public figures. All were also activists, who explicitly saw their purposes as uplifting and inspiring African Americans and dealing a blow to white ignorance and prejudice, especially that spread by the popular general histories. Some of these writers and their projects—books, journals, newspaper columns, and musical manuscripts—are listed below.

• Nora Douglas Holt’s work for the *Chicago Defender*, 1917-1923.


• Maud Cuney Hare: *Negro Musicians and Their Music*. Washington, D.C., 1936.


The list above is not an exhaustive collection of works by African Americans on music between 1878 and 1944. I have focused primarily on authors who dealt with “classical” music and musicians, rather than those who dealt primarily with jazz or spirituals. However, Johnson’s spiritual anthologies are part of his sweeping project of history, culture, literature, politics, and music, while Locke’s *The New Negro* is simply too culturally significant to be passed by. Handy’s musical anthology and Freeman’s unpublished monograph never had the audience of Locke or of the *Chicago Defender*’s readership, but their works illustrate how men who had spent their entire lives in the music industry still grappled with these questions. Some African American writers fully approved of the “highbrow” project—neither J. Hillary Taylor nor Maud Cuney Hare had anything good to say about ragtime or jazz—but wanted the contributions of African American composers and performers to be given a fair hearing. Others, such as Johnson and Locke, wanted to create a spotlight for both Black performers and new and old Black forms of art. The African American music history books have many commonalities, but they also illustrate how different scholars sought to disentangle questions of race, art, and modernity.
In this chapter, I first examine the popular music history book of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the racist ideologies which led to the minimization of Black music in mainstream (white) scholarship. To understand these works is to understand the hostile intellectual forum in which Black scholars operated, and which their works refuted. I then turn to Black music histories and music journalism, grouped chronologically in relationship to the Harlem Renaissance. Works from before the 1920s bear some marked differences to those which postdate the Jazz Age, and those written in the 1930s or 1940s possess a different quality of reflection regarding both the music and the scholarship of previous generations. These works fit into different eras, but all of them insist on the importance of Black musical excellence, its past, and its potential. Naomi André refers to Black involvement with opera in the United States as a “shadow culture” compared to the all-white, segregated mainstream opera scene. These are the historians of that culture, chronicling its heroes and heroines, victories and defeats, influencing how performers saw their roles and how scholars framed the past.

African American music journalism and scholarship throughout this period was also situated at the intersection of “high art” and racial uplift. These documents negotiate and articulate cultural uplift as an ethos for Black musicians and audiences, such as the performers who make up the later chapters of this dissertation. Lawrence Schenbeck argues that the forces which caused upper-middle-class African Americans to uphold Western art music as superior were different from those which middle- and upper-class European Americans viewed as important. Many of these writers accepted that the “complexity” or historical value of Western art music made it superior in some way. However, classical music was also important to African Americans not just as a signifier of class or education, but because those signifiers of class and

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education facilitated racial uplift. Schenbeck writes, “For the black aristocracy, the demonstrated existence of a ‘better class’ of African Americans could be used to refute racist views of them as biologically inferior and unassimilable.”6 While these writers actively worked against racism, Eurocentric aesthetic standards and classism were more subtle and difficult to disentangle.

Writers of early African American musical histories and journals took up the widespread genres of popular music history and music journals to make a space for Black music and musicians in the discourse and the culture of classical music. The biases of white onlookers and the hopes of African American audiences are on display in these pages as well as history, theory, and biography, and these scholars did their part to make the venture possible by creating frameworks through which Black talent and skill could be understood and celebrated. Houston A. Baker, Jr. refers to both the “mastery of form” and the “deformation of mastery” in his study of the Harlem Renaissance: the latter “refuses a master’s nonsense. It returns—often transmuting ‘standard’ syllables—to the common sense of the tribe.”7 In writing, these scholars could transform the marginalizing genre of the general music history. In writing, they sorted through the same ambivalences and ambiguities that singers of color so often expressed in their perspectives of the stage. In this dissertation, then, these works take on multiple roles. In addition to serving as biographical sources, they were read and discussed by the singers and audiences I write about, contributing to the discourse as well as recording it, and offering insight into the cultural milieu in which this work was done. Through reframing history and advocating for contemporary singers and instrumentalists, these writers worked to create and foreground stages on which an African American opera singer could be both heard and understood.

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Imperial March: The Popular Music History Textbook

African American music histories, with their techniques of resistance and reversal, can best be understood in the context of popular general histories of music published during the same era. People of color were not merely obscured in mainstream histories: white scholars actively worked to invalidate their contributions. However, these Black scholars had been educated in the same tradition, whether at Fisk or at Harvard and Oxford. They knew the stereotypical “common knowledge” they faced. Their education also gave them the tools to reject the dominant narrative and use the techniques and language of mainstream music histories to center African American histories, accomplishments, and hopes for the future.

Popular music histories published across Europe and America taught their readers a Eurocentric, triumphalist view of global music. In the United States, these books typically came from British or American publishers. American authors tended to add a chapter or three on American music, and British authors were wont to focus on Tudor England, but most English-language writers followed the same outline they learned from German sources: a few chapters on Greece and Rome, then medieval chant and early polyphony, followed by the Renaissance, the Reformation, and culminating in the glories of the Austro-German symphonic tradition. These books were unabashedly universalist in their scope: essentially, all of humanity was portrayed as marching toward Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms. This was in turn marketed to a particular audience: upper and upper-middle-class audiences who patronized the symphony and the opera and wished to be more informed listeners. The books profiled here are merely a sample.8


8 Thank you to Patrick Burke for introducing me to these works.


These histories stand out for their unified approach to music and history. They are not merely books, but representatives of the consistent intellectual lineage which underpinned the foundations of the Western canon and the academic study of music. The similarities are evident in the titles, replete with metaphors of “growth,” “evolution,” and the emphasis on the parallel between musical development and the development of (Western) civilization.

C.H.H. Parry’s *The Evolution of the Art of Music* is a valuable case study, because it was cited by most of the later popular general histories, and Stanford and Villiers worked as his research assistants. Parry is also still well-known as a composer and conductor, as well as prolific scholar (he contributed to the first edition of Grove). In 1997, Bernard Benoliel wrote in his biography of Parry:

The first five chapters of the book [on scales, folk music, and medieval and Renaissance vocal music] are now so outdated as to be obsolete…. However, beginning with Chapter 6, ‘The Rise of Secular Music,’ Parry sets out in the remaining nine chapters a well informed, finely written, easy-to-follow discussion on the history of music from Bach to Wagner. Some of his opinions, such as his comparisons of Bach and Handel, became
standard for nearly 75 years.\textsuperscript{9}

Benoliel’s summation both makes it clear just how influential Parry’s work is, and demonstrates that it was still taken as “well informed” and “finely written” less than thirty years ago. Up through the 1990s, at least, these books were taken as legitimate secondary sources, rather than historical documents and products of their time. I was able to find Parry, as well as most of the other books on my list, on the “general history” shelf of the music library, rather than in archival materials—quite literally still in circulation.

Parry’s work was, as the 1932 preface put it, “not a history book but a theory of evolution founded on a review of historical facts.”\textsuperscript{10} He rooted his analysis in racial and ethnic stereotypes: “Racial differences which imply different degrees of emotionalism and imaginativeness, and different degrees of the power of self-control in relation to exciting influences, are shown very strongly in the folk-music of different cultures.”\textsuperscript{11} In Parry’s worldview, Indians were “fanciful,” the Chinese were “orderly” and rule-loving, Italians loved melody but did not have the mental stamina to concentrate on form, and only the Germans and the English escaped from patronizing ethnic depictions. The organization of Parry’s text further implied a hierarchy: all “folk music,” including the complex art music traditions of Asia and the Middle East, was treated before even medieval monophonic chant. The rest of the world was a footnote: the real story was the West.

Parry’s interpretation of art music placed the Austro-German symphonic tradition at the apex of musical endeavor, and his dismissal of other genres—including opera—was characteristic of these histories. On the subject of Italian opera, Parry wrote, “Operatic audiences have always had the lowest standard of taste of any section of human beings calling

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\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 78.
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themselves musical. They generally have a gross appetite for anything, so long as it is not intrinsically good.” In Parry’s view, Italian opera was either too formalized, as opera seria, or, in the case of bel canto opera, too concerned with providing singers opportunities for virtuosity. Unsurprisingly, it took German genius to set opera right, in the form of Mozart and Wagner. Parry concluded that “The Italians looked for beauty of externals, and the Germans for beauty of thought.” Likewise, that in French opera of the nineteenth century, “The dangerous susceptibility of the French nature to specious show and mere external effect seems peculiarly liable to mislead them when it comes to great or imposing occasions.” Verdi was tossed aside in a paragraph: Wagner received eighteen pages of loving analysis complete with musical examples. The repertoire of popular performers such as Adelina Patti was of no concern to him.

Parry did not treat the spiritual—or any Black music—in his book, but the authors who did minimized Black contributions in a way that gave footholds to outright falsehoods in the general history. In 1893, Richard Wallaschek complained of the spiritual, “I think I may say, speaking generally, these negro-songs are very much overrated, and that as a rule they are mere imitations of European compositions which the negroes have picked up and served again with slight variations,” further stating that they were “arranged—not to say ignorantly borrowed—from the national songs of all nations, from military signals, well-known marches, German student-songs, etc.; unless it is pure accident which has caused me to light upon traces of so many of them.” Since Wallaschek cited both Slave Songs of the United States, a genuine fieldwork collection, and Christy’s Plantation Melodies, which is decidedly not, one suspects his ear might not be as accurate as he claims. Fisk University professor John Wesley Work

12 Ibid., 394.
13 Ibid., 296.
14 Ibid., 401.
specifically criticized Wallaschek for this in his *Folk Song of the American Negro*. Work emphasized the idea of African “retentions” in African American music, and concluded, “But to assert he has found any greater resemblance between the Negro’s music and European music than would naturally result from the oneness of human nature, lays the writer open to the suspicion that he is uninformed, misinformed, superficial, unscientific, or all of these.”

Despite Work’s defense of African American creativity, in which he advocates for the “oneness of human nature,” Wallaschek’s work set the tone for later writers. C.H.H. Parry relied on Wallaschek, and when Cecil Forsyth wrote about Dvořák’s American sojourn, he referred to his use of “the music which he considered most characteristic of the country—the plantation-music of the Negroes, some of which at any rate has its origin in Ireland.” In the same chapter, Forsyth also claimed that “Harry T. Burleigh stands almost alone as an American Negro-composer with distinct creative powers.” In the 1930s, Marion Bauer and Ethel Peyser credited the spiritual to African Americans, but claimed jazz and swing as “America’s music,” centering biographies of the white composers Louis Gruenberg, Irving Berlin, and George Gershwin. Duke Ellington never entered into the narrative. (This book was criticized by Ruth Zinar in a 1975 issue of *The Black Perspective in Music* as “the most overtly offensive, in addition to replete with inaccuracies,” of those currently given to children in schools.) These ideas continued to

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12 Ibid., 326.
surface throughout the 1930s. Maud Cuney Hare took John Powell and George Pullen Jackson to task for claiming that African American spirituals originated in white revival music. Cuney Hare cited W.E.B. DuBois and others, even including an editorial in Dwight’s Journal of Music, (hardly a bastion of musical tolerance and appreciation) for her support. Immediately after mounting her defense, she observed:

“The of all folk musical expression, English folk song is the most barren. Their songs lack the freedom from monotony which the people of Southern France acquire by their short note groupings and frequent change of bar-time; the brilliancy of the Spanish with their accentuated rhythms in binary and ternary divisions; the unbridled emotion and sorrow of Russian song or the barbaric, rhapsodic moods of the embellishment of Gypsy song. This poverty of musical feeling in Anglo-Saxon temperaments was responsible for requests from the master class which made the musically gifted, though illiterate Negro serf, foreshadow the graphone and radio by becoming performers of music for the indolent white listeners.”

Cuney Hare indulged in some ethnic stereotyping of Russian and “Gypsy” folk music. However, she also turned them on their head. Unlike in Parry’s model of history, the Anglo-Saxon would be last, and the marginalized, non-“white” people of Europe and America would be first.

Founders: Pre-Harlem Renaissance Popular Music Histories

Opera and the culture of classical music were the centerpieces of early African American

21 Some white ethnographers of the 1920s did take a more nuanced view of African American music: see Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, The Negro and His Songs: A Study of Typical Negro Songs in the South, 1925; Dorothy Scarborough, On the Trail of Negro Folk-Songs, 1925; or Milton Metfessel, Phonophotography in Folk Music: American Negro Songs in New Notation, 1928. These writers were more willing to listen to African American expertise, and admit their own limitations as outsiders of the culture. However, these authors write with less ambiguity toward the development of new and popular traditions, coupled with an explicitly preservationist impulse focused on recapturing the past, rather than the future: a very different approach than their African American peers.


23 Ibid., 120-21
musical historiography. Works from the late nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century claim a place for African Americans in cultural institutions, even as they solidified into a form which excluded Black contributions. In *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, James Monroe Trotter was the first African American author to survey classical music, rather than focusing on folk music or the spiritual or collecting hymns for congregational use. He provided biographical information on both deceased classical performers and teenaged up-and-comers in the Boston area, as well as musical examples and a general history of music. Amelia Tilghman’s *Musical Messenger* and J. Hillary Taylor’s *Negro Music Journal* took the same approach to Washington, D.C. Trotter, Tilghman, Taylor, and the magazine contributors argued for hard work, Godly virtue, and diligent pursuit of the highest cultural goods in a way which would have caused the most buttoned-up Victorian WASP to nod along approvingly… until they read the examples, such as in this essay on the virtue of self-improvement from Taylor: “When we think of the lives of Beethoven, Schubert, Lincoln, Douglass, and many others, we can fully realize what one can do for himself in order to succeed in life: we can make our way if we will.”

Rather than questioning the value of musical or historical canons, he placed Frederick Douglass alongside Beethoven in the firmament. All of these writers shared the same approach to their publications: an explicit emphasis on musical and cultural uplift, with “classical” music as inculcator of moral values; a focus on performers; and the chronicling of a history full of artists of color whom both their readers and future generations of scholars would take as models.

*James Monroe Trotter*

James Monroe Trotter (1842-1892) was an exemplar of DuBois’s “talented tenth.” He

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24 J. Hillary Taylor, “Piano Department: Self Improvement, an Essay.” *Negro Music Journal* 1 no. 6 (February 1903), 95.
had been classically educated in Cincinnati, and distinguished himself as an officer during the Civil War. After the war, he worked as a writer, an appointee in the Federal Post Office, and a manager to singer Marie Selika. He even moved into Hyde Park and sent his son to Harvard. While Lawrence Schenbeck emphasizes that he was never fully accepted in Boston society, he still shared his neighbors’ education and aspirations. Schenbeck quotes another Black Bostonian who claimed, “While all our sympathies tend to unite us with the Negroes and their destiny, all our aspirations lead us toward white.”25 Despite these aspirations, Trotter had an expansive idea of racial solidarity combined with musical ideals. His uplift of a variety of genres and places established a historical genre which was more open to a variety of contributors and contributions than the guardians of the Western canon, further setting a standard of open-mindedness around genre and “popularity” for those who followed him.

![James Monroe Trotter](image)

Fig. 1.1: James Monroe Trotter, from Music and Some Highly Musical People

Trotter’s research and interviews formed the basis of multiple other studies, from Monroe A. Major’s 1893 *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities* to Cuney Hare’s 1936 magnum opus. His work began with the same universal sweep as the conventional general music histories, with a four-chapter introduction to music ranging from the sounds of birds and

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waterfalls to Greek and Roman instruments. After this, however, he profiled sixteen different musicians and musical groups, listed contemporary musical activities in most of the major cities of the United States, and concluded with thirteen different works composed by Black men. Trotter’s content provided a base of knowledge for later scholars to build upon, and his emphases and style likewise influenced his successors.

Throughout his text, Trotter returned to the theme of music as a means of moral and social uplift. Trotter occasionally framed this in the same evolutionary way as Wallascheck or Perry would: he opened his chapter “The Beauty, Power, and Uses of Music” by proclaiming that “The cultivation of the art of music has ever followed closely the progress of civilization; and those nations that have attained to the highest state of the latter have most encouraged the growth, and have been most skilled in the creation and the performance, of music.” However, he then emphasized that almost everyone can appreciate music, and insists that, “Indeed, the power of music to touch the heart, to fill the soul, lies oftenest in those tones that are comprised in its least difficult melodies.” Trotter might have viewed music as a key to civilization, but he appeared to differ from someone such as Parry on what good music was, as well as who made it. He emphasized the value of the simple and melodic as well as the formally complex, making musical uplift as easy to attain as a song.

Trotter’s accessible form of uplift led him to address his readers with didactic fervor. Of the opera singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, he said,

But amidst [difficulties] this noble lady and artist was ever brave, patient, hopeful, ambitious in a certain sense, yet modest. Fully aware of the magnificent quality of her voice, and of its phenomenal character…. She yet did not rest content, as most persons under the same circumstances would have done, but diligently applied herself to a scientific cultivation of a voice in natural power

27 Ibid., 38.
well-nigh marvelous, as well as to acquiring a scholarly knowledge of the principles of general music.  

Trotter’s focus on Greenfield’s hard work, studious achievement, and moral virtue served two related strategies. He assured his readers that she possessed the virtues they valued, while emphasizing that Greenfield had to study and work to improve, no matter how gifted she was “naturally.” This emphasis on labor throughout a wide spectrum of music explains why Trotter covered professionals like Greenfield or the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the same volume as an amateur group such as the Colored American Opera Company.

Trotter was also open to more “popular” interpretations of “high art,” rather than reserving it for professionals and the elite. For example, he did not write at all condescendingly about Italian opera as compared to symphonic music or the operas of Mozart and Wagner, in contrast with the sneering attitude of C.H.H. Parry. In his profile of the Colored American Opera Company, Trotter states, “The opera, or music drama, in which, in lieu of the ordinary forms of speech, music and song are used to give elevated expression to thought, is the most extensive, and, to nearly all lovers of melody, the most charming of musical compositions. In its construction, several of the other forms of music are most pleasingly united.” Trotter also praised the massive Peace Jubilees in 1869 and 1872 in Boston, each of which included over one thousand musicians and one thousand singers. John Sullivan Dwight of Boston and Dwight’s Journal of Music had nothing but disdain for those popular undertakings. However, in Trotter’s expansive view, so many people making music in Boston was cause for celebration. Trotter’s example was echoed by later African American writers, as well: most were open to considering the merits of jazz or musical theater, as creating hierarchies was less important than the greater

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28 Ibid., 47.
29 Ibid., 160.
30 Ibid., 32.
picture of African American musical achievement.

Trotter’s focus on performers created another significant divergence in the study of African American music. Mainstream music histories devoted most of their texts to genres and composers, occasionally mentioning major theaters or symphony orchestras. In their introduction, Bauer and Peyser explained, “Among the omissions which may be regarded as serious is a chapter on the singers, those who have delighted and thrilled the public through the years, but the nature of this book, in the minds of its authors, precludes details of the executive side of music, adhering as closely as possible to the actual creators.”31 “Actual creators”—could any phrase better express the Romantic idealization of the composer and his (virtually always his) work? Trotter did prize composition, and nearly half the volume is made up of fully-scored examples. However, his project put performers on the same level as composers, an equalization of hierarchies unheard of in the mainstream popular general histories. Trotter’s advocacy of uplift meant that he wanted to showcase everyone he thought lent evidence to his cause. The Black musicians he profiled performed the “highest” of culture at a professional level, with more visibility and name-recognition than the composers he highlighted. At the same time, Trotter’s choices worked to rehabilitate the image of the African American musician. Minstrel shows and plays of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* had provided popular culture with plenty of images of singing, dancing, banjo-playing Jim Crows and Zip Coons. Trotter’s audience knew that African Americans were capable of being musicians, at least when it came to a folk song or a fiddle. Trotter reinforced through twenty chapters of repetition that African Americans were also capable of participation in the “cultivated” tradition: academic musical study, composition, and the classical pantheon’s highest levels of performance.

Trotter’s inclusion of a wide variety of professional and amateur performances both made this case and provided visibility to contemporary African American musicians, including both amateur and professional opera singers. Schenbeck comments, “The Colored American Opera Company, which apparently could not be praised overmuch on sheer musical grounds, nevertheless received an affirmative chapter that emphasized the group’s pioneering efforts as an ensemble devoted to refined music in the European tradition and its laudable efforts to overcome the obstacles posed by a lack of training and experience.”\textsuperscript{32} Without access to most formal institutions (conservatories, teachers, theaters, concert halls), Trotter emphasized, African Americans had overcome prejudice and lack of resources to become skilled performers of classical music. The implication runs throughout the book: if this is what his people could do amidst slavery and prejudice, what might they be able to do once those were overcome? In his biography of Greenfield’s student, Thomas Bowers, who was styled “The American Mario” after Italian operatic tenor Giovanni Mario, Trotter once more foregrounded the cause of advocacy. “Mr. Bowers was induced to engage in public performances more for the purpose of demonstrating by them the capacity of colored persons to take rank in music with the most highly cultured of the fairer race than for that of making a mere personal display of his highly-rated musical abilities, and for the attainment of the enjoyment which they would naturally be supposed to afford him.”\textsuperscript{33} Trotter often wrote approvingly of musicians who worked for the love of it or pleasure in the undertaking rather than for money, but the greatest good was art for the sake of the African American community, as Bowers once again proved when he refused to perform in a venue which did not honor the tickets purchased by African Americans.

Trotter understood that art did not take place in a vacuum. David Gramit argues in his

\textsuperscript{33} Trotter, \textit{Music and Some Highly Musical People}, 89.
study of German culture that “material interests are inevitably bound up in the development of high musical culture and that advocates of that culture sought to shape it in ways that seemed to have potential to attract support.”  

These interests ranged from pedagogy and social capital to the simple fact that musicians want to be paid for their work. Gramit argues, essentially, that “art for art’s sake” is impossible—even the idea of “art for art’s sake” is bound up in Enlightenment thought, with its associated social constructs. For Trotter and his Black artists, it was impossible to believe in “art for art’s sake” when one knew all too well that onlookers were judging one’s art by the color of one’s skin. Instead, Trotter emphasized artists engaged in their communities, bringing all of those “material interests” which African American community leaders sought.

The Musical Messenger

Just as Trotter did in Boston, the singer, teacher, producer, and writer Amelia L. Tilghman maintained a presence in every part of the Washington, D.C. music scene. The Howard University graduate first worked as a teacher in the African American D.C. public schools, organizing choral and musical events. She was also heavily involved in operatic performances: she was likely involved in the Colored American Opera Company, and in 1881, she both directed and sang the leading role in a costumed production of William Bradbury’s oratorio Esther, The Beautiful Queen. According to I. Garland Penn’s study of the African American press, Tilghman was injured by a falling brick at a construction site in 1883, and had to leave both teaching and the stage. However, by the mid-to-late 1880s she had taken up a position in

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Montgomery, Alabama, where she first published the *Musical Messenger*, the first musical journal directed toward African Americans. She had returned to D.C. by 1888 or 1889, where she continued to circulate the *Messenger* for several more years. The journal’s byline was “Highest Moral, Social, and Intellectual Interest of the People”: Tilghman’s goal was, through her musical and social content, to fold comprehensive uplift into four to six pages.

![Amelia Tilghman](image)

*Fig. 1.2: Amelia Tilghman from* The Afro-American Press, and Its Editors.

The two surviving issues of the *Messenger* reveal Tilghman’s understanding of her audience’s current concerns and her goals for elevating their horizons. The first page of each issue contains an article about church music, as well as a Christian poem and jokes about church musicians and personnel, suggesting that a large part of her audience worked in church music. She also included a listing of recitals, concerts, church appointments, and other musical news about African Americans in New York, Baltimore, and D.C. Like Trotter, she focuses on her particular community and their concerns and local stars. One of the endorsements of the *Messenger* refers to her as “the well-known Washington prima donna”\(^\text{37}\): she was recognized as a

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singer and as a peer of those whom she profiled and encouraged.

Even as Tilghman reinforced the local community, she pointed to the wider world. The Musical Messenger “is not intended as a local paper, not at all. Its aim is purely national, and its work is intended to reach from the gulf to the lakes and from the Atlantic to the Pacific.”

Juanita Karpf also argues that “black female concert artists and their audiences regarded their music as an agent of protest, defiance, and social reform,” tying Tilghman to Black feminist thought. Tilghman used this platform for issues both large and small. The May issue reprints an article discouraging asking for encores—informing the audience of a current controversy in musical etiquette as the practice fell out of favor in some circles and genres. And while the Messenger was not primarily a music history, Tilghman supplemented each issue with biographies of Haydn, Handel, and other musical luminaries, tying historical background to current practice. Opera, chamber music, choral works, and symphonies were all associated with the middle-class values she hoped to inculcate.

Tilghman also mixed musical etiquette and education—indirect schools of virtue—with direct appeals to traditional conceptions of morality and work ethic. The May issue contains an article entitled “Colored Loafers: To The Young Colored Men of America.” Tilghman or the author writes, “Many are young men who have completed a grammar and high school education; whose mothers have toiled late and early, day and night, for the education of their children; and these sons repay them for their years of hard toil by becoming street loafers.”

Tilghman used some of what we might call “bootstrap rhetoric”: another article on the same page states that “The Goddess of Success will not smile upon those who do not realize [time’s] value and

appreciate this great gift by using every moment for their advancement.”

But Karpf also points out her specific concern for the plight of African American women—their “years of hard toil” and the lack of respect that accompanied it—and her understanding of the racism and sexism they faced. This rhetoric was not unusual: a similar “bootstrap” philosophy was a hallmark of Booker T. Washington’s focus on practical and vocational education, only forty miles from Montgomery at the Tuskegee Institute. The specifically musical balance of advocacy and uplift ideology mixed with class-consciousness was common to Tilghman and a later D.C. music journal editor, J. Hillary Taylor.

The Negro Music Journal

J. Hillary Taylor’s Negro Music Journal was shorter-lived than the Musical Messenger, running for fifteen issues between 1902 and 1903. However, these issues ran from sixteen to twenty pages, much longer than the four to six pages of the Messenger, and the fact that all fifteen survive gives a much more extensive picture of the Washington, D.C. music scene, ten years after Tilghman ceased publication. Taylor, whose dates are unknown, was a pianist, elementary school teacher, and faculty member of the Washington Conservatory, as closely tied to Washington, D.C. as Trotter was to Boston. The Journal was even eventually formally linked to the Washington Conservatory of Music, at the time a brand-new music school for African Americans in the D.C. area. Taylor’s contributors—among them, the opera producer Theodore Drury and violinist and composer Clarence Cameron White—show how the genre of African American music history developed into the twentieth century.

41 Ibid.
42 Karpf, “As With Words of Fire,” 622.
J. Hillary Taylor’s many and varied goals, summed up in his first editorial, reflect the diversity of concerns in his musical community. He sought articles “upon the voice, piano, organ, violin, orchestra, the choir, choral society, musical clubs, Negro slave songs, musical history and biography, theory, teaching, studying, correct interpretation, phrasing, pedalling, musical literature, etc.” He further insisted:

The name, the *Negro Music Journal*, does not imply that nothing pertaining to the past and present achievements of other nationalities will be printed in its pages: but on the contrary, we desire to help our people to understand the musical art as it is: to trace her development from the very beginning, writing and talking about all of the characters that have been instrumental in its development and preservation. We especially desire to give prominence to all worthy achievements of the Negro, both of the past and present, but not without our people having a knowledge of forces, powers, and intellects that have made most of the Negro achievements possible.

Taylor’s emphasis on the history of music “from the beginning” and the people who developed it is straight out of the mainstream music history text, as are Agnes Carroll’s explanations of music history from pentatonic scales to the present which are featured in the “Club Department.” Taylor even advertises these sorts of books for music teachers in his Piano Department.

However, even in the first issue, a sketch entitled “Perseverance as Taught by the Lives of the Masters”—hagiography featuring the struggles which Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and the rest of the canonic “great composers” had overcome—was placed after two pages devoted to Samuel Coleridge Taylor, the British composer of African descent. Taylor had nothing positive to say about “coon songs,” ragtime, or popular music, referring to minstrelsy as a “slander.”

Placing Black cultural heroes among the greats of the “canon” served to reinforce both.

The *Negro Music Journal* also served as a vehicle for Theodore Drury and his Drury Opera Company, as they prepared to stage *Aida* at the Lexington Opera House in May 1903.

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47 Ibid., 45.
From Volume 5 (January 1903) until the show, the inside cover of each Journal issue carried a full-page ad for the upcoming performance. Taylor also advertised Drury’s attempt at building an African American opera house and creating a stock company in New York, encouraging his readers to buy stock in the venture.48

Taylor devoted a laudatory editorial to Aida after the performance, as well as running reviews from the Colored American and the New York Herald. In summary, he declared,

From the various press comments the production was, on the whole, creditably produced, and appears to be the best effort made by Mr. Drury in all his productions of grand opera. The only disappointment to his audience and admirers seemed to have come from the fact that a white orchestra and chorus were engaged for the occasion. From a personal

48 J. Hillary Taylor, “An Opera House,” Negro Music Journal 1 no. 6 (February 1903), 111.
statement of his, this could not have readily been avoided.49

Taylor used this flaw to once again call for greater involvement in choirs and orchestras in the African American community. He declared, “Now that we are awakening to the significance of these [larger musical] forms we should according to our talents and adaptability throw our hearts and souls into them.” Drury was able to find soloists to perform Aida, but Taylor wanted to see a performance which would be African American from the leads, through the chorus, down to the orchestra pit, and part of his mission was to make that come about. In Taylor’s eyes, Drury was both an example of how far African Americans had come, and how far they had yet to go.

As far as the Journal was concerned, Aida was the event of the year, and the support across multiple issues affirms the importance of opera to the project of uplift. In July, Agnes Carroll bestowed a biography of Verdi upon her Club Department readers.50 In September, Robert W. Carter observed on the first interior page, “[No white man] has yet ventured to present grand opera with Negro vocalists. This the Negro is doing for himself, unaided.”51 Carter commented that Verdi, Rossini, Donizetti, and Bellini all came from common backgrounds, and thus Drury was well suited to be their heir in bringing African Americans to opera. He mentions that though the opera was abridged, it was a success.

“White and colored performers sang and acted together on the stage, the Afro-American and Caucasian made up the vast audience, and shared refreshments at the same dining-room. At these gatherings, the refined and cultured of our race assemble, and from them the Caucasian learns that all of the Negro race are not ragtime characters, but that a great number of us possess a discriminating and cultivated taste for the fine arts.”52

Obvious class prejudice aside, the ideology of racial uplift among Taylor’s audience could hardly have been clearer. Drury’s operas were a perfect vehicle for the Negro Music Journal’s agenda

52 Ibid., 4
of education and uplift. Even though the journal was short-lived, it clearly expresses the musical and cultural priorities held by some upper-class African Americans at the time.

James Trotter, Amelia Tilghman, and J. Hillary Taylor all approached scholarship with a similar agenda. Each used role models, didactic examples, and moral exhortation in order to both encourage African Americans to listen to and pursue classical music, and to prove that their music and culture were worthy of serious scholarship. The next generation of scholars would have similar priorities: however, the intellectual movements of the Harlem Renaissance changed how they approached music and creating platforms for African American expression.

**Renaissance Men and Women**

During the 1920s and early 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance affected African American musical thought as much as it did art and literature. The newly visible “New Negro” cohort of intellectuals, artists, writers, and musicians who gathered in Harlem set themselves to trying to define a new age, and did so with gusto. Eileen Southern explains that many musicians were turning to what they saw as more distinctly African American forms of expression: “Composers used poems by black poets in their art songs; they exploited the rhythms of Negro dances and the harmonies and melodies of blues, spirituals, and the newer music called jazz in their composed concert music. Almost without exception black concert artists began to include on their programs the folk and composed music of black musicians…”53 Harry T. Burleigh, James Weldon Johnson, Clarence Cameron White, Hall Johnson, William Grant Still, and other composers began to publish spiritual arrangements and spiritual-based orchestral works. Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Jules Bledsoe, Taylor Gordon, Abbie Mitchell, Caterina

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Jarboro, and a host of other African American concert singers placed spirituals alongside arias and *Lieder* on the concert stage. The musical, concert, and vaudeville stages were still more accessible than opera, but Harry Lawrence Freeman’s Grand Negro Opera Company performed his *Voodoo* in 1928 for the New York radio station WGBS. All of these activities were chronicled by Nora Douglas Holt of the *Chicago Defender*, the first African American newspaper to reach national distribution, and an expanding field of Black journalists. Other commentators used books and essays to suggest new directions, just as Trotter and Taylor had. James Weldon Johnson, in particular, brought his background in musical theater and in international politics to his two collections of spirituals and his history *Black Manhattan*.

Music writers of the Harlem Renaissance sought a new way of mediating between the classical and popular traditions. Trotter, Tilghman, and Taylor ascribed to a nineteenth-century view of musical hierarchy, with classical music at the top. When they advocated for spirituals, they wished them to be taken seriously as folk music, after the model of the early ethnographers. The writers of the Harlem Renaissance saw new possibilities in not just the spirituals, but in the exploding popularity of jazz and the blues. Holt, Locke, and Johnson’s canons were more open to experimentation and a variety of influences. However, they were still invested in classical music and elite musical culture as a means of uplift: they wanted to see Black art transformed into public-facing concert works within classical music’s most prestigious genres.
The African American audience for classical music and musical uplift reached beyond Harlem and the East Coast, as did the activists who promoted it. Nora Douglas Holt’s work as music editor for the *Chicago Defender* brought African American musical life, including opera criticism, to a broad audience. Nora Holt—Lena Douglas at the time she was hired—was a master’s student at the Chicago Musical College, a pianist and composer in her own right. She was both the first regular classical music columnist in a Black newspaper and the first woman to be a regular member of the *Defender*’s writing staff. Holt’s work, two decades after Taylor’s *Negro Music Journal*, continued the nineteenth century’s legacy of advocacy and uplift, even as she broadened her scope to other genres and a different approach to community-building.

Holt’s column introduced all of the *Defender*’s readers to the traditions of classical music and Chicago’s institutions. Her tastes were broad, and she loved the Germanic orchestral

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54 Photo credit to International Photograph Center.
tradition as well as Italian opera. In this, she followed in the footsteps of her editor: Schenbeck relates the quote that the Defender’s editor, Robert Abbot, went to the opera “to prove Negroes have a taste for good music.” The performative appreciation of classical music was still very much a marker of both the Black and white upper-middle and upper class in the 1920s. However, Lucy Caplan further nuances Holt’s views. Holt was not precisely a model of straightforward “Talented Tenth” respectability, still the dominant model for the Black middle and class in this period. When she wrote for the Defender, she had been married three times, and she later moved to Harlem, then to Paris, where she worked as a nightclub singer. Caplan ties Holt to Black feminism, even though the term was not widely used until the 1960s. Her criticism took her embodied experience into account, while she also prized education, collaboration, and systemic change. Caplan states, “Holt’s journalistic work makes clear that African American artists, in Chicago and throughout the nation, engaged with classical music on their own terms.” Holt wrote about classical music, but she also praised ragtime and sang jazz herself. She praised high culture, but she did so within an expansive definition of what culture was worth promoting.

Holt’s column provides a day-to-day view of Chicago’s music scene. Books allow for overviews of musical trends, but a weekly column highlights current performances, both amateur and professional. Holt’s review of a 1918 Aida shows the sorts of concerns that she addressed. She wrote with a light touch, referring to Maestro Campanina, for example, as an “addictant of histrionism.” She acclaimed the singing, but devoted a large part of the review to praising soprano Rosa Raisa’s makeup for the role of Aida: the “beautiful brown pigmentation” which

56 Ibid., 182.
59 Ibid., 310.
60 Lena James Holt, “The Opera,” The Chicago Defender, 5 January 1918, 8.
she gave her skin. It stuns a modern reader to hear a progressive Black writer praising a white actor in brownface. However, Holt compares Raisa to the “smoldering chimney” look of the ballerinas: “Black-faced comedians are a joy in vaudeville, but in opera, one anticipates truer portrayals.” Through a review of a particular performance, we learn a particular writer and musician’s view of “blacking up” vs. brownface, vaudeville vs. opera. Part of Holt’s reaction also seems to stem from seeing that even a woman who looked African being pursued by the white tenor playing Radames was too much for some of the audience. Even if Holt would have preferred to see an actual Black woman on the stage, she was also happy to see a woman who attempted to at least portray Aida with dignity despite the mutters in the seats. Holt’s journalism tied the grand project of history-making—such as including the background of Aida for the interested audience—to the current concerns of Chicago audience members.

*Locke and The New Negro*

While Holt and other journalists interpreted events on the ground, other writers attempted to organize the broad swathe of artistic endeavor into a movement. Alain Locke’s 1925 anthology *The New Negro* remains one of the defining texts of the period, and while very few of its authors focus on classical music, that is part of the point: the musical and cultural horizons which Locke sought were broader than those of his forebears. Locke (1885-1954) believed that the “New Negro” was the one who had cast off the stereotypes and the shadows of the past, and was defining his own destiny. He set these new thinkers apart from generations past, and especially from racial uplift: “When the racial leaders of twenty years ago spoke of developing race-pride and stimulating race-consciousness, and of the desirability of race solidarity, they could not in any accurate degree have anticipated the abrupt feeling that has surged up and now
pervades the awakened centers.”

Instead, Locke said, “The Negro to-day wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not.”

Locke, who had graduated from Harvard and gone to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, was not against “high culture.” But the aftermath of World War I and the Red Summer of 1919 made it clear that no civic or cultural achievement could overcome centuries of racism by itself. The New Negro was an amorphous construction, deliberately so:

Houston A. Baker, Jr. calls it “our first national book, offering not only a description of streams of tendency in our collective lives but also an actual construction within its pages of the sounds, songs, images, and signs of a nation….there is no gainsaying the work’s quite canny presentation, utilization, and praise of formal mastery.”

The New Negro shows that the debates around the future of music had analogues in art, poetry, and literature, and that classical music was still part of the background of this tapestry of African American history and culture.

Locke’s collection of musical essays reflects this new world, emphasizing spirituals, jazz, and their relationship with modern literature instead of Western art music. The New Negro contains Locke’s essay “The Negro Spirituals,” J.A. Rogers’s essay “Jazz at Home,” and four poems: Claude McKay’s “Negro Dancers,” Gwendolyn B. Bennett’s “Song,” and Langston Hughes’s “Jazzonia” and “Nude Young Dancer.” The Harlem Renaissance was first and foremost a literary movement, and it made sense for Locke to focus on where music and literature intersected. Locke himself struck a middle road in his approach to the spirituals, writing, “Even Negro composers have perhaps been too much influenced by formal European idioms and mannerisms in setting these songs. But in calling for the folk atmosphere, and

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62 Ibid., 11.
63 Baker, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, 85.
insisting upon the folk quality, we must be careful not to confine this wonderfully potential
music to the narrow confines of ‘simple versions’ and musically primitive molds.” He wanted
neither Romantic classicism nor primitivism—itself a vogue of European composers—but a new
approach created by African Americans themselves. Locke mentioned both Paul Robeson and
Roland Hayes, who had very different concert styles, as his example. Robeson was more
dramatic and Hayes more restrained, but Locke found both appropriate.

Regardless of Locke’s ambivalence, the language and hierarchies of classical music
shaped his dreams for the future. He explained, “Just as soon as the traditional conventions of
four-part harmony and the oratorio style and form are broken through, we may expect a choral
development of Negro folk song that may equal or even outstrip the phenomenal choral music of
Russia.” Locke chose works which would be considered “classical” today as examples, such as
William Grant Still’s From the Land of Dreams, Edgar Varese’s Integrales, and Louis
Gruënberg’s setting of James Weldon Johnson’s poem The Creation. Locke’s ideal of African
American music was still influenced more by the “classical” or “highbrow” than the “popular,”
even as he upheld the “folk”—distinctions which, to him, were blurred and unstable. European
nationalists had championed using folk song as the basis for “classical” music by the end of the
nineteenth century. Locke thought that jazz and the blues could serve the same function in an
American art music, with African American composers leading the way. Paul Burgett refers to
this as “vindication”: the idea that folk music would be uplifted through its transformation into a
supposedly higher medium. Even though Locke did not advocate for the canon per se, he took
his standards of success and many of his points of reference from classical music, as he argued

65 Ibid., 208-9.
66 For more on this, see Paul Burgett, “Vindication as a Thematic Principle in the Writings of Alain Locke on the
Floyd, Jr. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 29-40.
that jazz was an authentic part of African American culture while distanc

ing it from the lower-
class associations of blackface, popular culture, and urban nightlife.

Like Locke, J.A. Rogers, who also contributed to The New Negro, tied folk and popular expression to the future of large-scale musical works in his essay “Jazz at Home,” using the same “classical” rhetoric to describe jazz. He claimed, “Musically jazz has a great future. It is rapidly being sublimated. In the more famous jazz orchestras like those of Will Marion Cook, Paul Whiteman, Sissle and Blake, Sam Stewart, Fletcher Henderson, Vincent Lopez and the Clef Club units, there are none of the vulgarities and crudities of the lowly origin or the only too prevalent cheap imitations.”67 He called upon the authority of the director of the Boston Symphony, Serge Koussevitzky, in support of jazz as modern music, and finally concluded, “[Jazz] has come to stay, and they are wise, who instead of protesting against it, try to lift and divert it into nobler channels.”68 Locke and Rogers both advocated a new sort of “uplift,” in which Black artists would claim the materials of modernity and remake them in their own image. The continued importance of uplift reflects the background of Locke’s contributors. By and large, they were middle-class and educated, raised in the sort of households to whom Trotter, Taylor, and Work wrote. (Rogers, an autodidact from an impoverished background in Jamaica, is one notable exception.) Their ideas were still part of the intellectual background, whether accepted, rejected, or uneasily skirted. However, the hope for “uplift” was now in the spiritual and African American folk music, rather than uncritical acceptance of Mozart and Beethoven. The ambiguities and ambivalences in these works—one moment denigrating classical music or “cheap” popular music, the next praising jazz’s creativity or the “noble” music of the canon—come out of this contradiction, as writers grapple with conflicting aims, loyalties, and

68 Ibid., 224.
aspirations. Modern readers often turn to these essays for information on jazz and spirituals. But understanding their authors’ use of classical music and its ideologies as a point of reference helps understand their positions and the conclusions they drew.

James Weldon Johnson

James Weldon Johnson’s works of the 1920s further demonstrate how a canon of African American artists solidified, and how ideals of uplift shifted during the Harlem Renaissance. Johnson (1871-1938) trained as a lawyer and passed the Florida Bar, but in 1899 he and his brother John Rosamond travelled to New York to find a producer for their first operetta, eventually joining Bob Cole to become Cole and Johnson, a team second only to Williams and Walker in the African American musical theater scene of the nineteen aughts.\(^69\) His “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” (1901) is still referred to as the “Black National Anthem,” since the NAACP first declared it such in 1919. He was also a consul with the U.S. diplomatic service in Venezuela and Nicaragua, an executive leader of the NAACP, and a prolific writer, poet, and anthologist. Even Johnson’s literary output held musical resonances: his poems in God’s Trombones included The Creation, which has been set to music multiple times, and the anonymous hero of his Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man is a ragtime pianist and aspiring folk song collector. Two of Johnson’s projects of the 1920s, his Book of American Negro Spirituals and Second Book of American Negro Spirituals, alongside his history Black Manhattan, contain much of Johnson’s knowledge and philosophy of music, through the career of a man who had been present at the cutting edge of African American musical theater throughout the twentieth century to date.

Johnson mingled his aspirations for the spiritual and ideals of the “classical” tradition just

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as the contributors to *The New Negro* did. In Johnson’s shorter introduction to the second volume, he looked toward the future, and what the newer generation of African American artist might do now that the spirituals were no longer considered a shameful part of a shameful past. In Johnson’s view, folk art was being lost with the advent of modernity, especially the phonograph and the radio, and “I doubt the possibility for the individual artists, especially the preponderating literary group, to produce anything comparable to the folk-art in distinctive values.”

Instead of folk art, Johnson believed that it was important for these artists to strive for new *American* art. Ragtime and blues had become popular music, and thus, in Johnson’s words, “Why cannot this nobler music of the Negro in the hands of our serious composers be wrought into the greater American music that has so long been looked for?”

Without explicitly invoking uplift, he refers to the further “development” of the spirituals—albeit, without over-formalizing them—in a way which is reminiscent of uplift ideology, just as Rogers and Locke used ideas of “development” and “nobility” to describe their goals for jazz.

Johnson’s 1930 work *Black Manhattan*, a history of African Americans in New York and in America more broadly, places both popular and classical music in their historical contexts. *Black Manhattan* can be viewed as a work of André’s shadow culture, a story of New York which foregrounds both the struggles and accomplishments of African Americans. In Johnson’s autobiography *Along This Way*, he explained,

“For the sake of the story, I kept down to a small degree the discussion of sociological and economic factors, and eschewed all statistical data. One of my prime purposes in writing the story was to set down a continuous record of the Negro’s progress on the New York theatrical stage, from the attempted classical performances of the African Company, at the corner of Bleecker and Mercer Streets in 1821, down to *The Green Pastures* in 1930. I considered that this record alone, done for the first time, was sufficient warrant for the book.”

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71 Ibid., 23.
Johnson’s “record” would be repeated in the sweeping histories of the 1930s, but the very scope and detail of Black Manhattan was something new, as well as Johnson’s eye for the complete theatrical experience, which encompassed the Shakespearean productions of the African Grove and Ira Aldridge as well as the triumphs of Williams and Walker and Shuffle Along.

Johnson based his narrative in Black Manhattan on “development” and increasing complexity. For example, he wrote a detailed biography of American-British actor Ira Aldridge, who made his debut with the short-lived African Grove company and gained fame in England and Europe for his portrayal of Othello. However, he observed, “Ira Aldridge was a sport; his career was in no degree a direct factor in the Negro’s theatrical development. In a less [sic] degree did the efforts made at the African Grove Theater have any consequent effects. The real beginnings of the Negro in American theatre were made on the minstrel stage.”73 While Aldridge was noteworthy, Johnson was also interested in organizing his theatrical chronology through intellectual and practical antecedents. Johnson looked for generic and theatrical firsts: for example, he wrote that the road show Oriental America “broke all precedents by being the first colored show to play Broadway proper… and it was the first colored show to make a definite break from the burlesque houses.”74 Likewise, he praised the Cole and Johnson shows The Shoofly Regiment and The Red Moon as advancements, calling them “true operettas” with “a well-constructed book and a tuneful, well-written score.”75 While his objectivity can be doubted on this front (even if he was no longer actively involved with producing alongside Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson at this point), he marked the advent of a “true operetta” as another step forward for African American theater. Bringing his tale to the present, he exulted that “The past

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73 Ibid., 87.
74 Ibid., 97.
75 Ibid., 109.
twenty years have seen the Negro actor, after a set-back, emerge from the Negro theatre of
Harlem and finally make for himself a definite place on the legitimate stage of New York, the
theatrical capital of the world.” 76 Like Locke, Johnson took a broad view of success, counting
jazz, blues, and musical theater as triumphs alongside opera and straight plays. A teleological
marching beat still pervades this story. Pioneers lead others, breakthroughs lead to further
opportunities, more training, and bigger and more prestigious stages. However, in Johnson’s
story of African Americans in New York, the inevitability of evolution lends its weight to the
inexorable progress of African Americans. They might be prejudiced against, denied, and
delayed, but they would not be stopped, and in Johnson’s telling he could already see
vindication’s light on the horizon.

Locke, Johnson, Rogers, and the other writers of the Harlem Renaissance continued to
advocate for African American musical progress and opportunity. They took a broader view of
what that meant, and were less likely to be uncritical of the giants of the Western canon than
their forebears. However, “classical” music was still an integral part of their definition of
success, and they still saw large forms, orchestral music, and long compositions as valuable ends
to which African American composers should strive. 77 In the 1920s, most of these insights were
delivered in short, timely forms: the occasional book, but also essays, magazine articles, and
other short writings. In the 1930s, four writers in particular gathered their thoughts into forms
which would compete with the mainstream music history text on its own ground.

76 Ibid., 224.
77 For examples of how this philosophy was enacted in the lives and works of Florence Price and other African
American composers, see Rae Linda Brown, Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price (Urbana,
Magnum Opuses: The Histories of Locke, Cuney Hare, Freeman, and Handy

The Great Depression doused many dreams of the 1920s—political, social, artistic, and otherwise—with cold water. The rise of swing cemented jazz as America’s sound (albeit with most visibility and reward going to white musicians), while Caterina Jarboro and Jules Bledsoe took the first steps toward integrating American opera stages, and Porgy and Bess and Four Saints and Three Acts created additional opportunities. But the frenzy of the 1920s had cooled.

After the explosion of creativity in the previous decades, several authors endeavored to take stock of the current state of African American music. Alain Locke’s slim volume The Negro and His Music was both a history and a continuation of the same musings he had first put forward in The New Negro. Maud Cuney Hare intended Negro Musicians and Their Music to be exhaustive: over four hundred pages of a global history which drew upon sources from the African diaspora and from musicologists, historians, and folklorists the world over in order to place African American music in as complete a context as possible. Both of these books—especially Cuney Hare’s biographical materials—are still cited today, and were major cornerstones in the tradition that lead to the work of Eileen Southern, Samuel Floyd, and other contemporary mainstays of Black music research.78

Other works, less well-known, provide valuable insight into how African American musical historiography continued to invest in opera and classical music. Opera composer and impresario Harry Lawrence Freeman wrote his own history in 1939, The Negro in Music and Drama. Like his operas, his manuscript was never published, but Freeman mixed a theatrical and personal history similar to James Weldon Johnson’s with anecdote and memoir, lending the narrative an additional personal touch. On the other hand, W.C. Handy’s Unsung Americans

Sun included three hundred pages of music written to honor people and events in African American history (including a choral arrangement of “St. Louis Blues”). Freeman and Handy engaged with both history and contemporary events as much as Cuney Hare and Locke did. All four authors continued to grapple with modernism, racial uplift, the roles of folk and classical music, and role models for their own work.

![Young Maud Cuney Hare](image.jpg)

**Fig. 1.5: Young Maud Cuney Hare**

Of these four, Maud Cuney Hare (1874-1936) was the most systematic in her approach to African American music, which was born out of a long career of researching, writing, and performing. Cuney Hare was born to upper-middle class, mixed-race parents and educated in music first by her family and then as a piano major at the New England Conservatory of Music. At different points in her life, Cuney Hare was a teacher, a music and art correspondent for the NAACP’S *Crisis*, researcher, folk song collector, music director, professional pianist, and writer of everything from poetry to a biography of her father, Texas politician Norris Wright Cuney. She died only two weeks after finishing *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, her final effort. Cuney Hare aimed to place African American folk and classical music on par with French, Russian, German, Eastern European, and other musics of the “folk” which had fed into national

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79 Cuney Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, xx.
schools of Western art music in the early twentieth century.

Cuney Hare had a definite view of the ideal goal of African American music. She argued,

It has been claimed that Jazz will divide itself and follow two strains—‘The Negro and the Intellectual.’ This aptly describes the situation. Many regard Negro music as synonymous with comedy and buffoonery, rhythmic oddities and random lines. But thoughtful musicians differentiate between music as expressed by trained and cultivated Negro American and Negro music of the above named style.

There are now two classes of native composers—the intellectual musician as exemplified in Harry T. Burleigh, Clarence Cameron White, and a number of others who are now experimenting in Jazz as known through the dance and comedy. They are of the school of rising young composers of Negro descent who are creating music as an art. Their work follows the line of Negro Music as it has grown from the African or Negro folk song, expressive of the soul of a people in their varied moods, but the material is treated as by men of education, musical training, and creative intelligence.80

Cuney Hare’s elitism shows in this statement, influencing both her musical and social standards.

Her emphasis on “thoughtful musicians”, “intellectual musicians,” and “men of education, musical training, and creative intelligence” suggests that Cuney Hare had absorbed the language of the nineteenth-century ideology of High Art from the New England Conservatory and the musical scene of Boston. However, she still acknowledged that jazz was a field which inspired the composers she championed, as well as the racial tensions and complications in the genre:

That Jazz can be made a musical performance has been proved by such orchestral and band conductors as Will Marion Cook and the late James Reese Europe together with a number of present day white orchestral leaders. The performances of the leading Negro band musicians have carried a definite and unmistakable message. But just as the white minstrels blackened their faces and made use of the Negro idiom, so have white orchestral players today usurped the Negro in his Jazz entertainment. However, there remains this difference—they are not caricaturing the medium, they are tremendously in earnest.81

Some musical universalism is in evidence in Cuney Hare’s statement that both white and Black jazz musicians were capable of making jazz into a “musical performance.” However, she also

80 Ibid., 131-2.
81 Ibid., 148.
went on to note that white musicians were able to take advantage of resources and performing opportunities that were closed to African Americans. She understood that other musicians were making the best they could of the opportunities they had. Even if she disliked jazz and ragtime, she could not deny their importance as part of her overall tapestry.

Through citing historical musicians from across the globe and previous Black scholars Cuney Hare placed contemporary African American musicians in a worldwide lineage. Ramsey notes that Cuney Hare relied extensively on Trotter when writing about pre-1878 musicians. Chapter 13, “World Musicians of Color” included several Arabian and Indian musicians dating back to the seventh century, before detailing other figures such as the Chevalier de Saint Georges, George Bridgetower, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, and other figures who have only reached the academic music history sequence in the last few decades. Plates of Naubat Khan Kalawant, Saint Georges, Ignatius Sancho, Bridgetower, Carlos Gomez, and Coleridge Taylor, as well as music examples, create a global picture of Black musicality which stretches from Africa and the Middle East to both Americas, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. By illustrating the complexity of Black music worldwide, especially in practitioners of the classical tradition, Cuney Hare argued both explicitly and implicitly for its place in music history.

Through her expansion of Black music history, Cuney Hare also followed in Trotter’s tradition of advocacy. In her profile of Roland Hayes, she wrote that “Hayes did not rely on patronage alone. He was a diligent worker, ambitions and farsighted, possessing an attractive personality and determination to succeed.” Her description echoes Trotter’s praise of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, which emphasized her virtues and work ethic as much as her talents. Cuney Hare included dozens of biographies of current performers, just as he had, though no other

83 Cuney Hare, Negro Musicians and Their Music, 353.
current mainstream general history did the same. She noted approvingly that Harry Lawrence Freeman “chose the difficult field of opera.”

Cuney Hare’s class perspective and language of universalism echo the general music histories of the early twentieth century. However, those works had a fundamentally different purpose. After reading a conventional general history, one was supposed to be inspired to appreciate Beethoven, not to become the next Beethoven. Cuney Hare was clearly invested in the idea that Western art music should be the final aim for Black musicians. However, her investment in that philosophy make it all the clearer that Cuney Hare departed from that script when she advocated for current musicians and composers, or added a millennium of African musical artists to the history of Black musics. Her ethnomusicological approach showed the richness new fields of study could bring to the historical effort.

![Image of Alain Locke]

Fig. 1.6: Alain Locke

Alain Locke used *The Negro and His Music* to revisit material he had only begun to touch on in *The New Negro*, creating a broader and more complete campus of the roles of

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84 Ibid., 342.
classical, folk, and popular music in the music of the Black future. He created a history, like Cuney Hare, complete with a timeline of the “Seven Ages of Negro Music,” regional zones after the model of *Slave Songs of the United States*, and numerous classification systems. But while he used similar academic language to Cuney Hare—as a man of his education would—it was in the service of jazz, and in the explication and promotion of what he called “classical jazz,” a genre which would mix the ideas of a *work* and a *composer* with the best of jazz improvisation and experimentation. While Cuney Hare’s book was a history, starting with its roots in African music and progressing in an orderly way to the present, Locke’s combined a textbook form, complete with discussion questions, with the focus of a monograph. His central assertion was that African American folk music was *the* American folk music, and that composers and musicians should draw inspiration from it. His history was also clearly positioned in relation to that central point, which not only claimed that African Americans deserved access to broader stages, but were already in the vanguard due to their understanding of their own musical traditions.

Locke both criticized classical music and used it as evidence in his explanation of African American music. He appreciated Western art music, but, in a cogent description of racial uplift, argued that the best African American musicians of the late nineteenth century “had to make common cause with ‘classical music’ in self defense.”85 Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield or Sissieretta Jones might very well have disagreed, but the idea shows Locke’s dissatisfaction with the “classical” tradition as it stood. He also explained, “Let us listen to what may be said from the side of jazz in self-defense; and then realize, perhaps, that the important distinction is not between jazz and classical music but between the good, mediocre and bad of both varieties. Jazz

has its classics; and the classical tradition has its second, third, and fourth raters.”86 Just as he had handled the spiritual, rather than insisting on a particular style or interpretation, he preferred to ask that composers compose well. Locke was no fan of music “tarnished with commercialism and the dust of the market-place.”87 What he sought was a perfect blend of the classical and the folk, of “classical jazz” which did not forget its roots in African American music and life.

“Classical jazz” was “symphonic jazz, breaking from the shell of dance jazz and popular song ballad.”88 It was a thing yet to be fully realized, Locke thought: many white attempts, such as those of Gershwin and Gruenberg, still had too much of Europe for his ear, whereas too many African American bandleaders allowed themselves to be “arrangers” rather than claiming their due as composers of original works. Locke sought the work and the composer, but on African American terms rather than European.

Not only did Locke advocate for “classical jazz,” but he used classical music in order to bolster the case for jazz. At one point, he recounted,

There is the story that Rossini, the great Italian composer, often composed in bed, and that when a manuscript slipped down to the floor on the wall-side, he would think up another melody because it was easier than picking up the strayed manuscript. Improvising is an essential trait of the genuine jazz musician: with the assurance that “there is plenty more where that came from,” he pours his music out with a fervor and freshness that is unique and irresistible.89

Locke’s citation of opera served to place jazz on another playing field entirely. At another point, he suggests that jazz’s nearest classical kin is the “contrapuntal traditions of the old polyphonic music” rather than more recent orchestral works.90 Locke saw African American music lifted to the standard of European concert works, proclaiming that “A folk who can improvise great and

86 Ibid., 93
87 Ibid., 4
88 Ibid., 112.
89 Ibid., 97.
90 Ibid., 112.
moving choral orchestras, for that is what a Negro singing group really is, should eventually have great opera, expert symphony orchestras, and skilled virtuosi or technical musicians.”91 In the meantime, he noted that “There remains to the Negro singer only one unopened door in American musical recognition, and that the Metropolitan opera.”92 Locke worked within a similar educational framework to Cuney Hare, and still saw large forms and entrance to the halls of high culture as a worthy goal to pursue. However, he saw those halls more critically, and was more forward in arguing for jazz to be recognized on its own merits, in addition to spirituals and African American folk song.

Locke’s didactic presentation and his choice of foci also point to how African American music histories were becoming an established genre of their own. Locke concluded each chapter with a list of discussion questions and sources for further reading. In some later sections, he supplemented these further with a discography. Locke was an educator for most of his career, and his neatly divided chapters were prepared in a format which would make them ideal to discuss in an educational setting. He also highlighted what he did not have the ability to cover, such as explicitly acknowledging that he did not feel he had the space to discuss Africa in depth.93 He did, however, include a study of musicians of African descent both past and present, from African American singers and performers to the Chevalier du Saint Georges and Bridgetower, further enshrining them as Black men who lived and worked at the same time as Mozart and Beethoven. These seem to be topics that Locke thought would be expected in a history. The similarities in Cuney Hare and Locke’s texts—whom they decide to focus on, and in what order the narrative is presented—suggests that they were working to further define an already-established historical narrative. They both knew the same set of heroes and heroines, and

91 Ibid., 5.
92 Ibid., 125.
93 Ibid., 136.
the same outline of history, which they divided roughly into the same periods. Their predecessors had created the basic framework, which they continued to develop.

While Cuney Hare and Locke both occasionally insert themselves into their narratives, mentioning that they had met someone or been at an event, Harry Lawrence Freeman’s *The Negro in Music and Drama*, which is preserved in his papers at Columbia University, is as much memoir and catalogue as history. In her work on Freeman (1869-1945), Lucy Caplan posits that, because he knew his operas would never be published, he gave full scope to his imagination rather than restraining himself because of performance concerns. Freeman’s monograph suggests the same sprawling ambitions. He included philosophical, historical, and musical digressions: at the time of this writing, he was a seventy-year-old man, who had spent his life considering these issues from all possible angles. Freeman’s own career gives weight to the

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94 From Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Archive.  
work, since his life and point of view are actually as interesting as he believes they are. He had written dozens of operas, and as an impresario he had been able to have a few performed. He had also composed and conducted for the Cole and Johnson musical theater troupe, and, like James Weldon Johnson, had met nearly all of the artists whom he would later include in this work. Freeman’s *The Negro in Music and Drama* is a sweeping history of music and theater, with himself as the central example. And while most of these polymaths were able to write well about opera, Freeman worked from the perspective of a composer for whom opera was his first and highest goal. Even though this book was never published, Freeman had had every bit as much experience as Locke, Johnson, or Cuney Hare with African American popular and classical music, and his monograph gave him the space to explore it in his own particular way.

Much like his operas, Freeman crafted his history on a massive scale. He divided it into three large sections: “Pioneer Period” catalogued musicians up to Freeman’s present day, “The Great Negro Theater” described buildings and companies, and “Great Negro Shows” contained both an encyclopedia of works and Freeman’s thoughts on “Negro” compositions. Freeman seems to have drawn on his extensive scrapbook collection for his research, since he reproduced plot summaries and cast lists for most of the major African American theatrical events of the early twentieth century, and further highlighting the fact that he had often had a front-row seat to this history. He also referenced his scholarly predecessors. Freeman did not explicitly cite Trotter, but shared many of his nineteenth-century examples with him. Freeman did, however, call *Black Manhattan* “a work of inestimable value,” and shared with Johnson a concern for the New York theatrical scene. By citing these works, Freeman’s book became a scholarly compendium as well as a collection of his own firsthand accounts and sources.

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96 Freeman, *The Negro in Music and Drama*, 348.
Freeman used his experiences with figures of African American art and literature to illuminate his own philosophy of opera composition. Near the end of the section on works, he described how both Richard B. Harrison and Paul Laurence Dunbar attended *The Martyr* in Denver, and the conversation he had with Dunbar which followed.

The first night of his stay, Paul disclosed his reason for not having been more enthusiastic in his congratulations after the production of my opera, *The Martyr*. I had just finished playing and singing the score of my second grand opera, *Valdo*, which I had completed the week before he arrived; whereupon he remarked: “I have exactly the same objection to this new opera you have just played for me that I had for *The Martyr* when I heard it in Chicago.”

I slammed the lid of the piano down with a bang, exclaiming the while: “You don’t know anything about music—real music—anyhow: I might have known I was wasting my time playing for you!” He hastened to explain: “The music as such is fine—great—don’t misunderstand me. “Then what?” I snapped; whereupon he continued: “I can’t see why you don’t base your work upon Negro themes—the folk, work, or camp-meeting songs of the South. There is nothing at all Negroid in any of your compositions.” I replied: “I didn’t intend that there should be. What do I know about those things?”

In Freeman’s dramatization of this encounter, after further debate he finally insisted that if Dunbar wished to use dialect, that was well and good, but Freeman would go his own way. A decade later, however, when their paths crossed again, Freeman informed him, “I shall be everlastingly grateful to you, Paul, for the great influence you brought to bear upon me through the awakening of my latent sensibilities to the full realization of the intrinsic value of the marvelous beauties contained in our own ‘songs of the soil.’” However, at this point, Dunbar was frustrated that his dialect poems seemed to be his only work garnering attention, and he urged Freeman to “not follow my own example, Harry—write as your muse dictates. Mix them up!” In Freeman’s discussions and debates with Dunbar, he encapsulated the African American composer’s dilemma in a simplified form: whether to hew to folk forms or to ignore them

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97 Ibid., 342-3.
98 Ibid., 346.
99 Ibid.
entirely. And, like most, he found his answer somewhere in the middle. Freeman’s later operas
drew on African, American, and African-American topics and music. Freeman likened his use of
varied musical materials to the realism provided by different dialects in literature or in a straight
play.\textsuperscript{100} He then compared this distinction to the difference between northern and southern
African American comedians and their work. This division is similar to that which he drew
between an excellent ballad singer and an excellent operatic singer, though he made it clear he
appreciated both.\textsuperscript{101} Freeman did most of his composition in opera, but had also worked with
Cole and Johnson and published popular songs: like James Weldon Johnson, he had a genuine
appreciation for both popular music and classical, and his manuscript presents Williams and
Walker and Samuel Coleridge Taylor as part of the same broad swath of pioneers of color.

Freeman’s retrospective account also shows how attitudes about music and the writing of
music were further nuanced by a half-century career. In an early chapter, he excerpted an article
about music which he wrote in 1897. He opens, “Music is highest and noblest of the arts—a
sacred trust from God to man.”\textsuperscript{102} This could be a phrase taken straight out of Trotter or the
\textit{Negro Music Journal}. Freeman did privilege “classical” forms in his work, devoting a large
amount of space to both his own operas and the operas and oratorios of others. He also described
Sissieretta Jones “simply depart[ing] from the ways of the eternally progressive in order to dwell
in the Elysian Fields of ‘least resistance’… a rut from whence she never extricated herself until
her retirement from public life.”\textsuperscript{103} However, in another section, he excoriates Howard
University for not acclaiming their alumnus James Bland, composer of “Carry Me Back to Old
Virginny,” a view which Taylor would certainly not have shared. On one level, he had a

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 196.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 49-50.
preference for the “classical” tradition, but on another a deep sympathy with the “popular.”

Freeman had to navigate tensions between ideals and reality, what was and what he dreamed. He included all of the traditional elements of the African American music history, such as a legacy of performers, major theatrical events, global models, and an epilogue full of young singers to watch. But in this private rendition of a public form, he was able to combine his own personal recollections with public history, and use his own memories of public figures—such as attempting to get Jules Bledsoe for Voodoo, who unfortunately came down with appendicitis—to add depth to narratives that often do not record what could have happened. In this form, Freeman allowed the tensions of genres and of histories to stand.

Fig. 1.8: W.C. Handy

Blues bandleader W.C. Handy’s Unsung Americans Sung takes yet another approach to historical form. While Handy drew his source material from fairly standard lists of notable African Americans across professional and historical boundaries, he turned those brief biographies into nearly three hundred pages of musical numbers proclaiming their accomplishments. While this work never had the public profile Handy envisioned, it was a
particularly creative attempt at bringing history to a wider stage.

Handy chose songs because of their particular public nature. He wrote,

Many read books, magazines, and newspapers, but everybody sings or listens to songs. Those who never read anything about Old King Cole nevertheless know him better than any English monarch through the nursery song describing him as a “merry old soul.”…. Since songs more indelibly engrave themselves upon the memory than any other media of communicating ideas and sentiments, they certainly constitute the most effective means of teaching Negro history to the masses and thus offsetting the corroding sense of inferiority which hampers an underprivileged minority unaware of what its people have accomplished for it…

In this passage, Handy took the theory of African American musical historiography to its logical conclusion: if these figures are important, and music is also important, then music should be used to tell their stories. He noted that his work was particularly meant for children (inspired by a volume of biography he once taught entitled *Musicians in Rhyme for Childhood’s Time*), but that he expected the figures contained within to appeal to a broad audience. One could envision the music being used to stage a variation of W.E.B. DuBois’s pageant *The Star of Ethiopia*.

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105 Ibid., 6.
Fig. 1.9: The Music of Unsung Americans Sung

W.C. Handy’s vision unfolds in a potpourri of music by a variety of composers. He included some of his own works: “St. Louis Blues” of course, but also the “Aframericam Hymn,” which bears a resemblance to the traditional patriotic “God of our Fathers.” The music ranges from solo arrangements to an eight-part double choir. Much of it is written in a homophonic hymn texture, but “Sissieretta Jones” cites operatic melodies, “Frederick Douglass” dabbles in chromaticism, and several numbers praise the jazz and blues in the appropriate styles. Handy implicitly underscored the point made by other historians: African Americans could sing and play in whatever genres they chose.
The images which accompany these didactic songs further emphasize the variety and diversity Handy brought together. Crispus Attucks and Ira Aldridge share one page, Sissieretta Jones and Toussaint L’Ouverture another. Some white allies are included, such as the sketch of John Brown and the text of the Gettysburg Address set to music. However, they are outnumbered by dozens of African American artists, politicians, scientists, leaders, and folk heroes. The variety of the biographies, the images which accompany them, and the musical materials used to enshrine them display the history of Black music and culture in all its variety and brilliance.
Conclusion

Whether in short editorials or sweeping histories, African American writers of the late nineteenth and twentieth century both explained and created places for Black artists on classical and operatic stages. They served as both educators in the history of Western art music and its Black participants, and advocates for both well-known and up-and-coming African American performers and composers. In doing so, they created a history apart from the mainstream of musicological texts: one which valued performers as much as composers and their “works,” and which gave the popular and the “folk” equal bearing with the sonata-allegro. Black intellectuals who engaged with Western art music and the “classical” tradition laid the groundwork for other African American musicians who wanted to sing or compose opera, preparing audiences to listen to Black men and women in a “white” art form, claiming both participation and outright ownership of the classical tradition as well as the African American folk and popular traditions, and insisting on their right to participate equally and excel at them all.
Chapter 2
Queens of Song: Stages and Strategies of Nineteenth-Century Black Prima Donnas

Introduction

The Black Swan. The Queen of Staccato. The Creole Nightingale. The Brown Melba. The Brown Patti. The Black Patti. The *Real* Black Patti. The Double-Voiced Queen of Song. The sobriquets evoke the inescapable omnipresence of race, even as they allude to glamor, vocal prowess, and the prestige mostly associated with white stars. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of African American women took to local, national, and international stages as classical vocalists, after Jenny Lind gave a new glamor and prestige to the operatic prima donna in the American imagination. Some came from the southern United States, others the Northeast or the West Coast. Some were either formerly enslaved or the children of formerly enslaved parents, while others hailed from free Black communities which had existed before the war. A few were self-taught, others found private teachers, and still others benefitted from the few conservatories that admitted students of color. They sang in churches, choirs, concert companies, and vaudeville troupes. Despite this variety, the white musical establishment treated them all as exotic novelty acts rather than professional artists.

In this chapter, my goal is to return their variety to the forefront by focusing on some of these individual women and the choices they made to further their musical careers. I will examine several nineteenth-century African American prima donnas, and analyze how they resisted, fit into, or sidestepped societal expectations for women of color in order to perform. I
refer to these women as the Queens of Song, based on the sobriquet bestowed on many of them by the popular press of the nineteenth century. A “Queen of Song” needed to display vocal mastery, but the royal title also conveys dignity and regal bearing, qualities which these women embodied in their roles as artists and as standard-bearers of Black culture.

- Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (c.1820-1871) was the first African American to have a prominent career as a classical singer. Her performance tours took her to England, where she was hosted by Harriet Beecher Stowe, the writer of Uncle Tom’s Cabin.

- Sisters Anna Madah (c.1855-1929) and Emma Louise (c.1857-1901) Hyers began performing opera excerpts under the management of their father in 1871. They later organized a theater company, where they premiered the operettas Out of Bondage, Peculiar Sam, and Urlina the African Princess.

- Nellie Brown Mitchell (1845-1924) trained at the New England Conservatory of Music. She was popular as a soloist and church musician throughout New England. At different times, she travelled with the Bergen Concert Company, directed music at the Bloomfield Street Church in Boston, and organized children’s operettas.

- Marie Selika Williams (c.1849-1937), a coloratura soprano, was the first Black artist to perform in the White House. She performed across the United States and Europe. After her husband’s death in 1911, she moved to New York to continue giving voice lessons.

- Amelia Tilghman (1856-1931) was a pianist and soprano who organized multiple oratorio performances. After an injury ended her performance career, she founded the Musical Messenger, the first African American music journal.

- Flora Batson (1864-1906) was called the “Double-Voiced Queen of Song” due to her wide range. She was the widest-travelled of the women listed here, going all the way to
Hawaii and Australia with touring companies.

I analyze Sissieretta Jones separately in the next chapter, because her high-profile public career was longer and more recent than the heyday of the other Queens of Song, and she left a particularly extensive archive, which allows for a detailed analysis of the intricate construction of her identity as a prima donna. The women in this chapter are more elusive: Eileen Southern points out that, during the Hyers Sisters’ initial tours in the 1870s, there were few Black newspapers, of which even fewer copies survive.\(^1\) However, this chapter examines a larger cross-section of the Queens of Song together in more depth than has been done before. I also include figures such as Nellie Brown Mitchell and Amelia Tilghman, who have attracted little scholarly attention due to the fact that they were regionally rather than nationally prominent. By considering them in this detail, both as a group and as individuals, common threads emerge. These patterns create a sense of the discourses that shaped how Black and white audiences encountered (or imagined) Black opera performance. All of these women took advantage of the currents of the time and place in which they lived: they were part of a generation able to capitalize on musical training previously unavailable to them, and a postwar public sphere in which women could teach or perform certain repertoire while maintaining their femininity. They were also supported by a nascent infrastructure of African American musical institutions and emerging ideologies of racial uplift. The Queens of Song deliberately took advantage of these factors, shaping their public identities and performances to occupy these emerging spaces.

Aside from Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, most of the nineteenth-century Queens of Song flourished after the Civil War and the end of slavery. However, this meant that they had to negotiate their careers in the middle of the postwar backlash against the expansion of women’s

options. Katherine Preston observes:

The dominant middle-class belief at midcentury was that women’s perceived moral superiority and emotional and physical makeup made them best suited for motherhood and domesticity, and the social expectation was that if a woman had to pursue employment outside of the home, she should choose a field that required these skills. Business, as a competitive and specifically virile endeavor, was generally considered inappropriate for women. Even some successful female public speakers on the lyceum circuit who advocated change nevertheless believed that their sisters and daughters were neither physically nor psychically suited to the fiercely masculine world of business. The African American teacher and entrepreneur Maggie Lena Mitchell Walker (1867-1934), for example, urged women to take economic control of their lives, but believed that “the timidity and retiring disposition of women [made them] unfit for the strife, competition and worry of business life.”

The arts provided a potential way for women to thread this needle. Music was domestic and feminine, even if being paid for it was less so. The managers Preston profiles in *Opera for the People* were able to leverage their artistic skill to make their own business decisions. African American women, of course, also had to deal with racism, leaving it more difficult for them to perform without relying on white, male managers. Even so, the Hyers Sisters and Nellie Brown Mitchell acted as managers of the groups they arranged. Preston emphasizes that the field of artistic business was one in which a woman could achieve both artistic and economic freedom, because of the power of the prima donna in opera culture. Female singers drew audiences, and that gave them leverage with which to make decision and direct their troupes and careers.

Despite the limitations of sexism, the legacy of slavery, and the emergence of Jim Crow, the Queens of Song were part of the first generation of African American women to have widespread access to formal musical training. Josephine Wright finds that Black women in the nineteenth century were able to access musical education in four ways: through private

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instruction, typically in cities; through private instruction in Europe; through instruction at the emergent Black land-grant colleges which offered music; and through instruction at a few American conservatories which accepted African American students. Oberlin Conservatory began to accept Black students in 1865. Boston Conservatory and the New England Conservatory followed in 1867, and the National Conservatory of Music in New York in 1885. These latter institutions trained many of the composers and singers who would go on to found music departments at HBCUs.

Unremarked by white newspapers and music journals, an infrastructure of churches and conservatories arose which provided training and opportunities for singers. At the very least, teaching music lessons or playing for church was a respectable position for a young woman—one which most of the women in this survey filled at various points in their lives. The 1880s, the peak years of the Queens of Song, were also the high point of English-language opera in the United States, giving them the advantage of audiences primed to accept homegrown singers as an alternative to European stars. These African American women belonged to what Nancy Reich (in a study centered on European women) called the artist-musician class, making their livings and accessing the Black middle class through performing and teaching music. Like most of the professional female musicians Reich writes about, many of the Queens of Song were the children of parents who worked as singers and music teachers, whether as careers or as side jobs. Their impact is inseparable from these musical lineages in African American communities.

As part of these communities, the Queens of Song were also standard-bearers. Proponents of uplift advocated racial advancement through displaying educational, social, and cultural

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4 Ibid., 43
5 Preston, Opera for the People, 563.
7 Ibid., 126.
achievement. Women who publicly and successfully performed the sort of tasteful European art music advocated by both white and Black classical-music promoters were textbook ambassadors for this model of racial equality. As Lawson Andrew Scruggs wrote in the introduction of his 1893 book *Women of Distinction: Remarkable in Works and Invincible in Character*, which chronicles all of these singers: “If in such a short time of greatly abridged citizenship our women have accomplished so much, and if many of those heroines mentioned did develop such giant intellects during those dark days of our history, may we be not the more encouraged to make more diligent, protracted, and determined efforts in this brighter age?”

Thus, they were held up as signs for both white and Black audiences: for whites, a proof that African Americans were every bit as intelligent and capable as they, and for Black onlookers, a call to go and do likewise.

The elusiveness of primary source documentation on these women and the musical world in which they worked requires turning to a variety of sources, several of which have not been studied in detail. In addition to what newspaper reviews exist, either in archives or reproduced in secondary works, I rely on late nineteenth and early twentieth century African American writers, some of whom knew these singers personally or had heard them perform. James Monroe Trotter’s *Music and Some Highly Musical People* profiles Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Nellie Brown Mitchell, and the Hyers Sisters, and provided biographical material for most of the later writers who considered them. Monroe A. Major’s 1893 *Noted Negro Women* added Marie Selika, Flora Batson, and Amelia Tilghman. In the 1930s, Maud Cuney Hare’s published *Negro Musicians and Their Music* and Harry Freeman’s manuscript *The Negro in Music and Drama* mix these older sources with their own personal recollections of the prima donnas. However, the primary documentation leaves a significant gap. White newspaper reviews, unsurprisingly, were

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heavily inflected with racism and sexism, even when they were ostensibly complimentary. On the other extreme, Trotter and Majors border on the hagiographic in the service of uplift.

These sources all require reading between the lines, while taking care not to put one’s own words into the mouths of these women who went to such lengths to make their voices heard. Eileen Southern’s article “Black Prima Donnas of the Nineteenth Century,” as well as The Music of Black Americans; as well as Rosalyn Story’s And So I Sing: African-American Divas of Opera and Concert provide valuable contextualized biographic information. Jennifer Stoever’s The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening both analyzes Greenfield’s career in light of Jenny Lind and lays the groundwork for a theory of just how the Queens of Song were heard. I build on Stoever’s analysis of Greenfield and Jocelyn Buckner’s work on the Hyers Sisters’ theatrical shows, since both Stoever’s concept of the “sonic color line” and Buckner’s “spectacular opacity” can be tied to the person and the performance of the prima donna. My contribution is to illuminate how the widely recognized image of the specifically operatic soprano shaped this generation’s performances. I fold Stoever’s and Buckner’s work into the larger context of the repertoire and rhetoric these women used to shape varying career paths for themselves in a rapidly changing musical ecosystem.

These women are important because they still affect those who have never heard their names. They created the first possibility of the woman of color as an opera singer in the American and European imagination, long before Marian Anderson or Leontyne Price took up the mantle, making the Black prima donna a real figure who could then be emulated. African American historians foregrounded them as living symbols of Black artistic success. This image was widespread enough to be reflected in fiction as early as the mid-nineteenth century. In

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9 See Chapter 1 of this dissertation.
British authors Charles Kingsley’s 1857 novel *Two Years Ago*, the mixed-race Marie Lavington first escapes to Canada, and then refashions herself as the Italian diva La Cordifiamma. American author Lydia Maria Child used a similar conceit in her 1867 *A Romance of the Republic*, which sees the formerly enslaved Rosa Royal become the opera singer La Senorita Rosita Campaneo. Pauline Hopkins, an African American author and journalist, gave the image a twist in 1902 with *Of One Blood*’s Dianthe Lusk, a star soprano with the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who loses her memory and forgets her race. These books are about the grey areas in both race and gender: the semi-white Mexican or Italian woman, the semi-respectable prima donna, and the gaps these figures exposed in nineteenth-century racial consciousness. The Queens of Song exploited these gaps. Daphne Brooks suggests that Lusk was a deliberate homage on Hopkins’ part to “these trailblazing women who were lauded as triumphant examples of ‘the colored race’s’ ability to achieve excellence in the institutional arts.” They remain in secondary sources, their accomplishments confused with each other, blurred by race, gender, and the effects of opera’s larger-than-life archetypes. Yet, each individual woman did her own work to lay the foundation upon which later singers would build. Jennifer Stoever writes that the Northern incarnation of the sonic color line “trafficked in stage spectacles, heightened—and increasingly popular—performances of race, gender, and sexuality that prodded, provoked, and shaped everyday understandings of race.” The Queens of Song were part of this structure, but one which undermined it even as it was built, finding agency and dignity in their performances that slavery and Jim Crow would deny them.

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Act One: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield was the first African American woman to make a name for herself as a concert singer, and in many ways her repertoire, career, and reception created a pattern for her successors to follow. Greenfield was born enslaved on a plantation near Natchez, Mississippi. However, she grew up in Philadelphia, home of one of the largest antebellum communities of free African Americans, and was educated in Quaker schools. She was freed at some point during her youth, but her former owner, Elizabeth H. Greenfield, hired her as a nurse and companion until the older woman’s death in 1845. After this, Greenfield established herself as a music teacher in Philadelphia and, in 1851-1853, embarked on her first concert tour of the eastern and midwestern United States in the immediate wake of Jenny Lind’s 1851 success.\(^{13}\)

\[\text{Fig. 2.1: Image from Playbill for 1853 Concert, Metropolitan Hall, New York.}\]^{14}\n
Greenfield’s life and reception outline many of the dilemmas and dichotomies facing the


\(^{14}\) Ibid, 142.
Queens of Song and their audiences: first, the problem of how to “hear” classically-trained Black female vocalists and, second, the debate about “nature” versus “cultivation” in their singing voices. The primary source for information on these reception controversies as they pertain to Greenfield is a 65-page booklet entitled *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad; Or, a Biographical Sketch of Miss Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the American Vocalist*, published anonymously in 1855. The piece includes a short biography, excerpts from letters to Greenfield, and press commentary. These letters and the overall positive spin of the document support Arthur LaBrew’s assertion that this sketch was probably sponsored by Greenfield and her managers. But even this promotional material highlights that “positive” responses to Greenfield were full of paternalism and racial essentialism. Arthur LaBrew and Julia Chybowski deepen the complicated critical reception to Greenfield’s performances through the additional sources they amass in their own scholarly work, including the more straightforwardly negative and/or racist reviews. I have also engaged in additional detailed analysis of the reviews collected in *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad*.

Fundamentally, white critics and audiences were not sure how to hear Greenfield, having no mental category for a Black woman who sung with the technique and repertoire of trained (white) sopranos. This uncertainty is a fact in the careers of all the women in this chapter, coloring their reception, responsible for contradictions and clichés. Stoever argues:

> Certain that either their eyes were deceived or their ears were playing tricks, many white reviewers either “whitened” Greenfield’s voice—disembodying it and locating it firmly in Lind’s style and tradition—or “blackened” its sound to match the cultural meanings her visible body represented. By criticizing Greenfield’s voice for betraying “blackness” or “whiteness,” nineteenth-century critics shored up the sonic color line by training readers’ ears to detect both.

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Greenfield was something new, and Stoever further contends that her reception—part of the skyrocketing political tensions following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in 1850—was not merely repeating existing racial ideas, but actively creating, performing, and reinforcing them. Lind and Greenfield toured so close together that comparisons were inevitable. Lind was ideally feminine, pious, her voice angelic. But, as the *Springfield Review* wondered, “It was amusing to behold the utter surprise and intense pleasure which were depicted on the faces of her listeners; they seemed to express—‘Why, we see the face of a black woman, but hear the voice of an angel, what does it mean?” The distinction the writer makes between “angel” and “Black woman” is telling. Stoever reports that numerous reviewers suggested listening to her with eyes closed, in order to avoid what was for the white, racist listener an uncomfortable disconnect between her body and her voice. Feminine ideals of beauty and purity, as expressed by a soprano, were bound up with whiteness. Jenny Lind embodied these virtues without friction, but critics were caught short by Greenfield’s claim to the same space.

The disconnect Stoever observes was further amplified by Greenfield’s three-and-a-half octave range, which she occasionally demonstrated by singing one verse of “Old Hundredth” in the soprano and the next in the tenor or baritone. Opera has a long history of female performers voicing male roles, but this extraordinary display of sheer vocal breadth, while impressive, carried the risk of appearing as a curiosity or sideshow. The *New York Daily Tribune* complained, “The idea of a woman’s voice is a feminine tone; anything below that is disgusting. It is as bad as a bride with a beard on her chin and an oath in her mouth. We hear a great deal about woman’s sphere. That sphere exists in music, and it is the soprano region of the voice.”

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17 Reprinted ibid., 88.
18 Ibid., 114.
The later Queens of Song Emma Hyers and Flora Batson were also low contraltos. As Black women, their femininity was already in question: for white listeners, their low voices finally put them beyond the pale (pun intended). As Daphne Brooks puts it, Greenfield “both entered into the realm of classical singing uninvited as an African American woman and bastardized the sphere by vocally travelling outside the boundaries of vocal categories.”  

Greenfield’s repertoire choices—parlor songs, folk ballads, religious works, and operatic arias in English translation—might have mirrored other “respectable” singers, but her virtuosity and her voice were her own, whether they supported or undermined her femininity in the minds of her listeners.

Though not as pervasive as the discourse around race and gender, there was a similar disconnect related to “cultivation,” another major factor in Greenfield’s vocal reception. Chybowski cites reviewers in New York and Boston who called Greenfield “natural,” “self-taught,” “childlike,” or referred to her “small amount of cultivation,” despite the fact that Greenfield was a literate woman in her mid-twenties who had had formal musical training. Unlike these writers, James Trotter emphasized how she “diligently applied herself to a scientific cultivation of a voice in natural power well-nigh marvelous, as well as to acquiring a scholarly knowledge of the principles of general music.” Greenfield may not have had a conservatory education, but she still possessed formal training and long experience, which Trotter highlighted. In doing so, Trotter aligned Greenfield with the ideals of “scientific” music (e.g., notated Western art music) and middle and upper-class gentility, which Trotter claimed for both Greenfield and his other subjects.

21 Chybowski, “Becoming the ‘Black Swan’ in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” 146.
22 James M. Trotter, Music and Some Highly Musical People (FQ Books, 2010), 47
“Natural” and “cultivated” had a particular and loaded set of meanings when applied to female singers in the nineteenth century, tied to perceptions of art, race, and femininity. Roger Freitas demonstrates this with his two articles on Adelina Patti.24 Patti, too, was described as entirely “natural,” “simple and childlike,” singing through instinct and for love of it rather than training and strategically using her voice.25 Of course, this “naturalness” was a particular performance, through her declamation of the text, use of rubato, application of trills, mordants, and grace notes, and other effects. Freitas also points out that this carefully constructed ingénue role, which Patti played throughout her career, was a way of distancing herself from the implied immorality of the stage.26 “Naturalness” brought together youth and innocence in such a way that an artist could invoke nineteenth-century ideals of womanhood even in public performance.27

These ideas take on a different significance in the case of a Black woman such as Greenfield. White critics could use it to invoke both racist and sexist stereotypes, and Black writers such as Trotter distanced her from the concept. White writers often assumed the conventional “wisdom” that people of African descent could have inborn talent, especially musical talent, but could not engage intellectually with their art. Another was the specter of minstrelsy—for an antebellum audience, “natural” Black singing evoked the melodies of Stephen Foster and entertainers in blackface rather than a sweet young woman singing “Home, Sweet Home” in the parlor. Chybowski writes that Greenfield was laughed at when she performed at some venues, including in New York City, because audiences saw her as a minstrel figure. “Even when reviewers used minstrel caricature to differentiate her from blackface entertainment, they

27 Ibid., 299.
still contributed to the racialized and gendered perceptions that evoked laughter from others because some heard and saw a minstrel caricature in Greenfield’s Blackness.” This mockery extended to Black Swan acts becoming part of minstrel shows throughout the United States. One mock-lecture from a “professor” is even more revealing, as Chybowski summarizes: “This mock lecture also denigrated Greenfield’s audience for patronizing Black female strength over white female sweetness and for their presumed anti-slavery politics. Finally, and most importantly, the lecturer predicts a violent response by the African American audience attracted to the ‘Black Swan.’”

This burlesque lecture makes it clear that, while Greenfield performed “naturalness,” racist audiences were unable to accept this as idealized femininity, and instead took it as evidence of racial limitation. But the sheer nastiness of the criticism shows that these audience saw Greenfield as a true threat to the whiteness of both femininity and elite musical culture.

In order to overcome the disjunction reviewers found between her voice and appearance, between the imagined “naturalness” of a Black woman and the “naturalness” of Lind or Patti, it was especially crucial for Greenfield to both sound and look the role of the prima donna. Through a few selections from The Black Swan at Home and Abroad, one finds how Greenfield responded to criticism of her performances based on her public appearance. One letter from “E.S.M.” of Utica suggested a very specific wardrobe in 1853:

You were dressed with great modesty and with much simplicity, still there are some things it would be well for you to lay aside. Wear nothing in your hair, unless it be a cluster of white flowers in the back; never wear coloured flowers, nor flowing ribbons. Let your dress be a plain black silk, high at the back of the neck, and open in front about half way to the waist, under this, wear a square or lace, tartan, or muslin, doubled and laid in folds to cross over the breast. Wear muslin under sleeves, and white kid gloves—always. Dress very loosely. I would advise no whalebones, (but perhaps you are not prepared for that reform.) In case you should lay them aside, a sacque of the same material as the dress would be very pretty to conceal the figure. If you tire of the black

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29 Ibid., 315.
silk, a steel colour would be a good change—but these two are preferable to all others. 
Your pocket handkerchief should be unfolded and somewhat tumbled, not held by a point 
in the centre; perhaps it would be better to have it in your picket, quite out of sight—the 
piece of music is enough for the hands. I rejoice in the dignity of your deportment and in 
the good hours you keep. I have said this much in relation to your dress, because I know 
how important it is that, in the midst of all the prejudice against those of your colour, that 
your appearance should be strikingly genteel.30

E.S.M anticipates Pygmalion’s Henry Higgins in her desire to completely transform
Greenfield into a New England gentlewoman—taking it upon themselves, of course, to assume 
that a complete reworking of the singer’s wardrobe would be welcome advice. A letter from G. 
in Buffalo takes a similar approach with opposite ends:

There is one thing which Miss Greenfield must allow a stranger to suggest—and it is on 
the subject of her dress. The dress itself was handsome, but why wear that white lace 
bertha? Some bright rich color would suit so much better—or something darkly delicate, 
indeed, before a European audience, I think Miss Greenfield might adopt the Oriental 
style of dress with the best effect.31

However, what Greenfield actually wore in performance is described in a review from 1852:

Her principal exterior garment enclosed the whole person excepting the caput… the 
color… light blue, or green-cerulean or emerald, rather profusely covered with large 
white flowery figures; her gloves were of white kid, from which depended a fine nine 
shilling linen handkerchief. She wore what appeared to be heavy gold ear-rings; and her 
hair, jet black, with the natural wiry curl, was arranged a la Jenny Lind. Her manner and 
carriage were exceedingly easy, and even graceful.32

The description of “a la Jenny Lind” is the important one here. Rather than Puritan 
austerity or gratuitous exoticism, Greenfield modeled herself after the iconic prima donna by 
combining both glamor and modest femininity.

Greenfield modeled herself after European prima donnas in repertoire as well as 
appearance. As Chybowski observes, “She sang the repertoire common to middle and upper 
class parlors and concert stages graded by European prima donnas. She dressed in ways that

30 Reprinted in The Black Swan at Home and Abroad: Or, a Biographical Sketch of Miss Elizabeth Taylor 
Greenfield, the American Vocalist (1855; reprinted Scholar’s Choice, 2015), 11-12.
31 Ibid., 39.
32 Ibid., 22.
seemed appropriately fashionable yet modest, behaved in ways that reviewers interpreted as respectable and humble.”

A program from 1851 shows the sort of repertoire that Greenfield performed—the ten-song lineup was extraordinary for the period, in which it would be more usual to perform two or three numbers, and then encores to those, accompanied by other acts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1</th>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Ballad</th>
<th>Ballad</th>
<th>Ballad</th>
<th>Sacred Piece</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Salut a La France” from <em>La fille du Regiment</em></td>
<td>“Make me no gaudy Chaplets” from <em>Lucretia Borgia</em></td>
<td>“On the banks of Guadelquiver’ from <em>Linda de</em> [sic] <em>Chamounix</em></td>
<td>“O Native Scenes”</td>
<td>“Sound the Trumpets,” arr. Gardner</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Donizetti</td>
<td>Donizetti</td>
<td>Bellini [sic: Donizetti]</td>
<td>Bellini</td>
<td>Hummel</td>
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<tr>
<th>Part 2</th>
<th>Pianoforte</th>
<th>Cavatina</th>
<th>Ballad</th>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Aria</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“The Bouquet,” arranged and performed by E.L. Baker</td>
<td>“Like the gloom of Night retiring”</td>
<td>“Why do I weep?”</td>
<td>“Dying Warrior” (guitar accompaniment)</td>
<td>“Natalie, the Maid of the Mill”</td>
<td>“Sweetly o’er my Senses Stealing”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bishop</td>
<td></td>
<td>Barnett</td>
<td>Lemon</td>
<td>Peters</td>
<td>Zengarelli [sic: Zingarelli]</td>
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*Fig. 2.2: 1851 Buffalo Program*

Greenfield performed a mixture of *bel canto* arias, most likely in translation, popular ballads, and religious songs. Many of these were also popular with white prima donnas—Lind was known for her excerpts from Bellini’s *La sonnambula*, and Bishop had written several pieces especially for the Swedish soprano. This was noticed by reviewers as well. In Albany, one observed, “She labored under the disadvantage of having no other vocalist to assist her. The program, too, was a difficult one. Here was a favorite song of Jenny Lind’s, there a masterpiece of Catharine Hayes, here a piece from a sacred opera, and there a merry Scotch ballad. Success in such a varied field

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33 Chybowski, “Becoming the ‘Black Swan’ in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” 151.
certainly could hardly be anticipated, yet success the Black Swan certainly had.” 35 Another reviewer commented of a later concert: “It was a bold attempt for the Black Swan to sing ‘Do Not Mingle,’ after Jenny Lind and Parodi, but she succeeded in rendering its difficult passages with considerable taste, and a good degree of justice. It is in pieces of this kind that her untaught powers come into direct competition with the masterly training and careful cultivation of the artistes above named, and the difference is perceptible. But the voice is there, and with that she is destined, if skillfully taught, to achieve a fame that will be world-wide.”36 The reviewer reproduces the familiar “untaught” vs. “cultivated” dichotomy, but even this hedging praise admits that Greenfield could master the repertoire, and both writers recognized the parallel Greenfield’s song choices constructed between herself, Lind, and other white prima donnas.

Greenfield’s repertoire served her well on both sides of the Atlantic as an advocate of Black music in defiance of minstrel stereotypes. After her initial tour of upstate New York, New England, and the Midwest, Greenfield had a career breakthrough in 1853, when she travelled to New York and then to England. Her English tour, in particular, where she was introduced to high society by Harriet Beecher Stowe and performed for Queen Victoria, spoke of success to her American listeners in an era when artists still returned to Europe for further “polish.” The tour began badly: the 1855 sketch mentions that “the individual with whom she had drawn up the contract for this musical tour was unfaithful to his promises, and she found herself abandoned, without money and without friends, in a strange country.”37 However, Greenfield soon found herself taken up by abolitionist British sponsors. Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s arrival in England, both sensational successes, had both prepared the ground for Greenfield’s reception, and Greenfield’s new promoters saw her as akin to a Stowe character in

35 Ibid., 40.
36 Reprinted in The Black Swan at Home and Abroad, 10.
37 Ibid., 40.
the flesh. Stowe herself sponsored Greenfield and introduced Greenfield to the upper-class, wealthy women who formed the backbone of the English antislavery movement. Through her, Greenfield began to perform her ballads and arias in drawing rooms. Stowe remarked, “I could not but think what a loss to art is the enslaving of a race which might produce so much musical talent. Had Miss Greenfield had culture equal to her voice and ear, no singer of any country could have surpassed her.”

Stowe refitted the “nature” vs. “culture” discourse, framing Greenfield’s lack of “cultured” singing as yet another deprivation inflicted by slavery. In her account, Greenfield is passive, simple, and friendly—for that matter, traits shared by the Black protagonists of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Chybowski points out that this additional facet of “naturalness” was part of Greenfield’s constructed “authenticity” as a former slave. In her audience’s hearing, this identity gave authenticity to both minstrel numbers such as “Old Folks at Home,” and abolitionist ballads including “The Vision of the Negro Slave,” which she sang before Queen Victoria on a concert bill which included the British opera singer Louisa Pyne.

Greenfield’s own further career, as little as is known about it, amply reveals that she was no passive pawn of her circumstances. She made at least two more American tours, in 1857 and 1863, and taught music and worked with choral groups in Philadelphia. According to Chybowski, she continued to perform under the management of Colonel Wood, her American promoter, as well as headlining benefit concerts she organized herself. By the mid-1860s, she was placed on a lecture program in Philadelphia which featured Frederick Douglass, Francis Watkins Harper, William Lloyd Garrison, and William Wells Brown, suggesting that, after her

38 Ibid., 47-48.
39 Stowe’s account is reproduced on pages 42-48 of The Black Swan at Home and Abroad.
41 The Black Swan at Home and Abroad, 48.
experience with Stowe, she continued to draw abolitionist audiences. Greenfield was able to take the lessons she had learned and create a career which lasted until her death.

Greenfield also had to make choices about where she would perform, and sometimes she and her management decided to perform at theaters with segregated seating, or which would not allow Black patrons inside, even if the star of the event was a Black soprano. In Detroit, the Voice of the Fugitive complained in an 1852 editorial note, following a whites-only concert, “We cannot believe that Miss Greenfield will suffer herself to be exhibited by a set of pro-slavery scamps after she is apprized of the fact that her own people are insulted and abused through her.” The highest-profile of these controversies occurred in New York, immediately before her England trip. The 1853 pamphlet skips over New York to England, merely noting a positive reception: LaBrew points out the omission, and then fills in both the antagonistic New York reviews and the outcry from the African American community. No patrons of color were allowed in Greenfield’s biggest Metropolitan Hall concert, and Frederick Douglass’ Paper mourned,

We marvel that Miss Greenfield can allow herself to be treated with such palpable disrespect; for the insult is to her, not less than to her race…. Oh, that she could be a woman as well as a songstress—brave and dauntless—resolved to fall or flourish with her outraged race—to scorn the mean propositions of the oppressor, and to refuse sternly to acquiesce in her own degradation. She is quite mistaken if she supposes that her success as an artist depends upon her entire abandonment of self-respect.

An open letter published in the New York Herald was much more straightforward: after decrying the exclusion, suggested that Greenfield do a benefit concert for the Home for Aged Colored Persons and the Colored Orphan Asylum. Greenfield publicly responded that she would do so upon her return from Europe, but there is no evidence as to whether that concert took place.

Greenfield’s management, at least, seems to have preferred a conciliatory “not taking

43 Chybowski, “Becoming the ‘Black Swan’ in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America,” 155.
44 Ibid., 64.
46 Ibid., 77-78.
sides” approach. *The Buffalo Daily Express* wrote in 1851, “It may be inferred by persons abroad that the success of Miss Greenfield resulted from some abolition or “higher law” fanaticism, but this is not so. She is countenanced and especially praised by distinguished Silver Greys and compromise men, so that while we congratulate a worthy member of a proscribed race upon her remarkable success, we can assure the public that the Union is in no degree periled by it.”\(^{47}\) It is impossible to untangle in retrospect which decisions were made by Greenfield, which were made by her managers, to what extent any of the parties involved could have influenced theaters to open their houses to African Americans, and what might have been tried behind the scenes. The *Express*’s phrase suggests that, even though anti-slavery advocates were a necessary part of her support network, Greenfield may have tried to avoid being pigeonholed as “the soprano of the abolitionists,” at least in her early career. To do so would have certainly severely limited the cities and even the venues in which she could have appeared, already constrained by those which refused to let a Black woman onstage. According to Trotter, Greenfield’s student Thomas Bowers refused to sing one concert unless several Black patrons were allowed to sit in the first-class seats they had paid for.\(^{48}\) Greenfield never explained why she did not do the same, but we simply do not have the sources to infer how much agency Greenfield had in these decisions, or what other factors might have been involved.

Greenfield set the stage for the Queens of Song who would follow her, through voice, deportment, and repertoire, and the career choices she made. As Brooks put it, “Greenfield gave birth to a genealogy of black women’s cultural play within classical music forms, and she exemplified the ways in which professional singing might operate as a vocation capable of

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 29.

\(^{48}\) Trotter, *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, 90.
rewriting black female iconography in the cultural imaginary.”

Her performances were a model, and her teaching—including the internationally-renowned tenor Thomas Bowers—helped create the infrastructure which would support more singers. Southern even claims that she organized opera in Philadelphia, though I have been unable to locate any more specifics about this troupe or what they performed. Her reception also foreshadowed the issues her successors would face: criticisms of gender, appearance, and voice based on racial stereotypes, ignorance of their training, and segregated concert spaces. Stoever concluded, “Even in the face of the severe distortions of the sonic color line and the listening ear, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield continued to tour, powering through Lind’s repertoire and vibrating concert halls with the full range of her voice.”

Greenfield’s story is not as simple as “underdog overcomes obstacles,” but her efforts widened the cracks in the theater walls for the women who followed.

**New Songs: The Hyers Sisters**

Anna Madah and Emma Louise Hyers came from a very different background than Elizabeth Greenfield. The sisters were raised in Sacramento, California: both their parents were amateur musicians, and their mother worked as a music teacher. They first began to tour in their teens as a concert act, performing the standard mix of ballads and arias, and then transformed into a stage company performing *opera bouffe* composed specifically for them. The Hyers Sisters crafted their careers in the 1870s through the 1890s based on the effectiveness of the generic balancing act they performed in both concert and theater work. They blended operatic and vaudeville spectacle with a mission of social uplift and their certainty that, first and foremost, they were *opera* singers. This implicit certainty—that what they were doing was serious, and

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ought to be taken seriously even as it entertained audiences—is at the root of what they and the other Queens of sought to accomplish.

Fig. 2.3: Flyer for Out of Bondage

Like Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield before them, the Hyers Sisters initially toured as concert singers. The sisters sang operatic solos and scenes along with popular ballads: standard fare for popular concert singers in the 1870s, Black and white. Trotter provides an excerpt from the San Francisco Chronicle describing the sisters, their voices, and some of their repertoire.

Miss Madah has a pure, sweet soprano voice, very true, even, and flexible, of remarkable compass and smoothness. Her rendition of “Casta Diva,” and her soprano in the tower scene from Il Trovatore, and Verdi’s “Forse e’ lui che l’anima,” as also in the ballad, “The Rhine Maidens,”52 was almost faultless, and thoroughly established her claims to

52 I have been unable to verify this with certainty, but I suspect that this is “The Rhine Maiden,” an English-language parlor song by Henry Smart (1813-1879), an English organist and composer, rather than a Wagner excerpt.
the universal commendation she has received from all the connoisseurs in melody who have heard her.

Miss Louise is a natural wonder, being a fine alto-singer, and also the possessor of a pure tenor-voice. Her tenor is of wonderful range; and, in listening to her singing, it is difficult to believe that one is not hearing a talented young man instead of the voice of a young girl. Her character song was one of the greatest ‘hits’ ever made; and henceforth her position as a favorite with an audience is assured.53

Trotter also immediately assured his readers of the sisters’ respectability and their parents’ virtuous management, writing that despite their parents’ justifiable pride in their gifts, they did not “rush them before the public” and waited two years after their teacher had deemed them ready before they made a public debut.54 This was another way of invoking uplift: Trotter implied that they were well-brought-up young ladies with respectable management, marking them as potential role models. Their operatic repertoire was extensive: Trotter mentions Donizetti’s *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Linda di Chamounix*, Verdi’s *La Traviata* and *Il Trovatore*, Bellini’s *Norma*, and the popular English favorites, Balfe’s *The Mountain Sylph* and Flotow’s *Martha*. Another review notes, “Both of the sisters sing in the Italian with fluency and with correct pronunciation.”55 This further emphasizes their training, as in the early 1870s, it was not uncommon for touring troupes and concert singers to perform only in English translation. Not only did the sisters perform the same repertoire as other professionals, they performed it in the original language, which was rapidly becoming the standard for new major companies.

The Hyers sisters and their parents immediately worked their polished presentation of “classical” music into advocacy for uplift. Buckner calls the performance of classical music itself

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54 Ibid., 109.
as an act of resistance: “By employing traditionally white, Western aesthetic forms, the Hyers
subverted and refashioned master narratives about blackness, enacting moments of spectacular
opacity in which alternate realities and possibilities for African Americans were rehearsed,
imagined, and achieved.” However, the sisters also performed at venues such as the massive
Boston World Peace Jubilee in 1872, where they took the stage alongside the Fisk Jubilee
Singers. Southern points out that this event—an attempt to top the 1869 National Peace
Jubilee—was an under-rehearsed musical disaster, but marked the first time that Black singers
were invited to perform in a large, public musical event in the United States, albeit on a separate
day from the white performers. The Jubilee Singers remain the very image of racial uplift and
advocacy through music, and singing with them in this venue reinforced that the Hyers Sisters
Concert Company had the same aims.

In the Hyers Sisters’ recital and theatre repertoire, they consistently took advantage of
their complementary soprano and alto/tenor voices in order to perform a wider range of duets
and scenes. Even when they added tenor Wallace King and baritone John Luca, both Black, to
their concert ensemble, they often played female and male roles opposite each other in both their
concerts and the later comedies. Jocelyn Buckner argues that this allowed them to portray serious
romantic relationships in a way Black men and women could not on stage at the time. However, they also used staging to their advantage—the sisters’ performance of the “Miserere”
scene from Il Trovatore was celebrated, but Emma Louise sang her part offstage, strengthening

57 Eileen Southern, The Music of Black Americans: A History, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 229. The white performing forces on the other days of the festival included 20,000 singers, 2,000 instrumentalists—many hired from Europe—and Johann Strauss the Younger to lead his own Blue Danube Waltz.
58 Buckner, “‘Spectacular Opacities’: The Hyers Sisters’ Performances of Respectability and Resistance,” 311.
the illusion that a man was performing the duet. The Hyers Sisters performed a deliberate dance between the sensational and the respectable. Elements such Emma Louise’s “cross-dressing” voice and their play with staging could be received as gimmicks. But their self-presentation as opera singers allowed them to use these tactics as virtuosic displays of mastery.

The sisters may also have been helped by their relatively light skin: one Boston paper advertised them as “The Musical Wonders/Hyers Sisters/Quadroon Prima Donnas.” They were more adjacent to “whiteness” than Greenfield, and white audiences found it correspondingly easier to accept them as cultivated artists. The closer an African American singer was to “passing” as a model of respectable True (White) Womanhood (in this case, through light skin, outward invocation of respectability through their father’s management, and demonstration of education through their performance of opera in the original languages), the easier it was to step into the realm of a “respectable” prima donna, and away from the minstrel stereotypes that clung to Greenfield, which the sisters did not face to nearly the same extent.

The Hyers Sisters’ twin specialties of uplift and operatic performance took on a new guise in 1876, when the Hyers Sisters Concert Company presented its first musical comedy. While they had toured with minstrel companies such as Callender’s before, the three-act musical Out of Bondage was written specifically for the sisters by the white writer Joseph Bradford. This work—along with Peculiar Sam and Urlina, the African Princess—was framed as “opera bouffe” or comic opera, mixing spoken dialogue and musical numbers which could be changed depending on the circumstances. By taking advantage of their established reputation on the concert circuit, Anna and Emma were able to stage their own versions of popular theater genres—the Uncle Tom’s Cabin knock-off and the exotic extravaganza.

60 Ibid., 22.
Anna and Emma took leading roles in these spectaculars, their names and images being the principal draws. They positioned themselves as a more sophisticated, realistic troupe: for example, when they performed *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the 1880s, they advertised an interracial cast, with the Black leads played by Black actors. This was a major change from the traditional “Tom show,” essentially a minstrel act with white actors in blackface. With the sisters fronting it and Bradford, a longtime abolitionist, writing the book, *Out of Bondage* had a similar anti-minstrel aim, and the Redpath entertainment bureau advertised the production as “The Great Moral Musical Drama.” Minstrel shows and Tom shows often portrayed antebellum slaves as happy-go-lucky, singing and dancing, loyal subordinates. Black performers—including Sam Lucas, who starred in *Out of Bondage* and *Peculiar Sam*—performed these same characters, and Lucas and other lighter-skinned Black performers acted in blackface. In contrast, the Hyers Sisters’ musical comedies dispensed with blackface makeup, varied dialects, and simplistic (mis)representations of slavery. Instead, they represented *themselves* as skilled entertainers, and their performances were first and foremost displays of that virtuosity through their more complex plots and characterizations. Other Queens of Song who later performed on the vaudeville stage—Marie Selika, Flora Batson, and Sissieretta Jones—had to use similar tactics to distance themselves from blackface and the seedy reputation of popular theatre.

The Hyers sisters continued to push boundaries and advertise “firsts” with their musical theater troupe—another way to position themselves as both cosmopolitan and politically engaged artists. Their next work, *Peculiar Sam; Or, the Underground Railroad*, written by African American playwright Pauline Hopkins, was the first full-length work of musical theatre written

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61 Ibid., 313.
62 Buckner, “‘Spectacular Opacities’: The Hyers Sisters’ Performances of Respectability and Resistance,” 315.
by an African American.\textsuperscript{63} Hopkins’s work, and the Hyers Sisters and Sam Lucas’s performances, foregrounded similar themes to \textit{Out of Bondage} and \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, with a particular eye to the women affected by them. This was followed by \textit{Urlina, the African Princess}, the first African American play set in Africa, in which Urlina is kidnapped by Prince Zurleska’s father, after which Zurleska rescues her and restores her to her throne.\textsuperscript{64}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{urlina_and_zurleska.jpg}
\caption{\textit{Fig. 2.4: Anna as Urlina and Emma as Zurleska in Urlina, the African Princess (1879)}\textsuperscript{65}}
\end{figure}

These ventures made the implicit racial uplift of their concert appearances even more explicit through their storylines. Buckner writes: “These positive representations of African American life and love were strategic acts of resistance against the rampant racism of late-
nineteenth-century America.” The conceits of the performances—antebellum plantations, melodramas in exotic lands—were common in minstrel, burlesque, and vaudeville musical comedies. However, by aspiring to the category of “comic opera,” and by staging their characters with dignity, as Buckner observes, they “reinscribed white minstrel stereotypes in order to create spaces for alternative black expression.” Opera is a core part of this “spectacular opacity”: opera, as a fundamentally anti-realist art form, provided a field in which these alternative spaces could be created, new stories inscribed over the old ones. The skills the Hyers Sisters had developed through their years presenting “authentic” opera gave them the platform from which they could re-present “authentic” Black experiences of slavery and their own perspective on African tradition, and their credibility as artists meant that they were taken seriously. One could even suggest that Peculiar Sam was about reinscribing performance: Brooks points out that “Peculiar Sam’s cast of characters ultimately emancipate themselves by using their myriad gifts of performance to build a bridge out of abjection,” through tricking, disguising, and performing their way across the Ohio River. I argue that the Hyers Sisters themselves could be said to do the same. They performed consistently as opera singers, educated and professional, and their productions were politically engaged with current concerns. For example, Peculiar Sam focuses on the plight of a woman whose master is forcing her to marry the much-older Black overseer, while she loves the title character. And Urlina is an early example of the re-construction of a Black past, of a heritage linked to African royalty and Biblical antiquity.

Emma Louise’s performance of Zurleska made the gender dynamics of Urlina even more complicated than those of the concerts, as she physically appeared dressed as a man, rather than

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66 Ibid., 310.
67 Ibid., 314.
69 See Chapter 4 for more on these roles, and Chapter 3 for how Sissieretta Jones in particular performed them.
simply voicing one. This allowed them to side-step the prejudice around Black men in romantic roles: Sam Lucas was only able to play the lead of Peculiar Sam because he made frequent performative references to his successful minstrel career. Emma’s assumption of the lead role also played into a long theatrical tradition. “Highbrow” entertainment included operatic and theatrical trouser roles, and English pantomime had a long tradition of the stock character of the young lover being played by a cross-dressed woman, much as old women were often played by men. On the other end of the entertainment spectrum, burlesque also featured “breeches roles” largely for the sake of showing off women’s legs in tights. Emma’s Zurleska costume definitely does that, but, based on the rest of their repertoire and performance strategies, I doubt that was intended as the primary effect. However, I have not found any reviews of Urlina that touch specifically on Emma’s performance as Zurleska. I suspect that, just as Anna and Emma did with their operatic concerts, their performance of gender in Urlina delicately touched the edge of sensation while remaining firmly anchored to respectability and “high art” tradition.

The 1870s and the 1880s were the heyday for the Hyers Sisters and their various companies. Though their profile diminished, the sisters continued to tour with Out of Bondage and other shows into the early 1890s, after which they began to perform separately. Emma died around the turn of the century, though she toured with the Black Patti Troubadours in 1897. Anna continued to sing with touring companies, performing with John Isham’s Octoroons and Oriental America (two shows that, like the Black Patti Troubadours, included operatic excerpts alongside vaudeville numbers) and Ernest Hogan’s Rufus Rastus company, in which she was

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70 Buckner, “‘Spectacular Opacities’: The Hyers Sisters’ Performances of Respectability and Resistance,” 321.
71 Ibid., 319.
72 Story, And So I Sing: African-American Divas of Opera and Concert, 35.
directed by the composer and impresario Harry Lawrence Freeman. Maud Cuney Hare states that Anna married a Dr. Fletcher in Sacramento. Cuney Hare visited her in 1920, and stated that she “lived quietly” but still loved music and was happy to talk about her career.

Through their operatic performances of respectable spectacle, the Hyers Sisters were able to perform both operatic excerpts and original works in their own travelling troupe—a combination which would pave the way for Sissieretta Jones to do the same. Anna and Emma merged their classical repertoire and their original musical comedies to model a way in which a Black woman could perform as a prima donna across stages, and in which both vaudeville and opera could be used to advocate for artistic and social justice.

**Queen of Queens: Marie Selika**

Marie Selika embodied the operatic diva more than any other Queen of Song before Sissieretta Jones, down to changing her name in honor of the heroine of *L’Africaine*, whose influence is discussed further in Chapter 4. In 1890, the Indianapolis *Freeman* called Selika “undoubtedly the greatest living prima donna of her race.” Harry Freeman stated simply, “Madame Marie Selika was the greatest female singer the race has ever produced, with one possible exception—the incomparable Marian Anderson.” Cuney Hare likewise called her “The greatest of the Negro prima-donnas of yesterday.” Selika was every inch the diva: classically trained and classically attractive, glamorous and well-travelled. With her coloratura and her operatic specialties, she broke through onto the European operatic stage, and had the

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74 Harry Lawrence Freeman, *The Negro in Music and Drama* (Unpublished, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library), 23. For more on Freeman’s unpublished monograph, see Chapter 1.


78 Cuney Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, 222.
greatest international reputation of any of the Queens of Song. Selika’s performance choices and
diva imagery have not previously been discussed in detail, and the sheet music published in her
honor provides the chance to examine how an African American prima donna’s virtuosity was
marketed to audience members. Selika points to yet another style of performance and type of
professional activity among the Queens of Song, and she adds to the picture of uplift,
respectability, and “scientific” music the glamour of the diva.

Selika was born Marie Smith in Natchez, Mississippi, the same town as Elizabeth Taylor
Greenfield. Her family moved to Cincinnati when she was an infant, and she began her music
study as a child, sponsored by a wealthy white family.79 Southern lists a near-dizzying array of
teachers and performances: study in San Francisco leading to her concert debut in 1876,
followed by triumphant appearances in Philadelphia and Boston (for which she was managed by
James Monroe Trotter), and then on to further study in England and an 1882 appearance before
Queen Victoria, and a star-studded European concert tour from 1887 to 1892.80

79 Southern, The Music of Black Americans: A History, 245. I have been unable to determine who this benefactor
was, how this arrangement came about, or where Southern sourced this information.
80 Ibid., 245-46.
Selika’s flexible coloratura voice and her savvy repertoire selection were fundamental to her success as a Black diva. In his unpublished monograph *The Negro in Music and Drama*, Harry Freeman described her thus:

Madame Selika’s endowments and technical accomplishments were impeccable—the former replete with a vast succession of flawless intervals, rich in melody and vibrant in their sustaining entourage; while the latter was the quintessence of executive prowess. The roulades, turns, cascades, and cadenzas encountered in intricate patterns of coloratura embellishment were surmounted with the greatest fluency and adroitness. Her trill was the most marvelous ever to issue forth from the human body; as broad, definite and thrilling as the vibrations caused by the reaction of a hurricane through the fluted column of a Corinthian Temple; while her staccato passages were like unto the detached notes of a trumpet rebounding from a golden cornucopia.  

Freeman’s archive has not been widely read or cited, but he wrote from extensive personal and professional experience, including having met almost all of the Queens of Song. His effusive praise was grounded in an entire career working in opera, and is a valuable first-hand account from a knowledgeable observer. With her husband, a baritone who went by Signor Velosko (real

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name Sampson Williams), Freeman notes that she performed scenes from *Aida, Rigoletto, and Il Trovatore*, and technical showpieces which displayed her command of technique and her famous staccato. A Berlin review was nearly as exhuberant as Freeman:

Mme. Selika, with her singing roused the audience to the highest pitch of enthusiasm, and after her first aria, she was twice recalled, and could quiet the vociferous applause only by rendering a selection with orchestral accompaniment. Of this wonderful singer we can only say that she is endowed with a voice of surpassing sweetness and extraordinary compass. With her pure tones, her wonderful trills and roulades, her correct rendering of the most difficult intervals, she not only gains the admiration of amateurs but also that of professional musicians and critics.

Selika’s reputation for vocal fireworks was such that her name was put to Frederick Carnes’ “Selika Grand Vocal Waltz of Magic”—of the Queens of Song, only Selika and Sissieretta Jones had sheet music marketed with their images, a mark of their reputation among both Black and white audiences. The Library of Congress copy is signed by Williams, suggesting that they at least owned it, whether or not Selika regularly performed the number.

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82 Ibid., 15.
83 Cuney Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, 223.
The “Grand Vocal Waltz of Magic” packaged exotic virtuosity for a domestic audience. Selika herself is pictured on the cover, resplendent in a nonspecific, but clearly non-Western, gown and headdress. The reference to “magic” adds another layer of the thrilling or exotic to the presentation. Despite this packaging, the melody and the poetry convey “unmarked” or “white” virtuosity. The text, which is underlaid with an Italian translation, begins as follows:

Over the lake the pale moon is beaming  
Over the waves the silver light streaming  
Close by the shore my light bark is dancing  
Come where joy the senses entrancing.

This Neoclassical ode to music and pleasure goes on to feature nymphs, birds, and references to “Luna.” What all this Grecian atmosphere does not include is any dialect or references to African

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84 Library of Congress.
American or American folk culture. This work could just as well be sung by—and marketed by—a European soprano. Through Selika’s name and image, however, the piece links a Black woman to these same images of cultivation and sophistication. I have not been able to find any reception which would clarify whether this “whitened” Selika’s voice, or served to make listeners hear the entire piece as “exotic,” but the fact that both are plausible reactions only emphasizes the tensions inherent in the mantle of a Black Queen of Song.

The “Grand Vocal Waltz of Magic” also emphasizes Selika’s known vocal skills and coloratura achievements. Figure 9, full of arpeggiation and leaps with only chordal support from the piano, is one characteristic example of a flashy showpiece for a flexible soprano with a wide range—the full work spans over two full octaves, from B₃ to C₆.

![Image of sheet music](image)

Fig 2.7. “Selika’s Grand Vocal Waltz of Magic”, p. 5

The way in which virtuosity was packaged for a home audience is made plain in the page 9 cadenza. The sheet music actually provides two potential cadenzas, one ascending and the
other descending. Both are equally difficult—this is not a case where one is a more accessible option than the other. The result is a feeling of awe for Selika’s talents, represented by two separate feats of incredible range, precision, stamina, and control.

Fig. 2.8: “Selika’s Grand Vocal Waltz of Magic,” p. 9

The cadenza is not even the climax: the next page is marked “staccato,” Selika’s famous skill, and includes nineteen more measures of wide-ranging arpeggios before returning to the text of “echoes rebounding.” The “Grand Vocal Waltz of Magic” packaged bel canto bravura for a sheet-music audience, and gave domestic listeners—or singers bold enough to attempt it—a sense of just how accomplished a vocalist Selika was in her prime.
Selika’s coloratura talents also paved the way for her to sing in fully-staged opera. I have not been able to verify reports that she may have sung in a concert version of L’Africaine in Philadelphia in 1878. However, she did sing Weber’s Der Freischutz in Germany in the early
There were also rumors of opera from the *Freeman* in Selika’s tour of Europe in the 1890s: “Last account of Mme. Marie Selika and her husband Signor Velasco (né Sampson Williams) found them in Germany at the head of an opera troupe numbering 50 people where a Negro opera is to be given. An English writer makes this inquiry about them, ‘As Selika in *L’Africaine*, it will be all right but how about *La Dame Blanche*?’” That is, of course, the (crudely put) question. There is also no proof of this later European production of *L’Africaine*, but the English writer makes it clear that European audiences saw the same limits on Black opera performances as American ones did: characters of color were fine, but a Black man or woman playing a “white” character was out of the question.

Selika also presented herself as an advocate for racial uplift, and had to contend with the ramifications of being a role model in the public eye. In 1890, the *Freeman* reported that Selika “has announced herself a woman with a mission. She is willing to make a sacrifice of her life that the colored race of America may learn of higher music than that with which they have heretofore been acquainted. Her work so far, however, has been somewhat disappointing. But her efforts to elevate her race, she says, will only end with her death.” The disappointment of these efforts may well have influenced her decision to join a company and tour Europe, reported in the *Cleveland Gazette* in May of 1891. “Madame Selika is said to get $7000 a year and has a contract for three years with Foote’s Afro-American Specialty Company, that left for Europe a few weeks ago. Song and dance and other acts, as well as solos, will be given. Selika surprises

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all her friends and admirers in taking this downward step.”\textsuperscript{88} The description of a “downward step” is significant. The tour was later described as relatively “high-class,” with acts that avoided the worst stereotypes.\textsuperscript{89} This indicates something similar to the Hyers Sisters’ performances, yet this was still perceived as beneath Selika’s established dignity. Cuney Hare also suggests that Selika may have lost opportunities due to preferring to be programmed with her husband, whose voice and acting ability was solid but not as spectacular as hers.\textsuperscript{90} However, all of the Queens of Song struggled by the mid-1890s, including Flora Batson and Sissieretta Jones, who were much younger than Selika. Whether or not Velosko’s career influenced Selika’s decisions, she had worked for uplift, and may have decided that turning to teaching was a better way to uphold her ideals than variety tours after this last European sojourn.

Selika’s heyday might have been the 1880s and 1890s, but she enjoyed a particularly long career afterward as a voice teacher. In 1893, after her return from Europe, she opened a voice studio in Ohio, where she taught and sang locally until Williams died in 1911. After his passing, she took up a position at the Martin-Smith School of Music in Harlem, an operatic godmother to all of the Black singers who flocked to New York in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{91} Freeman recounts visiting Selika shortly before her death in 1937, at eighty-seven years old. After the two of them reminisced about her career, she sang “Ah, for’se lui” from \textit{La Traviata}, and Freeman wrote in horror that her voice was “impossible to describe; the nearest approach or rather resemblance was to that of the croaking of a bull-frog…. Although, ‘believe it or not,’ every melodic phrase, every word and intonation was still absolutely perfect—only the voice!!!”\textsuperscript{92} Her voice may have

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 149.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Cuney Hare, \textit{Negro Musicians and Their Music}, 223.
\textsuperscript{92} Freeman, \textit{The Negro in Music and Drama}, 19.
faded—after nearly ninety years of singing, teaching and travelling, hardly a shock—but Selika was a diva until the end, and the memory of her performances remained clear.

**Grande Dame: Nellie Brown Mitchell**

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the Hyers Sisters, and Marie Selika were far from the only African American women to use this changing musical landscape to develop careers. The lower-profile Queens of Song were just as important in the African American musical landscape of the late nineteenth century as the most famous stars. Nellie Brown Mitchell is a case in point. The New England soprano had a less spectacular career than Greenfield or the Hyers Sisters—she toured along the East Coast and through the Midwest and Upper South in the 1870s and 1880s, but primarily worked as a church soloist, concert singer, and teacher in New York and Boston. Mitchell’s service to racial uplift was more implicit than the Hyers Sisters’ theatrical activism, but her career directing productions, teaching students, and singing in both Black and white churches shows how one of the Queens of Song enacted uplift as a pillar of the community.

*Fig. 2.10: Nellie Brown Mitchell*93

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Nellie Brown was born in Dover, New Hampshire, and had the advantage of attending private schools, private voice lessons, and eventually the New England Conservatory of Music. In 1865, at the age of 20, she accepted her first professional post at the Free Will Baptist Church in Dover. In 1872 she moved to the Grace Methodist Episcopal Church—a white church—in Haverhill, Massachusetts, thirty-five miles north of Boston. At her Steinway Hall Debut in New York in 1874, the *New York Gazette* reported, “Miss Nellie Brown… possesses a voice of rare power and beauty which she has diligently labored to cultivate and improve.” It is striking that a white paper not only attributes “power and beauty” to her voice, but also extensive training and discipline—there is no sign of the “naturalness” discourse which clung to Greenfield or, later, to Sissieretta Jones. She continued to mount concerts in Boston and New York until her marriage to Lieutenant Charles L. Mitchell in 1876. Carolyne Lamar Jordon notes that, though she toured less after her marriage, she was a popular concert performer as well as a church soloist throughout the 1880s, appearing as a lead soloist in the Bergen Star concerts, variety concerts billing top talent. Freeman also writes that, including the Grace Methodist Episcopal, Mitchell was the soloist of four white churches, and Trotter adds that she also directed church choirs. To be able to hold those positions, Mitchell must have been viewed as both an exemplary singer and an exemplary role model—anything less would never have propelled her over that racial barrier.

There is little extant detail on Mitchell’s repertoire, but what there is suggests that she used a similar strategy to Greenfield or the Hyers Sisters. An 1887 review in the *New York Age* mentions the ballad “Bright Star of Love” and the encore “Coming Thro’ the Rye.” To sing the latter in the 1880s was to evoke the iconic Adelina Patti, and Mitchell may well have done so

95 Jordan, “Black Female Concert Singers of the Nineteenth Century,” 37.
96 Ibid., 38.
deliberately, echoing the same genteel “natural” affect which Greenfield did through similar repertoire. Trotter assembles several reviews which include “La Primavera” and “Del Ciel Regina”, two art songs with English and Italian texts by English composer and pianist Jane Sloman Torry; and the popular operatic solo “Robert toi que j’aime,” from Meyerbeer’s Robert le diable.\textsuperscript{99} Quoting the Boston Traveller, he repeats that Mitchell “possesses a very fine voice under excellent culture, and gave with much taste several solos… In all her selections she exhibited excellent style and finish.”\textsuperscript{100} In New York, a paper reported that “She sang ‘Salve Maria,’ and ‘Robert toi que j’aime,’ with very good effect, besides assisting in several duets and quarters. She possesses a very good voice; and, although of light calibre, it is even now able to fill a hall like Steinway.”\textsuperscript{101} From these quotes, Trotter paints a picture of a skilled professional vocalist: perhaps not a particularly striking or unusual natural voice, but someone who was very well trained and knew how to play to her strengths.

Mitchell expended as much energy teaching and directing the productions of her students as she did into her own considerable performing career. One of her first notable productions was the children’s operetta Laila, the Fairy Queen in 1876. The first performance, in Boston, involved fifty girls from five to fourteen years of age: the Boston Journal reported that “The Misses… possess very sweet voices; and the music was given with much taste, and a degree of artistic excellence reflecting great credit on Miss Brown’s efforts.”\textsuperscript{102} She then presented the same work in Haverhill, with high-school students. Cuney Hare reports that Mitchell and her sister continued to produce operettas, even if they did not have the profile of the centennial

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\textsuperscript{99} Trotter, Music and Some Highly Musical People, 133-34.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 132.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 134.
\textsuperscript{102} Jordan, “Black Female Concert Singers of the Nineteenth Century,” 37.
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celebration.103 Mitchell continued to teach after her marriage, as well: in the *New York Globe* in 1883, Mitchell was advertised as a “Teacher of the Guilmette Method of Vocal Technique and Respiratory Exercises, 16 Mills St., Boston, Mass.,” with terms listed for both lessons and concert performances. From 1888 to 1890, she taught in the Vocal Music department of Hedding Chautauqua in New Hampshire.104 In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Chautauqua organizations presented themselves as the edifying and morally uplifting alternative to vaudeville: Mitchell’s presence there and in the *Globe* suggests that she was respected as an educator as well as a vocalist by both Black and white audiences.

Through her teaching and performing in various venues, Mitchell was also part of the infrastructure which brought up the Queens of Song of the 1880s and 1890s—for example, she was a soloist with J.G. Bergen’s Tennessee Star Concert Company, which also provided an early-career springboard for Harry Burleigh and Sissieretta Jones, and Flora Batson (later Flora Batson Bergen) got her first break when she stepped in for Mitchell as an understudy.105 Nellie Brown Mitchell’s importance was not the height of her career, but its length, depth, and breadth. As Jordan puts it, “She became an important figure in [Boston] because of her musical programs and her talent as a director.”106 Trotter emphasizes, “Nor should I in this connection fail to advert to the helping, the inspiring influence of thousands of noble people of New England, who, fond lovers and constant promoters of the beneficent art of music, are ever prompt in the recognition and encouragement of all its talented devotees.”107 Nellie Brown Mitchell was a singer who was part of her community, and who used her vocal and organizational talent for its benefit.

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103 Cuney Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, 209.
104 Ibid., 38, 39.
Voice and Pen: Amelia Tilghman

Like Nellie Brown Mitchell, Amelia Tilghman was a primarily local and regional figure: she worked as a soprano for less than a decade, and then spent the rest of her life teaching, and writing about music. In the previous chapter, I discussed her as the founder of the first African American music periodical, the *Musical Messenger*, and as the historiographical peer of James Trotter and J. Hillary Taylor. In this chapter, I focus on Tilghman as a performer and producer, though musical performance, the “performance” of writing about music, and musical pedagogy cannot be so easily separated in Tilghman’s case, just as they could not be in Nellie Brown Mitchell’s life’s work. Just as Tilghman belongs with the pre-Harlem Renaissance theorists and promoters of Black music, so too does she belong with the Queens of Song, even though her performance career is less well-documented than her later work as a writer.

Tilghman was raised in the middle-class African American enclave in Washington, D.C., where she attended Howard University. After her graduation in 1871, she taught in the D.C. schools while working as a soprano at Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church and local concerts throughout the 1870s. Scruggs notes that she performed with Marie Selika and Nellie Brown Mitchell when they did concerts in town. In December of 1880, she had her first national performance at Steinway Hall in New York, followed by her role as the featured soloist for the 1881 *Saengerfest* in Louisville, Kentucky. The next year, she mounted and starred in a production of William Bradbury’s 1856 cantata *Esther, the Beautiful Queen*. However, her promising career was cut short: Tilghman was injured by a falling brick at a construction site in

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1883, and had to leave both teaching and the stage. After this point, Tilghman focused on teaching and the *Musical Messenger*: she left Washington, D.C. in 1885, studied piano pedagogy at Boston Conservatory, and then moved to Montgomery, Alabama for several years.

In singing, teaching, and writing, Tilghman’s purpose was explicitly one of racial and cultural uplift. The free Black community in Washington, D.C. had become a hub of classical music: while there is no conclusive documentary evidence, Tilghman may well have sung in the chorus of the Colored American Opera Company’s production of *The Doctor of Alcantara*, the first Black-cast opera production in the United States, which occurred in 1873. Karpf notes that she did work with some of those singers, and hired a few of those stars for major roles in *Esther*. These sorts of cultural projects were part of the life of her community. Scruggs suggests that Tilghman was inspired to perform *Esther, The Beautiful Queen* after she first saw it staged by a Black cast during the 1881 *Saengerfest*. The work would most likely have already been known to the same community which had seen *The Doctor of Alcantara* performed: it was accessible music, and a favorite for school, community, and church productions, performed by Black congregations into the 1960s. In 1882 in Washington D.C., as well as in 1886 in Montgomery, Alabama, Tilghman auditioned the singers, rehearsed them, played the piano accompaniments, and sang the part of Esther herself. The educational aspect of the performance was twofold: both for the singers, recruited from local church choirs, who performed in a fully staged oratorio with costumes, and for the community which would see this production and be enlightened to both the Bible story and the spectacle of an entirely Black cast producing art

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114 Karpf, “An Opportunity to Rise: Reinterpreting Esther, the Beautiful Queen,” 244.
music. She did the same with the *Musical Messenger*, advertising Selika, Mitchell, and other African American artists, as well as white musicians and musical history.

Tilghman’s career may not have been as long or as high-profile as the other women in this study, but she exemplifies just how a single performer can have a large impact on a community, and the varied professional avenues available to women of color in the late-nineteenth-century musical landscape, especially those who promoted uplift ideology. There is very little documentation of her own performances besides the most general of praise—for example, no record of what she sang at Steinway Hall or the Saengerfest. But by anchoring the performances of *Esther, the Beautiful Queen*, she used her status as a singer for both community education and racial uplift in two different cities, just as she did with the *Musical Messenger*.

**Beyond the Sea: Flora Batson**

Flora Batson was a contemporary of Sissieretta Jones, another resident of Providence, Rhode Island, though even in her short life her career took her around the globe, making her the most-travelled of the Queens of Song. Batson’s experiences show how, in some ways, the opportunities for a Black concert singer were narrowing by the end of the century. However, her extensive touring and variety show work is an example of one way in which a woman could create a career despite that lack.

Batson’s career began early: in her hometown of Providence, Rhode Island, she was already the African-American Bethel Church’s featured soloist by the age of nine. By thirteen, she was singing professionally, and in 1883, at the age of nineteen, she joined J.G. Bergen’s Tennessee Star Concert company at the same time as Nellie Brown Mitchell. Batson and

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Bergen (who was white) were married in 1887. Together, they toured the world three times, and as Flora Batson Bergon, she sang for Queen Victoria, Pope Leo XII, Queen Lil of Hawaii, and the native royalty of New Zealand. Batson and Bergen separated in 1896, but Batson continued to perform with other companies, including a tour of Australia before her death in 1906.  

Fig. 2.11: Flora Batson

Unlike Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the Hyers Sisters, Marie Selika, or Sissieretta Jones, Flora Batson rarely performed as a solo artist or the main attraction of a show. Part of this is because she married Bergen, who already worked in the variety-show format: his whole purpose in the Tennessee Star Company was to bring as many first-rate performers together as he could for gala performances, rather than simply headlining one person. Even after they separated, Batson performed with Black bass Gerard Miller and sang operatic numbers with the South

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116 Ibid., 33.
117 Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
Before the War Company and the Orpheus MacAdoo Minstrel and Vaudeville Company.\textsuperscript{118} Batson also continued to perform at various African American churches, and one of her last performances was at the Big Bethel A.M.E. Church in Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{119} In Gerard Miller’s 1906 paean to his friend—written in the finest Victorian hagiographic style—he declared that “We see Flora Batson, like Moses, preferring adversity with the people of God in their churches to the fabulous salaries of the vaudeville stage. Take up the cross and follow me.”\textsuperscript{120} Here the ever-present racial uplift is given a religious cast: Batson is anointed a spiritual as well as cultural leader, and singing classical music in a religious setting is framed as taking the best part of both.

The reality is not as simple as Miller’s assertion. The prospects of the Queens of Song dwindled into the 1890s, as independent companies and concert managers merged into vaudeville circuits and operatic institutions became more centralized and exclusive. Eileen Southern writes that the Black operatic prima donna had largely disappeared from concert stages by the mid-1890s due to lack of public interest.\textsuperscript{121} Mitchell, Tilghman, and Selika all went into teaching and church music by 1900. Sissieretta Jones worked with the Black Patti Troubadours. After the loss of her sister, Anna Hyers made the same choice that Batson did: to continue performing as part of a broader vaudeville troupe, even at the cost of some autonomy. Batson found that autonomy in her advocacy work: in the concert at Big Bethel A.M.E, the final tableau was an anti-lynching work by Miller called “The Clansman’s Confession,” in which Batson portrayed the Angel Justice.\textsuperscript{122} Cuney Hare also reports that she spent three months singing for a

\textsuperscript{118} Story, \textit{And So I Sing: African-American Divas of Opera and Concert}, 32.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 67.
temperance revival in New York City. Batson’s variety show performances helped her to retain a platform from which she could work as a high-profile soloist to draw audiences.

Batson’s church and variety work included some operatic scenes, but, as any other Queen of Song, she played to her vocal strengths. Harry Freeman, who had heard her perform, described her as “first and last a ballad singer; but the kind of ballad singer that is given to the world once in a century—an inherent product of nature gifted to the highest degree.” Freeman reported that Marie Selika had never cared for Batson for just this reason. It irritated Selika that they were both mentioned in the same breath, despite their very different repertoire and Selika’s European tutelage. However, Freeman gave each woman her fair share: “Madame Batson owed her vogue to the fact that she was all soul; and when she gave herself over, whole-heartedly, to the contents of the simplest song, were it Scottish, Irish, English, or Negro, one almost felt his own soul leaving his body and soaring away to realms of infinite space—difficult to recall when the delineation had ceased.” Miller’s account of Batson’s repertoire supports Freeman’s claim that she specialized in ballads: in his list of fifty of Batson’s songs, all are in English except for the “Ave Maria.” In addition to many folk ballads, they include some familiar technical showpieces such as the “Swiss Echo” and “Staccato Polka,”; the dramatic scene “The Ship On Fire”; and a number of religious works. Most of her ballad repertoire overlapped with that performed by opera singers as part of their repertoire for the last half-century, positioning her as the exact same sort of respectable singer who had come before, despite her lack of operatic experience. As for the emotional power in her voice, the New York Age reported in 1889 that “As an old gentleman said in Memphis, ‘She sings the devil right out of the white folks, and when

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125 Ibid.
you get the devil out of the white people they are just as good as colored people.”  

Like Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and Emma Louise Hyers, Batson also made full use of an extraordinary vocal compass, from soprano all the way to baritone. Cuney Hare referred to her voice as “a remarkable soprano voice of great range as well as sweetness.” Batson made her wide range part of her act as the “Double-Voiced Queen of Song”: when she first sang her lowest notes onstage, she looked around in surprise as if searching for the other singer. Operatic standard provided a clear way to delineate her “doubled voice”: at one concert, she sang the Flower Song from Faust, a mezzo-soprano number, followed by an unspecified selection from Il Trovatore in baritone. Opera remained enough of a cultural common ground that her operatic selections provided a shorthand for the compass of her voice.

In the waning years of the Queens of Song, Flora Batson perceived few opportunities as an independent solo artist. However, her touring variety show work circumnavigated the globe, and she used her stage to benefit causes dear to her heart, just as Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the Hyers Sisters, and the other Queens of Song had done. Even as genres shifted and musical markets changed, prima donnas still had power, and Flora Batson exercised hers to the fullest extent, emphasizing that a diva remained a diva, no matter what stage she chose.

Conclusion

The nineteenth-century African American Queens of Song travelled the globe, across many genres of stages, all the more impressively because of the obstacles arrayed against them. Each one had to find and perform the repertoire which best suited her training and her voice,

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while simultaneously appealing to existing conceptions of vocal virtuosity and operatic womanhood. They worked with numerous managers and performing associates, rarely holding a long-term position in a theater or a troupe. Each woman found her own balance of performing, teaching, writing, and other community work. Greenfield, the Hyers Sisters, Mitchell, Selika, Tilghman, and Batson were all different women in similar situations—my goal has been to bring out both the differences and the similarities. It was through their individual choices that they became integral parts of the cultural construction of the Black diva, the Queen of Song, an image which remained with audiences of all races. Pauline Hopkins wrote, “The work accomplished by these artists was more sacred than the exquisite subtleness of their art, for to them it was given to help create a manhood for their despised race.” These women created a place for Black singers and actors to work with dignity within an elite art form. They created a heritage that twentieth-century singers, composers, and historians built upon, framing themselves as the bearers of a tradition. A great deal of the long project of Black opera is based upon the work they did, work that they were rarely able to see realized, but which they were instrumental in bringing to pass.

Chapter 3
What Color is the Diva? Hearing Race and Seeing the Prima Donna in the Career of Sissieretta Jones

Introduction

The name of Sissieretta Jones moved trains, illuminated marquees, and filled theaters across the United States in the first decades of the twentieth century. Born Matilda Sissieretta Joyner (1868-1933), her nickname, “the Black Patti,” came from a comparison with Adelina Patti, the most famous soprano of the late nineteenth century. After training at the New England Conservatory, Jones began her career as a classical concert singer in the middle of the 1880s, toured the United States, South America and Europe, and performed for four presidents.1 From 1896 through 1916, she headlined the Black Patti Troubadours and the Black Patti Musical Comedy Company, African American theater troupes that performed both vaudeville sketches and opera scenes. She built on the foundation laid by Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and Nellie Brown Mitchell, and was a contemporary to Marie Selika and Flora Batson. However, her nearly thirty-year career in the public eye sets her apart from her fellow “Queens of Song,” as did the methods she used to achieve it.

Jones has not often been connected to the tradition of the operatic prima donna, likely

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because she only performed on the concert and vaudeville stages. However, she consistently performed as a prima donna in the tradition of other popular sopranos of her era, even when performing as part of a vaudeville troupe—far from a “respectable” stage for a woman at the time. The sporadic attention Jones has been given in musicological scholarship illuminates a career in which she continually inhabited the role of the diva. She is the subject of a substantial article by John Graziano on her early career and chapters or subchapters of varying length in surveys of African American concert and vaudeville performers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{2} There are three book-length biographies of Jones: a 1968 Ph.D. dissertation in interdisciplinary humanities and musicology by Willia Daughtry, great-niece of Jones; a 2002 book, also by Daughtry; and a 2012 biography by journalist and editor Maureen Lee.\textsuperscript{3} Daughtry and Lee have each collected a significant amount of information on Jones, her context, and her reception. This chapter uses both new primary sources and established literature to focus on how she troubled the boundaries of race, gender, and genre in her performances and to illuminate Jones in the context of other prima donnas and recent research on Black opera.

Focusing on Jones as a diva highlights how she navigated the ambiguities and boundaries she faced. An African American woman could not inhabit such a role at the turn of the century without friction. Jennifer Lynn Stoever’s research on the “sonic color line” and Nina Sun Eidsheim’s work on “sonic Blackness” provide a framework for analyzing Jones’ reception among critics and audiences, while Susan Rutherford, Hilary Poriss, Rachel Cowgill, and others


have researched the role of the prima donna and female opera singers more broadly in the
nineteenth century. In addition to navigating the sonic color line, Jones spent two-thirds of her
career on the vaudeville stage, a place where genres blended and blurred in the course of single
performances. Jones’ blend of “low” vaudeville and “high” opera occasionally confounded both
white audiences, who expected lowbrow caricatures, and African American critics, who wanted
her to be a symbol of racial uplift. Writers who saw her as a role model often found themselves
apologizing for or downplaying her vaudeville career, and others ignored her entirely in favor of
more “respectable” singers. Throughout her career, Jones made choices. Her race and gender
limited her agency: for one, her race kept her from the operatic stage. But Jones chose to become
the headliner of the Black Patti Troubadours, setting records with her intense performing
schedule, making the vaudeville stage into her own personal operatic vehicle, and using a
consistent repertoire and image to perform the role of the diva throughout. Her choice may have
been this career or no career at all—returning home to Providence and singing in the church
choir, as she did indeed do after 1916—but Jones’s choices deserve to be examined rather than
brushed away or regretfully accepted as her only option. Jones herself knew what was stacked
against her: when asked about performing opera, she was candid about the fact that she could not
hope to sing in an otherwise-white production. The hapless interviewer suggested that she could
wear makeup, just as white sopranos used makeup to play Aida or Selika. Jones responded, “Try
to hide my race and deny my own people? Oh, I would never do that…. With me, if I made
myself white, prejudiced people would say I was ashamed of being colored.”

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Troubadours, Jones was able to star in staged opera scenes with an entirely Black cast.

Jones’ long career also created an extensive reception history replete with loaded criticism, racial and gendered implications, and outright contradictions centering on both Jones’ appearance and her voice. One reviewer might insist that she is quite dark, and another that she is very light, one that her voice “sounds” distinctly African American and another that her singing is free of racial markers. Some praised her freely, others criticized, and many met her with grudging or bewildered acceptance, unsure what to make of what they had seen and heard as they were forced to confront their own preconceived narratives. Jones’ scrapbook of press clippings, held in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Collection at Howard University, is fundamental to establishing this critical history. However, most of its contents are from 1892-1893, before she took the helm of the Troubadours. Since some of them are replicated in Jones’ programs, they may have been collected for advertising material. I have also consulted material from the New York Library for the Performing Arts and databases of both white and African American papers to locate sources Jones did not archive herself. Jones’ choices and her listener’s reactions are two separate parts of the narrative, but both inform each other in turn. Articles on Jones and her performances were often as much about what a reviewer wanted to see or hear as they were about the artist herself, but Jones still comes through. Throughout her career, Jones drew on the prima donna’s reputation of power and status on the one hand and modesty and respectability on the other to present herself as a popular diva in the public sphere. In addition to manipulating her own image, she also chose repertoire and concertizing strategies on the concert and vaudeville stages in order to embody the diva regardless of her surroundings.

Performing the Diva: The Presentation of Sissieretta Jones

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As a leading lady, Sissieretta Jones took part in a long tradition of cultural myth-making around the prima donna. The prima donna could be portrayed as a siren or a songbird, but she was also a symbol of female independence and achievement. This image—what Rutherford calls the “superwoman”—also allowed the prima donna to become more socially acceptable toward the end of the nineteenth century and made singing opera a legitimate ambition for middle-class women.⁶ An independent woman earning money by displaying herself on stage was a fraught moral category in the Victorian era, but in the 1850s Jenny Lind was able to embody ideal (white) femininity and combine it with the power of an international star.⁷ Lind was not the only prima donna to present herself as socially respectable, but the publicity around her United States tour led to her becoming the preeminent prima donna in the American imagination for decades to come. By the time Jones started her career, becoming an opera singer carried the potential to be a prestigious career choice rather than a blemish on a woman’s reputation. Jones performed both sides of the prima donna: the glitz, glamor, and competence, as well as the modesty and piety that allowed her social respectability and made her a model of racial uplift.

I argue that Sissieretta Jones consciously assumed the role of the diva in order to access the associated power, freedom, and achievement. The combination of the star power of a prima donna and the financial backing of prominent female audience members created a space where women were able to wield artistic and entrepreneurial agency.⁸ The glamor and power of the image allowed Jones far greater independence and professional prestige than was normally

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granted to an African American woman in the late nineteenth century. From Jones’ time to today, she has been referred to as a “diva,” a “prima donna,” a “queen” of stage or song.

Jones projected a consistent image of beauty, prestige, and glamour throughout her career. Figure 3.1 contains publicity images from various periods, all of which demonstrate how she crafted her public persona. The first shows Jones arrayed with the medals she had been given by governors and civic organizations, emphasizing that she was a singer good enough to be officially rewarded. According to Black music critic Florence Williams, Jones’ contemporary:

The medals and necklaces were presented to her by the highest officials of the different places [in the Caribbean and South America], such as His Excellency Sir William Robinson, K.C.M.C.; Lady Robinson and His Worship, the Mayor of Port of Spain. The Generals, Counselors, Governors, and Majors of the different islands seemed to take great delight in presenting to Mme. Jones the many tokens of appreciation in the name of the citizens. 9

Citizens also presented these honors on their own: the Irishmen of the Parnell Association of Providence, Rhode Island awarded Jones a medal in honor of her performance of Irish ballads. 10

Other photographs in the example position Jones as glamorous and sophisticated, a woman with the right to stand among the elite. In the second image, she wears a fashionable dress and stole. In the third, she bears a sunburst like a tiara in her elegantly done hair. In the final image, Jones wears an embroidered dress complete with train as she leans on a carved chair. By posing in a sumptuous interior, she positions herself as a woman who moves in upper-class spaces, such as in 1893 when she gave a private performance for New York women including the Vanderbilts and the Astors. 11 Her expression is always quiet and thoughtful, either evenly gazing at the camera or looking slightly beyond, and while some later publicity pictures included

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her entire troupe, most of the images of her are of her alone, set apart by her talent. She presents herself as singular, elegant, and confident, every inch the prima donna, the “queen of song.”

Fig 3.1: Images of Sissieretta Jones.¹²

¹² From top left: Metropolitan Printing Company (Library of Congress); Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection; New York American (Locke Collection, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts); H. Lawrence Freeman Collection, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Columbia University.
Jones’ publicity images are similar to those of white prima donnas of her era. In the leftmost picture of Figure 2, Jenny Lind is similarly poised and fashionable, demurely looking away from the camera. In the second, Emma Abbott, a famous touring American soprano of the 1880s referred to as the “peoples’ prima donna,” wears an elegant dress in her role as the Queen of Spain. Both Abbott and Adelina Patti, in the final image, are clad and coiffured in fashions of the 1880s and 1890s, reminiscent of the way that Jones dressed and arranged her hair for her own portraits. Abbott and Patti also cultivated Lind-like images of innocence, humility, and piety: Jones could have found many models for her portrayal of the respectable prima donna in the sopranos around her, in addition to the divas of the past.

Fig 3.2: Images of Jenny Lind, Emma Abbott, and Adelina Patti.13

Jones and her managers used these images as promotional material throughout her career: a public construction that invited comparison with internationally famous sopranos of her day. Both her audiences and her principal biographers recognized the role she took up in these

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13 All images from Library of Congress.
photographs. Lee defines Jones as a diva while deliberately excluding the word’s negative connotations when she describes that “Women loved seeing Sissieretta in her beautiful gowns,” and states that she “… was graceful, intelligent, well-spoken, and professional, and she presented herself regally but was never haughty. She was a concert diva in the best sense of the word.”\textsuperscript{14} Kristen Turner describes her in a similar way, as well as suggesting that a diva’s following could even transcend segregated theaters: “Audiences loved her beautiful gowns, and both blacks and whites crowded her shows.”\textsuperscript{15} Neither Lee nor Turner exaggerates when they emphasize the attraction her glamour held for the audience: especially during Jones’ concert career, reviews regularly described her outfits as they grappled with the timbre of her voice and the color of her skin. In 1901, a San Francisco reviewer at a Troubadours show connected the concepts, writing, “Black Patti grows no older or less imposing with the years. She has the dignity of an experienced prima donna, the poise and lovely gowns, and superb diamonds decorate her chocolate arms and fingers. Her voice is rich and strong, but has lost just a suspicion of the velvet quality that once distinguished it.”\textsuperscript{16} To this reviewer, the poise and gems and gowns were at least as important as the voice in distinguishing a diva, and “prima donna” was a term of admiration. Another interviewer described how he had found her when invited to call:

There was no need to ask if the prima donna was at home when such a volume of melody greeted me as I ran up the Metropole stairway. Madame—the Black Patti—was practicing or else singing, as true singers will for the love of it, all unconscious of the fact that knots of people gathered in the corridor and on the stair, enjoying the music. I joined the impromptu audience, and listened until the rich voice tripped on some slippery accidental and rolled helplessly down in a rivulet of sweet sounds to end with an exclamation of impatience and silence.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 144-5.
\textsuperscript{15} Kristen M. Turner, “Opera in English: Class and Culture in America, 1878-1910,” (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2015), 290. Despite this optimism, however, reviews of the Troubadours often noted the “top-heavy” audience, suggesting that, in a segregated theater, the African American audience in the upper gallery outnumbered white patrons seated on the theater floor.
\textsuperscript{17} Jones Scrapbook, Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection.
Here, Jones is framed as an archetypal “true artist,” devoted to art for art’s sake rather than fame or fortune. This writer sketches Jones as modest and unprepossessing, yet so talented that even her mistakes became “a rivulet of sweet sounds.” In order to be the prima donna, Jones needed the complete package: the talent, the air of glamour, and the poise and attitude of humility that allowed audiences to see her as an accessible person as well as a “genuine” artist.

These promotional materials were widespread in both the white and African American press, and Jones used them to convey her status as a diva even to those who had not yet heard her perform. These images were then further transmitted as memory, as in an obituary which ends: “The picture we like to remember is that of a queenly black singer in a dress of shimmering green, a leopard’s skin over her shoulder, singing Myerbeer’s [sic] ‘L’Africaine,’ rather than that of a penniless, almost friendless old woman glad to pass out into another world.”

The image of the diva is given preference over the real woman. Jones’ reputation for style and class lived past her death: in 1976, an ad in the Baltimore Afro-American advertised a “Bicentennial Collection” of wigs honoring Black women in history. Jones earned her place with the “Sissieretta,” a “rich [wig] with full jaw-length waves that can be styled off the face for a classic look.”

Even as it provided a useful lens through which to understand Jones, the performance of the prima donna struck and confused reviewers. The diva in the mode of Jenny Lind was implicitly white. However, Jennifer Stoever connects stereotypes of African American “excess”—sexual, physical, emotional—with similar stereotypes associated with Italian opera singers.

The Italian roots of the diva allowed the role to stretch to include an African American woman.

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The Black woman in minstrelsy, whether “wench,” “mammy,” or other unflattering stereotype, was portrayed—by a white man in drag—as either promiscuous and desirable, unattractive and unfeminine, or somehow both at once: images which set them against everything an ideal (white) woman was “supposed” to be in the nineteenth century.\(^{21}\) Jones’ performance of both artistry and respectability allowed her to access the role of the prima donna beyond the stereotype.

The role of the diva allowed her the position of dignity and power from which to negotiate her career, and even caused others to afford her more respect than they would have afforded another Black woman one generation removed from slavery. On August, 11\(^{th}\), 1894, *The Cleveland Gazette*, an African American newspaper, reported that a white tenor had refused to sing on a concert in which Jones was headlined. The writer concluded, “However, the concert went on without the prejudiced fool. ‘The Black Patti’ is not only the better known and appreciated of the two but she can teach the jackass good manners.”\(^{22}\) The review carries with it a sense of offended dignity. The prima donna was *expected* to demand her rights: there is a reason that the term is used for demanding, egocentric behavior. In the 1890s, what rights did an African American woman have to demand? One of Jones’ obituaries related a story in which a rich white woman sent her African American cook to “allow” the woman she heard singing in the church to perform for her. Jones then returned the message that the rich woman would have to contact her agents, and it would be seven or eight months, as she was quite busy.\(^{23}\)

Ralph Matthews, the author, recounted the story with a vicarious glee: by becoming a famous singer, the Black woman could tell the white woman to get in line and wait her turn. Whether or not the anecdote happened as Matthews told it, it still shows that Jones and other Black prima donnas


were perceived as women who were able to defend their rights and uplift African Americans in the public sphere. Thomas Riis emphasizes this part of the diva persona as well: “Social slights that [a vocalist] might suffer need not be interpreted racially (and hence dangerously for the singer) but only as actions insufficiently sensitive to her artistic nature.”

In this way, becoming a prima donna was actually a path to safety, allowing Jones to frame herself as a diva rather than be a Black woman dangerously out of place. She was never accused of being vain or temperamental, because African American prima donnas could not afford outright bad behavior. However, for Black women, merely asking for respect was transgressive, and the “diva’s” transgressions a matter of professional and literal survival.

The private train by which the Black Patti Troubadours travelled serves as another example of a diva’s “excess” functioning as a defense. Private trains had an air of glamour, but were a necessity for Black performers in the South, who could not be sure whether they would be allowed to purchase food or find a place to stay. Some troupes even had hidden compartments in their train cars, where they could hide actors who had drawn the ire of townspeople. Rosalyn Story makes it clear that, for Black travelling performers, private train cars were a matter of necessity rather than opulence. Yet they could still be framed as part of the fashionable life of the star. This also benefited Jones when she complained about a segregated house in Louisville during a concert tour in the early 1890s:

I have never seen anything like… putting the colored people off in the gallery and leaving all those vacant seats downstairs. Why, the house would have been crowded if ‘they’ would have allowed them to have seats downstairs. I feel very much disappointed; I never before had such an experience, and I could not help feeling it. Don’t you think there ought to have been a division of the house downstairs?.... I think people of my own

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25 Rosalyn M. Story also describes Marian Anderson as a “diva” with this positive connotation in *And So I Sing: African American Divas of Opera and Concert* (New York: Amistad Press, 1993), xx.

26 Ibid., 17.
race ought not to be shut out in this way. The gallery, you see, was crowded and no more could go up there and still all the back part of the house was not taken. I don’t know anything about it of course. That’s a business affair.  

The reviewer noted that Jones seemed less than pleased, even as he also described “her quiet, lady-like way and soft voice.” Though she did not argue for full integration of the house, even suggesting that African Americans be allowed in the lower level of the theater was radical in Louisville at the time. Jones was able to further couch her objections in wishing that more paying audience members would have been allowed into the show. Jones was happy to object to segregation: she noted in the same interview that she had not been allowed in her first choice of hotel, and the title of the article, “The Black Patti Thinks Her People Not Well Treated” also frames her complaint as a matter of civil rights. But alluding to “business affairs” allowed her to soften the criticism, and kept the accusation of ill-treatment from landing dangerously.

At other times, Jones had to fight her battles in the legal realm. First she sued her white manager, Major James B. Pond, in 1892 for breach of contract (initially resolved against her, but later in her favor), and later the lawyer who represented her in that court case. Then, in 1898, she divorced her husband of fifteen years, David Richard Jones, for alcoholism and neglect, a choice that was far from easy in the late nineteenth century. Unlike some white singers of the period, Jones never acted as her own manager. She was initially managed by her husband, but except for a brief period in 1894 in which she was managed by another African American woman, Ednorah Nahar, her managers were white men. At the same time, she was often forced to advocate for herself, manager or no. Even with its pressures, the role of the prima donna

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29 Ibid., 124.
offered Jones freedom and agency.

Uplift and the Respectable Prima Donna

Sissieretta Jones deliberately crafted her own public image in the model of the “respectable” prima donna, which she held in common with white singers such as Emma Abbott and Adelina Patti. Jenny Lind had won over Americans with her concerts of bel canto arias, folk songs, and religious music, displaying herself as a pious and charitable artist. Singers afterward drew upon the Lind model by singing sacred music and publicizing their charitable donations, drawing on the fact that the fine arts were seen as a womanly virtue even if being paid to perform them was not. Americans had always been somewhat skeptical of opera and its perpetrators, but Lind’s success provided other singers with a template that they continued to rely upon through the rest of the nineteenth century. Jones’ adherence to this model also made her an ideal candidate to embody racial uplift to African American audiences.

Jones’s interactions with the media reinforced her performance of the socially respectable diva. Some articles about Jones emphasized her religiosity and the fact that her father was a minister. Others played up her stage presence. One review observed, “she became the favorite of her audience from the moment she appeared on account of her modest bearing and the entire absence of affectation.” Another reported, “In demeanor she is quite modest and reticent. Indeed, she might give her stage sisters lessons in this charming quality.” This same standard was applied to her clothes, which tended to be described as “modest,” “becoming,” or “fashionable.” She was never accused of gaudiness or poor taste. In a 1904 review of a

31 Hilary Poriss, “Prima Donnas and the Performance of Altruism,” In The Arts of the Prima Donna in the Long Nineteenth Century, 44.
Troubadours performance, Sylvester Russell noted that Jones wore a white satin and lace gown with a diamond broach for the olio, and a “pale blue silk dress of startling beauty” for the Operatic Kaleidoscope. In addition to being fashionable, during this performance Jones seems to have leaned into “maidenly” colors which communicated innocence as well as femininity.

Jones’ dignified, modest bearing was also emphasized in retrospective accounts. In his obituary for the Defender, Salem Tutt Whitney, who had performed with the Troubadours, referred to her as “reticent… sweet and gracious to all the members of her company.” He also relayed the anecdote that she often sang with the chorus from offstage, modestly claiming that it was only to warm up her vocal cords. These obituaries primarily reveal how their writers wanted to portray Jones to a new generation, but they show the continued power of Jones’ efforts to inhabit the role of the prima donna. In an early interview, one of the few which quotes her directly at length, she commented, “Do you know… it rather annoys me to be called ‘The Black Patti.’ I am afraid people will think I consider myself the equal of Patti herself. I assure you I do not think so, but I have a voice and I am striving to win the favor of the public by honest merit and hard work. Perhaps some day I may be as great in my way, but that is a long way ahead.” She did not deny that she was good—the diva does not play down her merit—but humbly denied any comparison to Adelina Patti. Instead, she went on to discuss how her parents had sung with the church choir, and the writer relayed a story about her first solo and how nervous she was. Jones connected these anecdotes to simultaneously humanize herself and reference her religious upbringing, building a public image of a woman who was gifted yet gracious.

Jones’ portrayal of the Lind model—including her evocation of Adelina Patti herself—

36 “She’s a Great Artist,” The Evening News and the Detroit Times, n.d., Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection.
went beyond her stage and interview comportment into the repertoire that she sang. For example, Lind, Patti, and Jones all sang “Home, Sweet Home” on recitals throughout their careers.\(^{37}\) Jones made the comparison with Patti even more explicit when she sang “The Patti Waltz” by J.S. Pattinson. Audiences responded to more than her stage name when they compared Jones to Patti: a reviewer observes that she sang “Comin’ Thru the Rye,” a Patti standard, with “Patti-like naivete.”\(^{38}\) Roger Freitas has done considerable analysis of how Adelina Patti’s “natural” or “naïve” singing voice was a matter of carefully constructed choices.\(^{39}\) He concludes that Patti’s “natural” technique included mimicking the declamation of speech by techniques such as avoiding a regular tempo, strategic portamento, and softening dotted rhythms from the original score. The way the reviewer invoked Patti suggests that Jones may have used similar techniques to render ballads, whether “Home, Sweet Home” or her own trademark “Swanee River.”

Jones borrowed both repertoire and deportment from other Lind-like sopranos in order to create the same air of respectability around her role. Much like them, she performed religious music: the Bach-Gounod “Ave Maria” and the “Inflammatus” from Rossini’s *Stabat Mater* were standards of her concert performances. Jones also used her operatic selections to the same effect, such as an aria from “La Sonnambula.” It is likely that the aria was one of Amina’s, a paragon of virtue and innocence, and another role closely associated with Lind. Later in her career, such ideally feminine heroines as *Rigoletto*’s Gilda, *H.M.S. Pinafore*’s Josephine, and *The Bohemian Girl*’s Arline were part of the Operatic Kaleidoscope.

Jones performed the prima donna in the model of Lind’s idealized white femininity, but her prominence led to particular expectations among African Americans. She was part of W.E.B.


\(^{39}\) Freitas, “The Art of Artlessness, Or, Adelina Patti Teaches Us How to Be Natural,” 217.
DuBois’s “talented tenth,” forwarding the cause of racial uplift by proving that she could perform at the same level as any white star. Langston Hughes no doubt intended a compliment when he described Jones as a “statuesque woman with a glorious voice.” He also referred to Dora Dean as “a beautiful woman of color” and three other female performers as “golden brown and talented.” His sincere appreciation of these women conflated their talents and their physical appearances, and illustrated the weight of social responsibility placed upon Jones and other potential leaders. The Detroit Plaindealer chided African Americans for not turning out in sufficient numbers to hear Jones in an 1893 concert:

Had it not been for the whites who largely outnumbered [African American audience members] the enterprise would have been a big financial failure. Instead of the three hundred colored people present the first night and about two hundred the second, there should have been a thousand each night… if Madame Jones ever makes a reappearance in Detroit the Plaindealer hopes that members of the race will endeavor to make amends for their failure of last week.41

Graziano emphasizes that Jones quickly became a role model: an educated, financially successful African American woman who did not conform to racist stereotypes.42 She was the recipient of favorable African American press because of this project of cultural uplift, but that carried yet higher expectations. Monroe Majors wrote in his encyclopedic 1893 Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities that “Hence, after a few weeks with the classic masters [Jones’ voice teachers] the whole Negro race was applauded for the advent of one among us, and sufficiently black to claim our identity, that was destined to move the world in tears. (emphasis mine)”43

Along with the other artists, educators, and activists that Monroe profiles, Jones’ abilities are

held up as a beacon to all African Americans, described in near-salvific terms. Also, unlike the actor Ira Aldridge, the poet Pushkin, or the writer Alexandre Dumas, Jones was not of mixed race, and her accomplishments could not be attributed to white parentage. Less than a decade into her career, this sort of description shows the pressure she was under to be a role model.

Jones could be enlisted as an agent of uplift precisely because of the fact that she successfully performed the implicitly white role of the socially respectable prima donna. Kevin Gaines describes one particular strand of racial uplift around the turn of the century as a primarily Black middle-class ideology, one which adopted white middle- and upper-class models of culture and social respectability. Jones appears to have attracted this particular audience.

One review opened by describing how “about 2,500 people, composed of the best elements of white and colored citizens, were present last night to hear the ‘Black Patti,’…” If she was performing before “the best element,” she was likely attracting members of the African American middle class who sought to become part of European-American “high” culture. Jones became an image to which African Americans could aspire, even though she was never a spokesperson for uplift. Other performers, such as Williams and Walker, were more explicit that they expected their troupes to know their responsibility as African American artists and act as role models. However, it says something that when Abbie Mitchell first auditioned for Will Marion Cook in 1898, when she made her assertion that “I’m a nice girl—I only sing classics!” she also observed later to her son that she had felt, “I, who felt that there was but one singer

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45 John R. McLean, “The Black Patti,” *The Enquirer* (no city or date.) Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection.
superior to me: Black Patti! Who was Cook to criticize me? Even for a self-admittedly sheltered girl, ambivalent about her first audition, Sissieretta Jones still prevailed as a role model.

Jones presented herself as a socially respectable prima donna throughout her career, using these strategies on concert and vaudeville stages. In addition to bolstering her own image, her repertoire and performance strategies also placed her among her the popular prima donnas who were her peers.

**Queen Without a Throne: Jones on the Concert Stage, 1892-1896**

Jones performed the image that she created for herself and dealt with the ensuing expectations associated with her role as a prima donna in multiple ways throughout her bifurcated career. The first of these careers, as a solo concert singer, took off with her first major concert at Madison Square Garden in 1892, and lasted until the Troubadours were formed in 1896. During these early years, Jones used the image she had constructed in addition to programming and touring strategies to promote herself as a popular prima donna after the model of other successful sopranos of the later nineteenth century.

Jones’ repertoire as a concert singer was very similar to other singers of her day. Daughtry notes that Adelina Patti’s concerts typically included three different types of songs: dramatic pieces that showcased power and emotion, coloratura pieces, and popular songs. Daughtry finds that Jones’ repertoire overlapped with Patti’s and that of white soprano Lillian Nordica: a combination of English, Italian, and French operatic selections, English and Italian

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parlor songs, and English popular ballads. Jones performed very few recent works. Most of her operatic selections were bel canto classics from the early nineteenth century or the midcentury warhorses of Meyerbeer and Verdi, alongside English art songs, parlor ballads, and dramatic scenes such as Henry Russell’s “The Ship on Fire.” There was no Wagner, French mélodie, or German Lieder on her concert programs. Jones knew the boundaries of the frame in which she was working: she sang the same or similar repertoire to other concertizing prima donnas, because she based her own performance of that role on the models in front of her. Jones’ performances at the Pittsburgh Exposition of 1892, representative of her programming overall, show how she used a variety of music to reach a wide audience. The exposition was a breakthrough for Jones—in concert with Jules Levy’s military band, she was able to perform for large, racially mixed audiences, expanding beyond church and local concerts for predominantly Black crowds. In addition to showing how Jones fit into a varied program, the different “nights” at the Exhibition, show how Jones balanced conceptions of classical and “popular” music. Most of her concerts were cast as popular. At one, Jones was advertised as singing the Page’s Song from Meyerbeer’s Les Huguenots and the “Patterson Waltz” (potentially a misspelling of the “Patti Waltz,” one of her mainstays.) A follow-up article states that she also sang “Last Rose of Summer” and “Swanee River” as encores. Thus, while Jones typically only programmed two or three numbers, it is more likely that she actually sung four or five. On another evening, she sang “Robert, toi que j’aime” from Meyerbeer’s Robert le diable, and encored it with “The Cows in the Clover” and “Every Rose Has its Thorn.” The same article references her “operatic selection” on the next concert, suggesting that pairing an aria with a ballad was commonly

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49 Ibid., 197-9.
50 Daughtry bemoans this, as she refers to Lieder as “artistic and demanding perfect vocal mastery.” Ibid., 64.
51 “At the Exposition,” Pittsburgh, Dr. Carl R. Gross collection.
52 “Crowds at the Exposition,” Pittsburgh, Dr. Carl R. Gross collection.
53 “Queen of Song,” Pittsburgh, Dr. Carl R. Gross collection.
accepted practice for this sort of program. On both occasions she chose to open with a florid
Meyerbeer aria, making an operatic impression on her audience before turning to familiar crowd-pleasers. Levy’s programming on these nights was very similar—a mix of popular operatic
excerpts and overtures, programmatic music, and other light, tuneful fare.

The program of the “Classical Night” shows Jones using the same strategy in a slightly
different context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Part 1: 7:30 PM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orchestra</td>
<td>Rienzi Overture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orchestra</td>
<td>Tannheuser [sic] “Erinnerungen”</td>
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<td>Orchestra</td>
<td>Tristan und Isolde, “Nachtgesang”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orchestra</td>
<td>Tristan und Isolde, “Love and Death”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orchestra</td>
<td>Lohengrin, “Elsa Entering the Cathedral”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orchestra</td>
<td>Der Fliegende Hollender, “Steuermannslied” and “Matrosenchos”</td>
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<tr>
<th>Part 2: 9:30 PM</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orchestra</td>
<td>Tannheuser Overture</td>
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<tr>
<td>Black Patti</td>
<td>“Solo” [Rossini, Stabat Mater, “Inflammatius”]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mr. E. H. Clarke, Trombone Solo</td>
<td>Tannheuser,[sic] “Recitative, Aria, und Lied an den Abendstern”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orchestra</td>
<td>Lohengrin, Excerpts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orchestra</td>
<td>Die Walkure, [sic] Excerpts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orchestra</td>
<td>Lohengrin, “Einleitung und Brautchor”</td>
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Fig. 3.3: Classical Night at the Pittsburgh Exposition

The Pittsburgh Leader greeted this assortment with dismay: “Too much Wagner! What
has the community done that Conductor Brooks should make this onslaught? If it not be too late
in mercy’s name let something be substituted for about half—or more—of the numbers. Wagner
is great, but this is too much. The audiences that assemble in the exposition—even on classical
nights—are too general in character for such a program.”54 The author’s comment about a

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54 Untitled clipping, Pittsburgh Leader, Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection
“general” audience suggest that most of the variety-based concerts Levy and Jones assembled were designed to appeal to a broad variety of fairgoers, including those whom a music critic thought unprepared for “serious” fare. Fortunately, the Pittsburgh Times reported that the evening was a success, though “the most popular number last night was Black Patti’s singing of ‘Inflammatus’; two encores were demanded and gracefully responded to.” Jones’ excerpt from Rossini’s Stabat Mater may well have been the welcome injection of non-Wagner for which the Leader hoped. This Wagner-focused concert was somewhat outside of Jones’ typical work, as indicated by her choice of Rossini as her contribution: she sang “popular” classical music such as Italianate arias and classic ballads rather than German Lieder or Wagnerian opera, as did most of the popular prima donnas who were her musical peers.

Jones’ series at the Central Music Hall in Chicago in March of 1893 demonstrates how she continued to use these strategies once she had become a star. Despite the presence of William Sherman Baxter, a banjo virtuoso; Señor Encarnacion Garcia, a salterio player, and the Arion Lady Quartette, the program is titled “Black Patti Concert”: Jones was unquestionably the main attraction, as well as the only Black performer. Graziano also notes that this concert included Jones along other American artists: on previous tours, Major Pond had scheduled her with a Russian violinist and a Swedish sextette, who were likely to be more comfortable taking the stage with a woman of color. This was not the last time Jones would face that prejudice, but the Central Music Hall represents Jones at the height of her fame as a concert singer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wednesday, March 15, 1893</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arion Lady Quartette</td>
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<tr>
<td>William Sherman Baxter</td>
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<tr>
<th>Sissieretta Jones</th>
<th>Wekerlin, “Fleur des Alpes”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encarnacion Garcia</td>
<td>Garcia, “Rossini’s William Tell Fantasie,”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arion Lady Quartette</td>
<td>Nedlinger, “Rock-A Bye”</td>
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<tr>
<td>William Sherman Baxter</td>
<td>Baxter, “Cradle Song”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Encarnacion Garcia</td>
<td>Mendelssohn, “Spring Song”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sissieretta Jones</td>
<td>Bach-Gounod, “Ave Maria”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arion Lady Quartette</td>
<td>Root, “Home, Sweet Home”</td>
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**Thursday, March 16, 1893**

| Arion Lady Quartette | Rees, “In Dreamy Shadows” |
| William Sherman Baxter | Verdi, “Grand Fantasie, Il Trovatore” |
| Sissieretta Jones | Centemeri, “Aria” |
| Encarnacion Garcia | Garcia, “Rossini’s ‘Semiramide’ Fantasie,” |
| Arion Lady Quartette | Erminie, “Lullaby” |
| Bavarian, “Skylark” | |
| William Sherman Baxter | Baxter, “Variations on ‘Old Folks at Home’” |
| Baxter, “Gavotte Fleur de Lis” | |
| Encarnacion Garcia | Garcia, “Medly of Popular Airs” |
| Sissieretta Jones | Meyerbeer, aria from L’Africaine [unspecified] |
| Arion Lady Quartette | Marchner, “O! Why Art Thou Not Near Me” |

**Saturday Afternoon, March 18, 1893**

| Arion Lady Quartette | Mollay, “Waggon” |
| | Sullivan, “The Lost Chord” |
| Sissieretta Jones | Eckert, “Swiss Song” |
| Encarnacion Garcia | Garcia, “Concert Waltz” |
| Arion Lady Quartette | Abt, “Water Lily” |
| William Sherman Baxter | Mendelssohn, “Song Without Words” |
| Baxter, “Berceuse” | |
| Encarnacion Garcia | Mowkowsky, “Spanish Danse” |
| Sissieretta Jones | Wenzano, “Grand Valse” |
| Arion Lady Quartette | Root, “Home Sweet Home” |

**Saturday Evening, March 18, 1893**

| Arion Lady Quartette | Cowan, “Lady Bird” |
| William Sherman Baxter | Baxter, “Coon Patrol (Characteristique)” |
| | Mascagni, “Intermezzo (Cavalleria Rusticana)” |
| Sissieretta Jones | Meyerbeer, “Robert, toi que j’aime” |
Encarnacion Garcia     Garcia, “Il Trovatore Fantasy”
Arion Lady Quartette  Mair, “Swiss Song”
William Sherman Baxter Baxter, “Nearer, my God, to Thee”
                              Baxter, “Gavotte, Fleur des Lis”
Encarnacion Garcia     Garcia, “Medley”
Sissieretta Jones      Wenzano, “Grande Valse”
Arion Lady Quartette  Goldberg, “Good Night”

*Fig. 3.4: Central Music Hall Concerts of Sissieretta Jones*

This concert series shows how Jones’ choices meshed with other artists. The Arion Lady Quartette primarily sang English-language ballads. Sherman and Garcia, virtuosos on novelty instruments, showcased their own arrangements of popular operatic material and well-known songs. “Home, Sweet Home” and *Il Trovatore* appear multiple times. However, even the order of the program shows Jones’ primacy. She initially sang third, making the audience wait for her performance, and then again in the penultimate spot, the climax of the performance before the Arion Lady Quartette closed (and tired concertgoers slipped out to beat the crowd.)

Jones’ choices display how the variety of her programming worked toward a consistent effect. Most of her printed program choices were operatic: she probably saved popular ballads such as “Swanee River” or “Comin’ Thru the Rye” for encores. “Robert, toi que j’aime” makes another appearance, as does another standby entrance aria, “Sempre Libera” from Verdi’s *La Traviata*. “Sempre Libera” did double duty as a bravura showcase and as a mainstay of Adelina Patti. On Jones’ European tour, the London *Era* reported that she “showed herself a mistress of the vocal art in her first selection, “Sempre Libra” [sic], an air from *Traviata*, which is indissolubly associated with the Black Patti’s great namesake, and which demands exceptional capacity for its rendering.”

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A modern reader may be surprised that Jones performed “Swanee River”, poster child of the racist sentimentalism of mid-nineteenth century minstrelsy, rather than African American spirituals. This choice reflects the flexibility of “spirituals” and “Negro folk songs” as genre identifiers at this historical moment more than it does Jones’ own aesthetic choices. In the closing decades of the nineteenth century, minstrel songs and Foster ballads were conflated with an “authentic” African American tradition. Jones herself believed that “Swanee River” was a genuine African American folk song.\(^{58}\) In an undated article from the *New York Age*, Jones held up “Old Folks at Home” (“Swanee River”) and “My Old Kentucky Home” as examples of Black folk song that appeal to all audiences. She set out an ambitious program, proclaiming that,

> Their vocabulary inadequate, their freedom of speech denied, the Negroes fell very naturally to expressing themselves in song. Thus we have the ‘Negro folk song’ running the gamut of human emotions. To my mind, no artist should omit one of these beautiful songs from his or her repertoire. Every school, college, or university should include one of these songs in their musical program.\(^ {59}\)

Jones clearly took a particular pride in the heritage of African American song as she saw it. However, by suggesting that every artist and school ought to sing them, she made them part of a wider artistic tradition. In this way, her use of “Swanee River” mirrored that of other concertizing sopranos who performed folk and popular songs. This tradition links the popular prima donna to both the English-language opera of previous generations, which was framed as popular entertainment, the variety-based concert programing of the nineteenth century, and vaudeville theater, which used a variety of acts to appeal to the same broad audience.\(^ {60}\)

During Jones’ career, spirituals and minstrel songs, both of which were considered folk songs, served together as part of this varied popular entertainment. Sandra Jean Graham explores


how in the 1870s and 1880s, “traditional” spirituals gave rise to newly composed songs based on them, often influenced by minstrel stereotypes.\(^1\) The Fisk Jubilee Singers took that name to distinguish themselves from a minstrel troupe, but later performers such as the African American Georgia Minstrels and white imitators of the Fisk singers sang spirituals and minstrel songs together, further muddying the waters.\(^2\) Jones toured South America with the Tennessee Jubilee Singers, another group which mixed a few spirituals with vaudeville and minstrel conventions. Most twentieth-century African American singers performed renditions of “classic” spirituals, those promoted by the Fisk Jubilee Singers or set by later Black composers. This body of repertoire was not yet solidified in the 1890s. Jones’ choice of “Swanee River” rather than “Deep River” or “Go Down, Moses” (common choices of later singers) shows how the boundaries between “low” or “high” music, as well as the definition of folk song, remained up for debate.

While the music that Jones sang was similar to that programmed by other Black and white performers, she was separated from white sopranos by the fact that she could not hope to pursue an operatic career. A few short-lived African American opera companies had presented fully staged operas by the end of the nineteenth century, but there was not nearly enough support for a soprano to make a career there. Later reports claimed that she had signed a contract at the Metropolitan Opera or with Walter Damrosch, but these are unverified and never came to pass.\(^3\) Even in 1892, at the height of her concert career, the Detroit Plaindealer remarked mournfully, “It is rather pitiful to think of the way in which her career might be hampered because of her race—not because of prejudice exactly, but she certainly cannot appear in opera, in which she

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\(^1\) Sandra Jean Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 224


\(^3\) The oldest source I can find which asserts this is James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (1930; repr. Salem, NH: Ayer Company Publishers, Inc., 1990), 100. Johnson does not mention a source for the story, and later sources often cite Johnson.
would undoubtedly succeed, unless one were especially written for her, and then almost
insuperable difficulties would attend its production. She will be limited to concert…”64 The
writers of the Plaindealer could not conceive of an African American soprano playing any role
that had previously been coded as “white.” Indeed, Will Marion Cook’s ill-fated attempt to write
an opera of Uncle Tom’s Cabin for the 1893 Columbia Exposition in Chicago, in which Jones
was supposed to star, ended up snared in bureaucratic brambles. Marian Anderson ultimately
became the first African American singer to perform on the Metropolitan Opera stage, in 1955,
and even then in the limited and exoticized role of Ulrica the “Gypsy” sorceress. It was even
longer before an African American could hope to play a full spectrum of roles outside of African
American productions.65 Jones would have to turn elsewhere.

Long May She Reign: Jones as a Vaudeville Prima Donna, 1896-1916

Sissieretta Jones gave no public explanation as to why she decided to abandon the concert
stage and join the Troubadours, commencing on the second stage of her bifurcated career.
Graziano suggests that Jones’ prospects as a concert singer had waned—she could draw crowds
at summer exhibitions, but her main-season concerts were often not as well attended. She had not
had a steady manager since her acrimonious parting with Major Pond, which had also affected
her career and income, and her European tour had not delivered any uptick in those fortunes.66
Lee also observes that a steadier income and more reliable audiences were probably factors.67
However, Jones continued to present herself an operatic prima donna even in the midst of a

64 The Detroit Plaindealer, May 20, 1892. In Abbott and Seroff, Out of Sight: The Rise of African American Popular
65 Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera,” American Quarterly 63 no. 3
variety show, using strategies that she had learned in her concert career in a new setting.

Jones’ choice has caused consternation up to the present day. W.C. Handy despaired of this turn of events in his autobiography, saying, “The best talent of that generation came down the same drain. The composers, the singers, the musicians, the speakers, the stage performers—the minstrel shows got them all.”68 Even a successful road show like the Troubadours was a poor consolation when the Metropolitan Opera had seemed almost within reach. Scholar Daphne Brooks likewise laments: “… The grandly imposing opera singer Sissieretta Jones was often placed in the second act of a sketch comedy production rife with ethnic humor and coon song melodies. While Patti shined in her ‘operatic kaleidoscope’ concert sequence, she always shared the stage with banjoists, comedians, and acrobats.”69 Neither Handy nor Brooks is wrong about the compromises that African American road shows made. Black minstrels had little choice but to perpetuate many of the derogatory stereotypes of the genre, even if performers were also sometimes able to use those performances to gain visibility and eventually strive for more nuanced roles and other opportunities. This problematic history led some historians to sideline Jones, whereas others who praised her did so by minimizing the impact of her vaudeville years. However, I argue that Jones’ two decades as a vaudeville headliner were not necessarily a surrender or a defeat: a consolation prize after she was unable to bypass boundaries that Caterina Jarboro or Marian Anderson would later overcome. In the 1890s, vaudeville was growing in prominence and profitability, while travelling opera companies dwindled and American opera began to solidify into the “high art” presented by the Metropolitan Opera and other institutions. Jones’ chances at a classical career had decreased, rather than increased, despite her fame and her touring. The Black Patti Troubadours gave her another stage on which to perform as a

quintessential prima donna, distancing herself and her collaborators from the minstrel tradition because of the fact that she was adjacent to and yet clearly separate from it.

Sissieretta Jones worked within the minstrel format of the Troubadours’ vaudeville show in order to showcase her own talents. In a way, the Troubadours created the “[opera] written especially for her” for which the Plaindealer had hoped. While she was neither manager nor writer, she was the star, who drew the audiences and enabled the troupe to succeed. Thomas Riis observes that the Black Patti Troubadours relied less on spectacle than some other African American road shows of the time, because the name of Sissieretta Jones was enough to draw audiences. The Troubadours performed through what would become the Theater Owners Booking Association, the principal circuit for African American performers. T.O.B.A. worked with Black actors and primarily sought Black audiences, especially in the south. However, reviews describe mixed audiences in segregated theaters, just as in Jones’ concert years.

The tripartite format of a Troubadours performance had its roots in the minstrel show of the 1840s. The first act was a comic musical skit. This was followed by the olio, a variety performance which included comedy acts, dances, and other short entertainments. Jones often made her first appearance during this segment of the show. The evening concluded with the “Operatic Kaleidoscope,” featuring fully-staged scenes from well-known operas starring Jones. Unlike in a minstrel show, which began with a series of witticisms, followed by the olio and the skit, the Troubadours moved the “skit” to the first act in order to save the Kaleidoscope for the finale. The removal of the first act and the introduction of the Kaleidoscope made for a show with two plot-driven acts instead of one, as well as comparatively less emphasis on racist jokes and caricatures. Jones never appeared in the first act, where the skit often still included those

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70 Riis, Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915, 149.
elements. Instead, she restricted herself to operatic or concert numbers until the retitled Black Patti Musical Comedy Company began to stage multi-act musicals after 1910. Unlike Bert Williams and other comedians with ambitions to expand the range of Black theater, she never donned blackface or performed a minstrel-style role herself.

A program from Los Angeles in March of 1898 exemplifies how an evening with the Troubadours functioned, as well as Jones’ role within the production.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act 1: <em>At Jolly “Coon”-ey Island</em> by Ernest Hogan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>“Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight”</td>
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<td>“My Coal Black Lady”</td>
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<td>“Three Little Pumpkin Colored Coons”</td>
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<td>“Enjoy Yourselves”</td>
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<td>“Roxey Ann Dooley”</td>
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<td>“Before She Fell”</td>
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<td>“Sally in Our Alley”</td>
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<td>Japanese Song and Dance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buck Dancing</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Coney Island”</td>
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<td>Finale “The Mayor’s Haps and Mishaps”</td>
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<th>Act 2: Olio</th>
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<td><strong>Number</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sketch “The Yellow Kid’s Glove”</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Aria from I Lombardi</em> [Verdi]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grand Cake Walk</td>
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<tr>
<td>Original Songs by Ernest Hogan</td>
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<tr>
<th>Act 3: Operatic Kaleidoscope</th>
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<td><strong>Number</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Cavalleria Rusticana</em> “Intermezzo” and “Ave Maria” [Mascagni]</td>
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<tr>
<th>Musical Selection</th>
<th>Performers/Chorus</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Faust “Kirmesse Scene”</strong> [Act 2 of <em>Faust</em>, Gounod]</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bohemian Girl “Heart Bowed Down” [Balfe]</strong></td>
<td>C.L. Moore, baritone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>**“Hail to the Duchess” and “The Saber Song” [Offenbach, <em>Grand Duchess of Gerolstein</em>]</td>
<td><strong>Black Patti and Chorus</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sextette from Lucia [Donizetti, <em>Lucia di Lammermoor</em>]</strong></td>
<td><strong>Black Patti, Moore, Byrd, Richardson, Pierce, and Mackay</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“Queen’s Lace Handkerchief” [J. Strauss, <em>Queen’s Lace Handkerchief</em>]</strong></td>
<td><strong>Black Patti and Entire Company</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grand Finale—“Tar and Tartar: A Medley of National Airs”</strong></td>
<td><strong>Black Patti and Entire Company</strong></td>
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</tbody>
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*Figure 3.5: Black Patti’s Troubadours Program*

The first act, Ernest Hogan’s “In Jolly Coon-ey Island,” was very much still of the minstrel type, even though Hogan would go on to be viewed as one of the leading figures in early African American musical theater. The show includes both plentiful references to “coons,” and stereotypes of the Irish and the Japanese. However, the olio includes both the Sextette, a men’s chorus which sang in harmony, and Sissieretta Jones performing Verdi. These musical numbers set the stage for the popular opera selections that concluded the evening. The shorthand or occasional lack of titles in the program suggests that the scenes were familiar to the audience. The scenes are presented in the same program, labelled in the same manner, and yet the Kaleidoscope and “Coon-ey Island” seem like they could not be farther apart: a microcosm of the choices and caricatures that Black performers faced.

In these three-act shows, the Troubadours presented an entire spectrum of “high” and “low” art, further complicated by their location on the “low” vaudeville stage. Vaudeville itself was known for blending genres within both individual performances and bills as a whole, even if there were distinctions between a minstrel act and what was referred to as a “high-class” turn. Instead of focusing on genre, Nicholas Gebhardt frames the essential vaudeville relationship as
that between the performer and the audience, much as the prima donna is constructed in relationship to the public, or as Susan Rutherford refers to it, the point “between stage and auditorium.” To put it simply, it was most important that the performer be able to sell the act, just as Jones and the Troubadours sold their blend of well-known opera hits, musical theater, and variety show. Both their operatic selections and the variety-show presentation were more common to the mid-nineteenth century than the early twentieth, but Jones’ nineteenth-century prima donna persona sold those as well. The adaptability of vaudeville and the primacy of the diva reinforced each other to create a space where Jones could fill her particular role.

Jones still performed as an operatic prima donna on the vaudeville stage. She was the star attraction of her Troubadours, but the audience had to wait half the evening for her appearance. She also distanced herself from the minstrel-adjacent and comedy acts by only appearing in the operatic portions of the show, displaying the dignity of the diva. Once the troupe began to stage complete musical comedies late in Jones’ career, Jones still set herself apart through the roles she played. If she was not a queen or princess, she portrayed a Sunday school teacher, principal, or other position of authority and respectability. In one of these roles, her showstopping “Belle of New York” was reviewed in the *Freeman* as having “a brilliant operatic effect.” As part of the image of the queenly diva, she continued to hold herself above the hijinks of the rest of the cast.

The combination of high and low which the Troubadours’ skits and Jones’ diva status created made the Black Patti Troubadours stand out among other performing groups. Minstrel troupes often included operatic numbers—minstrelsy was sometimes even referred to as “black opera”—but typically parodied the originals, making a joke of the idea that an African American

could attempt the genre. What Jones presented as “Black opera” was entirely different: unaltered (read: “white”) opera staged by professional African American singers. Some critics took this in stride. A Fort Worth reviewer explained:

Captain Jasper, as presented by the Black Patti company, is not a minstrel show. It is a musical comedy about government papers stolen by a renegade officer of Negro troops to be sold to Cheteka, queen of a Philippine tribe, and the efforts to apprehend him. It serves, however, to introduce songs, dances and choruses as good of those as a minstrel show and avoids much of the horse play of those productions.

What “as good as a minstrel show” might mean is unclear, but the reviewer wants to make a point of praising this production for being both high-quality and “higher” dramatically than a minstrel show. However, some critics made it clear that they preferred the caricature. A review of a Williams and Walker show, Bandanna Land, compares the duo to earlier shows thus:

Not since the days of the original Georgia minstrels has there been anything like the opportunity to enjoy these racial accomplishments in anything like the profusion furnished by the present large company. Neither performances by the opera company headed by “the Black Patti” nor the more ambitious opera of Mr. Paul Laurence Dunbar, sung here some years ago, were so distinctly racial in quality.

The reviewer seems to suggest that Jones’s company was less “racial” than others, and that for Williams and Walker to be more “distinctly racial” was a marker of success for the show. Riis further notes that in accusations of “imitating white performers” or not being “authentic” often meant the Black performers weren’t fulfilling minstrel expectations. Jones certainly did not, and some of her press reflects that. One particularly vitriolic review of the Troubadours complained:

The performance is of varying degrees of enjoyment until a version of ‘The Chimes of Normandy’ comes on, which is time for you to go out. I am persuaded that if President Lincoln could have seen that comic opera performance he would have regretted not

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76 “At the Theaters,” Fort Worth Star-Telegram, October 12, 1912, Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection.
77 “Drama: Africa on the Stage,” Life (1833-1936); Feb 13, 1908; 51, 1320; American Periodicals p. 178.
78 Riis, Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915, 142.
placing a prohibitory clause on such tendencies in the proclamation of emancipation. Manager Baker should turn the bloodhounds loose.79

This critic may well have had no taste for light opera involving mysterious castles, long-lost heirs, and love triangles. However, he directed his venom toward the performers, rather than the performance, in a cruelly calculated insult redolent of the violence of slavery. In the Los Angeles Examiner, Otheman Stevens likewise complained, “The black and tan artists who compose the Black Patti troupe at the Grand are like a lot of good-natured children in their posturing, singing, dancing, and grimacing, but when they seek to get away from their racial traits, there is a pathetic sadness to their efforts, as their limitations are harshly denoted.”80 Stevens’ descriptions recall minstrel depictions of “childlike” African Americans. As long as Black performers acted the part of Topsy, he was content, but Violetta was out of the question.

Other reviewers made it clear that they viewed the multiple genres of the Troubadours shows through single-genre lenses. One such observed: “The solos of the accomplished diva and the assisting artists, and the grand ensembles by the entire company, were beautifully rendered. Clothed in costly costumes, and with rich scenic appointments, these colored troubadours sang selections from some of the standard grand and comic operas in a manner which would do credit to any grand opera company.”81 However, this is the middle paragraph of the review. The first talked about the “vaudevillians” and their antics, and the last described the comedians and the cake-walk. While the detail of the olio is flattering, the overall impression is that the reviewer was not sure what to make of it, and happily moved on to the entertainment that was closer to what he expected. White advertisements for the Troubadours often emphasized the comedy or “plantation melodies” in this fashion.

79 Untitled clipping, Locke Collection.
80 Otheman Stevens, untitled clip, Los Angeles Examiner. Locke Collection.
81 “Amusements Good and Varied,” The Evening Mail, September 11, 1900, Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection.
Jones’ willful blending of “high” and “low” genres, of the uplifting versus the popular, points at even deeper divisions than Jones’ bipartite career. She performed both “white” and “Black” repertoire in a fashion that would have been coded as “white” by her segregated but multiracial audiences. Her performance of the role of the prima donna and her choice to continue her career on the vaudeville stage placed her in a position where she could present herself this way. However, it was not enough to completely supplant the ambiguity Jones created in the minds of her audiences, and the way that audiences and critics dealt with this uncertainty played into the way that Jones was received. A reader can detect palpable anxiety in concert reviews and descriptions of Troubadour performances—anxiety swirling around a woman who did not fit easily into boundaries, who inspired contradictions and verbal leaps as journalists tried to position her in “whiteness,” “Blackness,” or some other category she refused to accept.

**African Queens and Queens of Song**

Jones’ queenly mien marked her not merely as a prima donna, but as part of an emerging engagement with African royalty and tradition. Daphne Brooks suggests that the various African American “queens of song” in the late nineteenth century might have resonated with African American constructions of and associations with Biblical or African royalty during this same period. These divas presented themselves as queenly leaders; a singer like Marie Selika, who named herself after L’Africaine’s royal title character, made those associations explicit.\(^82\) The character of the diva may have been an implicitly white one, but “exotic” roles, part of many mainstream operas, created a space where the Queen of Song could embody an African queen.

Critics’ descriptions of Jones show how she was conflated with archetypes of both the

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\(^{82}\) Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006): 320. For more on these roles, see Chapter 4 of this dissertation.
prima Donna and the African queen through the role of the exotic diva. I suggest that critics framed Jones as “old bronze” or “chocolate” or “light brown”—minimizing Blackness or emphasizing proximity to whiteness—precisely because Jones presented herself as a diva in such a way that they could not deny her right to the title. However, the exotic diva, familiar as the heroine of any number of operas, was much easier to accept than the simple fact of an African American operatic soprano. The exotic diva was not “white,” which suited, because Jones could not pass as “white.” However, the diva was more ambiguously Other than specifically Black, making it easier for some audience members to reconcile their ideas of race and music with her reality. This was only possible because Jones was so obviously a prima Donna. In some ways, the fact that she was a diva was so evident that it even managed to obscure her race.

Jones’ role as the diva informed critics’ assessment of her appearance, which is further illuminated by the fact that they never seemed to agree as they desperately tried to fit her into a suitable category. Among scores of reviews, many began by referring to her as “sable” or “dusky.” The far extreme can be found in The Chicago Herald, where the reviewer stated that “Mrs. Jones is a negress almost as black as can be found, but she has a voice that would make many a Caucasian cantatrice jealous.” More typical is the hedging found in the Los Angeles Times, when the writer commented that “She is not of a jet black in color, but of a rich deep brown. Her manners are said to be prepossessing and her face to show refinement and culture.” The writer attempted to “lighten” her as much as possible in print by insisting on “brownness” rather than “Blackness.” Other writers used similar techniques: either “lightening” or in other ways aestheticizing Jones, such as the San Francisco writer who described Jones as

“chocolate.” A Detroit interviewer wrote: “The Brown Patti’ would have been nearer the truth than her present sobriquet, for her skin is the color of old bronze with a warm tint underneath. Her hair is black and straight as an Indian’s, and her long curved eyelashes veil a sparkling pair of eyes that are dancing with jollity.” He did his best to recast Jones as an ambiguous exotic Other—her “old bronze” skin and her “Indian” hair minimized Jones’ Blackness while retaining her non-whiteness. A Canadian interviewer leaned even further into exoticism:

> “She has a perfect figure, a pretty, natural carriage, and a pleasant, girlish face lit with soft, dark eyes. Her dress is the perfection of richness and good taste; a combination of form and color that gives the dusky skin effective setting. Her hair, of heavy, dusky black, without ever a kink or curl, is coiled in a Grecian knot at the nape of the neck showing a prettily shaped head…. As she stands before her audience, we understand for the first time something of the fascinations of the dark-hued women of the Orient.”

While intending some sort of compliment, this interviewer straightens her hair, emphasizes her “Grecian” style, and creates an idol of youth and Orientalism. While colorism—the idea that “whiter” features were better—was never openly invoked, it was part of the cultural climate, and this lightening-via-adjective expressed a desire to make Jones more conventionally attractive, as well as more interestingly exotic. This exoticism is what creates Jones’ likeness to the exotic opera heroine, which resonated with her established role as the diva.

Jones’ performance of selections from *L’Africaine* as early as her Central Music Hall concert in 1893 highlights how quickly she developed an uneasy relationship with the roles “allowed” to women of color. Even white writers suggested that she could break onto the mainstream operatic stage by singing the title role from *Aida* or *L’Africaine*’s Selika. Verdi’s

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86 “She’s a Great Artist,” *The Evening News and the Detroit Times*, n.d., Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection.
87 “Her Color No Bar,” *The Empire*, no city or date, Dr. Carl R. Gross collection.
Aida was popular enough that when a reviewer referred to Jones as “A veritable Aida in Parisian costume,” there could be no doubt that he was identifying her with the character, even though she never actually programmed the role in her concert career or with the Troubadours. Her main “exotic” pieces during her concert career were L’Africaine and a selection from Gounod’s La reine de Saba. It is impossible to say whether she simply preferred how those roles sat in her voice, whether she disliked Aida as a character, or whether she resisted being associated with a role that she had never even performed. Even the Baltimore Afro-American obituary, which otherwise gloried in Jones as the diva, focused on her performance of Meyerbeer in a green dress accessorized with a leopard skin. The power of the image of the African queen, much like the image of the diva, had a downside: in this case, that Jones could be reduced to nothing more than the embodiment of a character, further limited by the fact that so few women of African descent had been portrayed on the operatic stage. An interviewer claimed that “Adieu, Land of my Childhood” from L’Africaine was Jones’ favorite piece: was this the truth, mere journalistic puffery, or Jones bearing up under what she knew was expected of her?

Jones distanced herself from the “exotic” diva during her career with the Troubadours, where she avoided the minstrel skits and kept to operatic and ballad selections. While she occasionally portrayed African queens or other such roles in musical comedies, she drew on “exotic” operatic repertoire less than she had in her concert career. According to Willia Daughtry’s list of Jones’ repertoire, the Troubadours used at least twenty-four different opera excerpts. These included popular operettas such as the Pirates of Penzance and Sousa’s El Capitan and light-opera favorites such as The Bohemian Girl and Martha, but Jones also

89 “Masonic Temple Theater,” The Critic (no city or date), Dr. Carl R. Gross collection.
90 “Black Patti,” Afro-American (1893-1988); Jul 8, 1933; pg. 6.
91 “Her Favorite is L’Africaine,” Detroit Tribune, Feb 12, 1893, Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection.
expanded into what we would call the operatic canon. She performed roles from both dramatic soprano and higher mezzo-soprano repertoire, including florid bel canto arias such as “Una voce poco fa” from *The Barber of Seville* and “The Jewel Song” from Gounod’s *Faust*. The Troubadours staged selections from *Faust, Lucia di Lammermoor, Il Trovatore, Robert le Diable*, and even Wagner’s *Tannhauser* and *Lohengrin*. Conspicuously absent: *L’Africaine* or *Aida*, even though Jones had often sung selections from *L’Africaine* in concert. The principal exotic repertoire in the Kaleidoscope was a scene from *Carmen*, the “Anvil Chorus” from *Il Trovatore*, and *Lakme*’s “Bell Song,” none of which purport to be African. While later singers such as Caterina Jarboro and Leontyne Price used these roles as gateways, perhaps Jones was afraid that *Aida* or *L’Africaine* would bear too close of a resemblance to a “back to Africa” skit or other minstrel material in the eyes of her audience. By only performing unmarked or “white” heroines, Jones was able to firmly delineate her Kaleidoscope from the rest of the show.

**BLACK PATTI TROUBADOURS**

*Fig. 3.6: The Pinafore Review*
Jones played this sort of traditionally white role in “The Pinafore Review,” a condensed retelling of *H.M.S. Pinafore*. Gilbert and Sullivan operettas were among the lighter fare performed during the Kaleidoscope, and yet the Troubadours did not present *Pinafore* as a minstrel satire: rather, their production would not have looked out of place in London. A “black opera” company was performing “white opera,” with Jones at the center. Sylvester Russell of the Indianapolis *Freeman* made the comparison explicit when he said, “Singing a role in *Pinafore*, which has been heard so often by white prima donnas, shows how superior Black Patti’s voice is, to those who are really capable of judging.”93 A first-rate prima donna allowed the Troubadours to pull this off both in the sense of having the right voices for the roles, and in the sense that it was expected that the Black Patti would sing opera.

When Jones did play exotic queens after 1910 in the revamped Black Patti Musical Comedy Company, her choices illuminate how she continued to set herself apart from stereotyped performances and reinforce her diva status. Her costume for the show *Captain Jasper* was described thus: “… Sissieretta Jones (Black Patti) appeared majestically in a white picture hat, white serge suit, white gloves, and white slippers. As she is booked in the play as ‘Cheteka,’ Queen of a Philippine tribe, this was rather more clothes than might have been expected, especially as the scene was laid in the summertime.”94 By dressing as a diva for this performance, instead of wearing an exoticized ensemble, she followed in the footsteps of other nineteenth-century prima donnas. They were expected to provide their own costumes, and often dressed for their stature as performers rather than “realism.” In essence, when Jones played these “exotic” roles of African queens, she performed them as a white diva would have, highlighting…

94 “At the Theaters,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, October 12, 1912, Dr. Carl R. Gross Collection.
that Sissieretta Jones, prima donna, was different from the characters whom she portrayed. Even if reviewers considered her Aida or Selika in the flesh, Jones’ real role was that of the diva.

Critical acclaim and the length of Jones’ career suggest that she succeeded portraying these roles in an unmarked or “white” fashion, preferring to emphasize her own role as the diva. However, this success did not completely supplant the ambiguity Jones created in the minds of her audiences, and the way that audiences and critics dealt with this uncertainty played into the way that Jones was received. A reader can detect palpable anxiety in concert reviews and descriptions of Troubadour performances, swirling around a woman who did not fit easily into boundaries, who inspired contradictions and verbal leaps as journalists tried to position her in “whiteness” or “Blackness,” and even exposed the racial ambiguity latent in the diva herself.

“*A Veritable Aida*”: Hearing and Seeing Race

Sissieretta Jones presented herself as a diva even in the midst of a minstrelsy-adjacent vaudeville troupe, highlighting the potential of the prima donna to complicate racial categories. Unsurprisingly, reviewers never knew what to do with her. Her voice and her role as the prima donna defied any straightforward, reductive characterization as she performed beyond traditional conventions of white femininity or middle-class Black ideas of racial uplift. The discomfort of the reviewers was both visual and aural: first, how “Black” did she look? Second, how “Black” did she sound? And how could they reconcile their concepts of Blackness with a woman who threw those concepts out of alignment and relevance?

Nina Sun Eidsheim and Jennifer Stoever both examine how the “Black voice,” in its myriad cultural constructions, applies to opera singers, and I draw upon their research to examine Jones. Both scholars argue that the “Black voice” is not something biological: it is instead a
construction reinforced through performance. If the “Black voice” is real, it is in the same way that race is real, as a cultural construction with real ramifications. Jennifer Stoever theorizes the sonic color line, in which listening and emergent technologies for doing so in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reify the racialized body. As she compares the reception of Jenny Lind and Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, she finds that, as tensions rose in the 1850s, Jenny Lind was lifted up as ideally “white,” and reviewers emphasized the ways in which Greenfield was not, drawing the sonic color line between the two. Eidsheim first defines voice as collective, rather than singular; cultural, rather than innate; and sourced in the listener rather than the singer. When turned to Jones, Eidsheim’s perspective of voice implies that how she “sounded” is a matter of the perceptions of her listeners, of the training she had received, and the popular culture in which she moved. In the case of opera singers, Eidsheim theorizes the “phantom genealogy” of voice teachers, writers, and audiences who have attached “darkness,” “huskiness,” or “savagery” to Black voices, causing those timbres to be associated with singers even in classical repertoire. As Kira Thurman observes in her discussion of Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson, “Even when in direct opposition to one another, white listeners relied on the category of race to form their aesthetic judgements…. White listeners’ struggles to come to terms with Black musicians’ performances are proof that musical reception was not a passive experience but rather an active process whereby racial categories were being worked out and renegotiated in Central Europe.” These renegotiations of racial categories were just as fraught in Gilded Age America, and Jones’ reception shows how these genealogies were created and reproduced by critics and audiences.

97 Ibid., 68.
In addition to commentary on Jones’ role as the exotic prima donna, the name “Black Patti” invited discussion from the outset. The title foregrounded a combination of race and talent, inviting the listener to make a comparison. Many reviewers granted that, while no one is claiming that she was Patti, she made a decent showing, from varying degrees of “good enough” to, in the words of one complimentary writer, “… if Mme. Jones is not the equal of Adelina Patti, she at least can come nearer than anything the American public has heard.”99 Another saw it as a detraction. “Black Patti, in spite of this ridiculous cognomen, with its suggestion of the dime museum, is a singer to be admired and respected.”100 Jones demurred from her title on the record. However, another clipping in her scrapbook declared that “Her real name is Sissieretta Jones, but she prefers to be called ‘Black Patti.’ She likes the Sissieretta well enough, but there is too much of a drop to the Jones to suit her, so ‘Black Patti’ she is going to be to posterity.”101 Jones’ role as a prima donna—in this case, having a sensitive enough ear to dislike the sound of her middle and last name combined—is evident here. What is less clear is whether Jones told the truth in one story and not in another, whether she was misreported, or whether her feelings changed at some point. Much like Jones’ work with the Troubadours, and her performance of the prima donna, being the Black Patti had both advantages and costs.

The exoticizing descriptions of Jones and the arguments over her sobriquet can be compared to another category of review: authors who insisted on her proximity to whiteness. One Louisville review described, “What people saw was a negress of light color, attired in a very becoming gown, en train, which revealed a superb figure, surmounted by a head and face

bespeaking plainly intelligence and refinement.”  Likewise, in Germany on her 1895 European tour, a writer said, “Our transatlantic-cousins have not exaggerated in comparing their countrywoman with Patti, but the adjective ‘black’ seems to us unnecessarily impolite. Miss Jones is evidently of Negro blood, but not alone of Negro blood. She is a mulatto of bronzed complexion and pleasant expressive features with full lips and high forehead and the bearing of a lady, even to the choice of costume.” These sorts of descriptions appeared in other reviews as well. Like the descriptions of Jones’ “darkness,” the descriptions of her “lightness” were also aesthetic: whatever color she was, she was still portrayed as accomplished and stylish, perhaps even attractive, but “Blackness/beauty” or “Blackness/culture” were set up as implicit opposites.

All of these reviews bring the intersection of race, cultivation, the prima donna, and performance to the forefront, but I would like to emphasize that they cannot be verified. Exposure in photography varies, and neither photographic film nor movies were calibrated for Black skin. Even a modern reader cannot know exactly how Jones looked. The only information available is that both of her parents were considered to be Black, and that there is never any suggestion that Jones could “pass.” Her Blackness was downplayed, not denied.

Jones’ success is evident in the fact that an overwhelming amount of reviews mentioned “culture” or “refinement,” a key requirement for a prima donna’s public persona: most commonly in her early reviews, but ideas of “class” or “good taste” continue to reappear in Troubadour reception. This was emphasized in Jones’ clothes, her manners, and in the fact that she has clearly studied vocal technique and repertoire. The belief that people of African descent were good “natural” musicians was widespread, but training was held to belong in the sphere of

103 “Mme. Sisseretta [sic] Jones,” Indianapolis Freedman, 4 May 1895, 1. Ibid., 89.
intellectual/classical/“white” musicianship. This was what made European classical music a target of African Americans attempting to disprove stereotypes. One reviewer encapsulates the anxiety Jones provoked through her trained voice:

The richness of the negro’s singing voice has long been recognized, and the believe has been expressed that were such a voice cultivated and trained an artist of exceptional worth would be the result. The only doubt as to the success of such an undertaking has arisen from the fear that the process of schooling the voice might rob it of those natural qualities which lend it a peculiar charm.105

This particular writer, representative of many others during the concertizing portion of Jones’ career, credited her with both training and retaining “the peculiar plaintive quality” of her voice. Other reviewers attributed her talent to “natural” musicianship or other signifiers that distanced her from classical music. However, even though listeners could cast doubt on her vocal quality, when Jones performed for presidents or sang the “Inflammatus” from Rossini’s Stabat Mater in front of Dvořák in 1893 no one could doubt the heights which she had reached.

That did not mean, however, that critics were comfortable with the concept of the prima donna as a “non-white” role. Stoever describes this difference in Greenfield’s reception as another example of the sonic color line. Much as critics did to Jones, when they reviewed Greenfield they either emphasized her “white” sound and disembodied her, or emphasized her visual Blackness.106 However, Jones’s successful performance of the prima donna complicated the sonic color line as well as her expected role: if her appearance caused anxiety, the even more fraught and subtle discussion of vocal timbre was yet another site of conflicting conclusions.

These reviews often link their descriptions of visual and aural Blackness or not-Blackness. Charles Nixon, a reviewer for the Inter Ocean, described Jones’ voice thus: “It would be difficult to describe her voice by comparing it with those of other singers. It is an organ of

105 “She Has a Wonderfully Rich Voice,” The Tribune (no city or date), Dr. Carl R. Gross collection.
106 Ibid., 79.
large range, clear and bright in its uppermost tones, rich in the breadth and timbre of its lower ones, almost contralto, all being pervaded with the peculiarly African sympathetic quality, pathetic in its warmth.” 107 The Chicago Evening Herald likewise referred to her “tropical contralto quality.” 108 A reporter in Chattanooga even went so far as to say, “The notes of pathos in [Old Folks at Home] rang true, as they came from the throat of the dusky singer like an echo from the old South.” 109 While many writers merely noted that she sounded “Black,” others used this to suggest that her repertoire was unsuited for her: one reviewer offered the patronizing advice that “Creole songs” would be more suited to her voice than her typical repertoire. 110 In this particular case—criticizing “Comin’ Thru the Rye,” which Adelina Patti also sang—the advice comes off as trying to put Jones into her place, away from white sopranos.

Some white reviewers may have felt it necessary to emphasize Jones’ aural Blackness because she did not actually sound “Black” enough to them, violating the sonic color line. Eidsheim points out that individual style and timbre are much less varied in classical music than in popular music due to the vocal training involved. 111 Jones possessed this training, after studying at the New England Conservatory and with an Italian teacher. Despite that, many people have attempted to locate a “Black voice” in the upbringings of Black singers, whether in learning spirituals or singing in African American churches. However, Eidsheim suggests that “this narrative’s persistence stems from unspoken beliefs about a uniform black culture, that the black body is distinct from the white body and thus possesses a different vocal timbre.” 112

110 Untitled clip from Jones’ scrapbook, Dr. Carl R. Gross collection.
112 Ibid., 646.
with Greenfield, critics had to recognize that Jones unquestionably succeeded at singing operatic repertoire. However, given their limited exposure to Black classical musicians, they found themselves emphasizing her visual Blackness and thus projecting what they expected a Black singer to sound like, expectations formed by minstrel acts. The one objective fact that can be gained from reviews of Jones is that she had a wide range, which can also be inferred from the repertoire she sang. Whether her voice was “unschooled” or “cultivated,” “light” or “rich” or “plaintive,” seems to have been based as much on stereotypes of African American singers as on her actual timbre. Like her skin color, her voice changed depending on the listener.

The reviewers who emphasized Jones’ proximity to whiteness committed a similar collection of fallacies by giving primacy to Jones’ voice rather than her body. Especially in Europe, without the pressures of Jim Crow, there was less of a drive to maintain her Blackness and thus her separateness: rather, audiences wished to preserve European proprietorship over what they viewed as their cultural heritage. Kira Thurman illuminates this in her study of African American musicians in Germany. Tenor Roland Hayes impressed a hostile crowd in 1924 with his command of Lieder, and was deemed by German newspapers “a Negro with a white soul.” He could not merely be a Black man who had mastered German diction and vocal technique. In order for an African American to have mastered a European art form—Lieder in Hayes’ case, or opera in Jones’—they had to somehow “be” white. In Singing Like Germans, Kira Thurman elaborates, “In a musical context, that phrase tacitly affirmed the whiteness of classical music. Behind musicians’ claims to German art song’s universality and pure artistry lies a racialized view of the music itself.” The integrity of the nation-state was as inflexible as the sonic color

113 Ibid., 661.
115 Thurman, Singing Like Germans, 150.
line, causing the German review to chastise “Black” as not merely inaccurate but also “impolite.”

Reviews that focused on the “whiteness” of Jones’ voice also occur in American papers, though they were not as common as those which insisted on her Blackness. The Chicago Mail’s reviewer commented that “Her voice is sweet, clear, and powerful, and she is entirely free from the accent which characterizes her race.” Taking the observation further, a Canadian reviewer said, “Perhaps one of the most remarkable features of her singing consists of the fact that there is no trace in her intonation of the peculiarities usually associated with her race. No one listening with closed eyes would dream for an instant that the notes proceeded from such a pronounced brunette.” This phrase is reminiscent of Greenfield’s reception: Stoever reports that numerous reviewers suggested listening to her with eyes closed, in order to avoid the disconnect between her body and her voice. Jones’ reviewers may not have literally suggested blindfolding the audience as one of Greenfield’s critics did, but the “blindness” remained. Lyman Glover of Chicago even bemoaned that “Her voice is remarkable for scope, agility, and sympathetic qualities, and but for the handicap of color she would undoubtedly jump at once into universal circulation.” Glover seemed to think that Jones’ voice was universal. It was just the inconvenient detail of her Blackness that held her back.

Critics who emphasized Jones’ deracinated voice often held up ideals of “pure” art or “classical” music as universal, sidestepping any risk of having to consider Jones as both Black woman and artist. One review, aside from its title “The Black Diva’s Concert,” did not describe Jones at all, but concluded that her repertoire “when rendered by her seemed to express the

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composers’ ideas to perfection.” An unlabeled clipping stated that “Mrs. Jones is most easy and graceful in her appearance and her soft, dark eyes and expressive face light up with the feeling and intensity of a true artist.” This particular technique minimized Jones physically by focusing on the “artist,” a role even beyond that of the prima donna, whose job was primarily to interpret the composer. Focusing on Jones as an interpreter of the “master,” whether of Foster or of Verdi, minimized her own contribution to a safe level by reducing her agency in the matter.

Framing Jones as vocally “white” caused less friction with the role of the prima donna, but every bit as much with Jones personally, as referenced in the introduction when she said she would never use light makeup to play an operatic role, because it would look as if she were ashamed of being colored. To white onlookers, Jones certainly did not fit on the Black side of the sonic color line because of her success in the role of the diva. But she also refused to allow herself to be whitened. Perhaps this was why she sung “Swanee River” throughout the entirety of her career—since she perceived it as an African American folk song, she emphasized that this was her heritage in the same way that many white sopranos included Scottish folk songs in their performances. This refusal to compromise either her race or what she wanted to sing marked Jones’ entire career. She presented herself on the same stages as minstrelsy, but she used the proximity to highlight that she was performing something different, complicating the attempts of critics to reduce her to another minstrel caricature while drawing on the nearness of the prima donna to the minstrel stereotype in order to carry off her fight for artistic independence.

121 Untitled clip from Jones’ scrapbook, Dr. Carl R. Gross collection.
Curtain Call: The Legacy of Sissieretta Jones

The ambiguities of Jones’ bifurcated career and her reception followed her, further complicating her reception and her legacy as a pioneer of African American opera. From her earliest performances in the 1880s, Jones was heralded in the African American press as a champion of the race. There was little of the equivocation or ambiguity that permeates Jones’ reception in white papers. However, once Jones began to tour with the Troubadours, the tawdry and morally suspect vaudeville stage conflicted with salvific imagery such as Majors’ description of Jones in her early years. The Troubadours were good, “clean,” family fun, a show well worth seeing, but not necessarily role models. Some advocates of musical uplift ignored Jones entirely, whereas others focused on her operatic career and minimized the importance of her vaudeville years. However, others recognized that both Jones’ opera and vaudeville performances, and her performance of the diva, set the stage for later generations of singers.

African American writers heralded Jones as a champion of the race partially by emphasizing her Blackness. This strategy was not new. After one of Elizabeth Greenfield Taylor’s concerts, a review published by Frederick Douglass emphasized that “Her ‘color,’ (by no means unimportant in this country), is that of a ripe chestnut, or a dark brown. She is evidently of complete African descent, and has the features which distinguish our variety of the human family.”123 Greenfield’s dark skin made it clear that her accomplishments were those of an African American woman, rather than of someone who could be considered “partly” or “mostly” white. Jones was sometimes presented the same way, such as in Majors’ description of her as “sufficiently black to claim our identity.”124 Colorism did influence the African American community, but Jones’ role as a Black cultural torchbearer appears to have rendered any public

123 “The Black Swan Again,” Frederick Douglass’ Paper, 18 December 1851.
124 Majors, Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities, 228.
judgement of her skin, hair, or facial features irrelevant. Daughtry quotes a reporter from the Syracuse *Evening Herald* who referred to Jones as “a full-blooded black woman with a large but well shaped mouth; modest and retiring demeanor… Her language is faultless in rhetoric, pronunciation, and accent… In dress she is quiet and modest, yet her gowns are of rich materials.” This same interviewer notes that Jones’s “shapely hands were covered with enough jewels to cause envy in the hearts of all womankind.”

By emphasizing both her Blackness and her financial success, the reporter could present the triumph of an African American woman as a triumph for African Americans as a whole. Another reviewer from the *New York Recorder* referred to Jones in 1889 as “quite dark and very handsome.” Jones’ role as both unquestionably Black and unquestionably successful was paramount.

African American reviewers regularly depicted the Black Patti Troubadours as skilled, talented, and entertaining, though they were never praised as effusively as Jones. A 1910 Baltimore *Afro-American* article heralding the groundbreaking of a new theater subtitled “This One To Be Run for Better Class of Colored Theatre Goers” mentioned Sissieretta Jones among Cole and Johnson, Williams, and other “first-class” attractions. By 1910 Bob Cole, the Johnson brothers, and Williams and Walker had largely proven themselves in the eyes of the Black middle-class public to be respectable actors instead of questionable vaudevillians. The Philadelphia *Tribune* may have hinted at this in their notice that the Troubadours were coming to town in 1914, in which James Austin wrote, “This attraction is conceded by the press and public as being greatly improved over its past seasons.” Either musical comedies were seen as a step above variety acts, or writers and reviewers were more used to viewing musical theater as

“respectable” art. In general, the Afro-American always praised the Troubadours when they came through town, from the beginning of the newspaper’s run up until Jones’ retirement. In 1911, their reviewer called the Troubadours a “classic show,” emphasized, Jones’ standing as a soprano, and concluded that “The show this season is better than ever before, the musical numbers as they deal with the chorus are all new, and are fine examples of the brightest and best in humorous and sentimental music.”129 The advertisement also mentioned that the troupe would perform selections from Lucia di Lammermoor. The Chicago Defender’s perspective was similar: “This show is well deserving of the merit given it. Their performers are fresh and attractive in their appearance, and the comedy, which consists of three acts, is not stale, but fresh and amusing. Black Patti is still the recognized prima donna of the race.”130 Both the Defender and the Afro-American emphasized that Jones was still a prima donna, regardless of the setting.

Despite this praise and acknowledgement, Jones’ involvement with the Troubadours lowered her standing in the eyes of some historians. In Negro Musicians and their Music, first published in 1936 (three years after Jones’ death), Maud Cuney Hare places Jones near the back of the chapter on “Musical Pioneers,” after singers like Marie Selika and Flora Batson, whom Cuney Hare praised more actively. There are two paragraphs on Jones: the first on her career up to 1892, and the second after. The entire run of the Troubadours is summed up thus: “[Jones] was later director of the Black Patti Troubadours, heard mainly in Western and Southern cities for nineteen years. The two principal performers in this company were Bob Cole, as ‘Willie Wayside,’ the tramp, and Billy Johnson, in descriptive songs. ‘The Spanish Review’ was a favorite number.”131 Cuney Hare said nothing about the Kaleidoscope, and little about Jones’ reception. Cuney Hare had a particular vision of quality music and musical uplift, and the

129 “Black Patti Troubadours Will Be Here Next Week,” Afro-American (1893-1988); April 8, 1911; 6.
Troubadours or opera on the vaudeville stage had no place in it.

However, Jones was also re-enlisted in the cause of racial uplift by some of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, who focused on her operatic achievements. In *Black Manhattan*, James Weldon Johnson emphasized the Operatic Kaleidoscope and the fact that Jones only performed during that portion of the show, as well as the fact that the Troubadours were the most successful Black show to play in the South.\footnote{Johnson, *Black Manhattan*, 101.} He also acknowledged that they served as the springboard for Johnson’s collaborator Bob Cole and other performers who unquestionably framed themselves as forwarding the cause of African Americans in entertainment. Similarly, Alain Locke wrote that “We might say that Negro musical comedy made its way by luring its audience with comedy farce and then ambushing and conquering them with music.”\footnote{Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, Inc., 1936), 59.} He credited Bob Cole and Jones together with exemplifying this tactic through the Troubadours. After noting that Jones was “really one of the great soprano voices of her generation,” Locke said, “[Jones] made no other concessions to vaudeville; she sang her operatic and concert repertory, with ensemble numbers with what was one of the first really good stage choruses.”\footnote{Ibid.} Locke emphasized the operatic side of the Troubadours more than Johnson did, but both Locke and Johnson saw that Jones’ concert and vaudeville careers were foundational for later singers and actors.

W.C. Handy gave this same view a unique twist in *Unsung Americans Sung*, an educational anthology he created in which the accomplishments of Black pioneers and standard-bearers were set to music. He seemed to have softened his view from his earlier comments in *Father of the Blues*, as he wrote, “She was at her best in her personal production ‘Black Patti’s Troubadours,’ supported by the inimitable Ernest Hogan, the scholarly Bob Cole, and the
talented composer Billy Johnson.” Over the following pages, Handy set the following text by Chris Smith and Henry Troy for an SATB choir with piano accompaniment.

The great Creator ever thoughtful of man in every place,
Gave him a pair of Prima Donnas of a different race;
To old Madrid Adelina Patti, with her tender tones;
To America our black Patti; Sissieretta Jones.

Black Patti born in Old Virginia and known across the sea,
Poet and Peasant sang her praises, so did Royalty.
She sang “Way Down Upon the Swanee River”
And they starred her as a troubadore [sic]
Black Patti will be remembered,
Who excelled in the op’ra Il Trovatore.

Handy’s revised opinion of Jones reflects both a higher opinion of the legacy of the Troubadours and a renewed focus on Jones’ operatic accomplishments: he may have complimented the Troubadours in the biography, but the last word of his arrangement goes to the opera. His music emphasizes the operatic as well, as well: he quotes “Swanee River” when the text references the title, but the ode is set in strict ¾ time with a homophonic texture, without any traces of syncopation or blues, building to a dramatic finale.

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W.C. Handy included “The Memphis Blues” and other syncopated pieces in *Unsung Americans Sung*, but he reached for the “classical” when he memorialized a woman he saw first and foremost as an opera singer.

This process of memorializing Jones was accelerated by the fact that Jones completely retired from the public eye for the final years of her life. After her retirement in 1916, few articles mention her until her death in 1933. The slew of obituaries in the African American press cast her as a pioneer of the past, emphasizing her long career, her financial success, and the illustrious people for whom she sang. At this point, other prima donnas had followed her, and the Troubadours had launched the careers of Bob Cole, Aida Overton Walker, and other African American singers and entertainers. Scholars Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff suggest that, because of the Troubadours’ longevity and popularity, Jones was able to inspire more people than if she had never left the concert stage, proposing that “elements of her operatic vocal technique, her courtly deportment, and formal stage attire were emulated by the full array of vernacular Queens...
of Song.”\textsuperscript{136} In her 2017 article on blues women, Daphne Duval Harrison describes:

Lavish tiaras, dangling earrings, heavily jeweled gowns, and huge feathered fans lent an air of grandeur that blues audiences admired and appreciated. Classic blues singers personified the beauty and the luxury that most in their audiences could never hope to attain, for beauty was more than skin color, exquisite facial features, or comely figure. Such titles as Empress, Queen, and Mother of the Blues signified the value that classic blues women held for thousands of listeners in cities and towns in the North and South. Their measure of success made their audiences proud.\textsuperscript{137}

Harrison does not connect Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith to Sissieretta Jones or the other “Queens of Song,” but her description bears similarities to Jones’ performance of the diva. Combining this with Jones’ frequent tours of the South, and the fact that many Black vaudevillians and singers had performed a season with the Troubadours, Abbott and Seroff’s assertion seems entirely possible. Even by 1911, Jones had become a standard: J.D. Howard’s \textit{Freeman} review of a younger vaudevillian, Mabel Gant, compared her favorably to “that princess of grace and style, among colored stage women, Black Patti.”\textsuperscript{138} Jones may never have reigned in an opera house, but her performance of the prima donna on the vaudeville stage still had an influence.

\section*{Conclusion}

Whether Jones performed in concert or vaudeville, as an exotic role or in a “white”-coded part, she was unquestionably a prima donna, recognized as such by contemporary reviewers and retrospective accounts. Jones used the power she brought to her position with the Troubadours to control what she would sing and how, choosing to continue to present herself as a quintessential prima donna. She performed with a mix of regal glamour and modest dignity, holding herself above vaudeville antics even as she used the vaudeville stage to reach the broadest audience of


any of the nineteenth-century African American “Queens of Song.” Most white writers coped with this uncertainty and the destabilizing of the prima donna as a “white role” by trying to reduce her to either whiteness or Blackness, and ignoring parts of her presentation that did not fit into their expectations. African American critics, while much more supportive overall, were likewise troubled by her decades-long career in vaudeville. However, Jones used her position and the flexibility of the vaudeville format to refuse to be placed on either side of genre or color lines. This was, perhaps, the greatest strength of Jones’ performance of the prima donna—to carve out an identity for herself and her own performance career in a time and place in which both her race and her gender restricted the choices she could make: merging genres and taking advantage of ambiguity to find a place to sing.
Chapter 4
“Baskets and Traps”: Black Singers and the Operatic Canon

Introduction

In 1903, the Washington, D.C.-based Negro Music Journal proudly advertised the Drury Opera Company’s production of Aida, giving the performance front-page billing for five monthly issues in a row. Theodore Drury had assembled African American principals from the ranks of his own voice students and other local talent, and the Journal considered it an event not to be missed. Drury’s appeal read, in part,

I have the pleasure to present to the public this season Aida, a grand opera in four acts by G. Verdi. This being one of the greatest of the Italian operas I feel that I will have as I have had heretofore, the entire support of the musical public. The opera I consider to be especially adapted to my use as regards the story as it deals with Ethiopians and Egyptians. The story of Aida is supposed to belong to the time of the Pharaohs and its action is located at Memphis and Thebes…

Drury considered Aida “especially adapted” to an African American cast. Throughout the twentieth century, other Black singers (and white directors and producers) felt the same. When Jules Bledsoe and Caterina Jarboro performed with white casts in 1932 and 1933, becoming the first male and female African American artists to do so in the United States, it was in Aida. The National Negro Opera Company debuted in 1941 with Aida. When Robert McFerrin became the first African American male singer at the Metropolitan Opera in 1955, he once again performed in Aida. A 1999 documentary on African American singers is titled Aida’s Brothers and Sisters:

1 “The Theodore Drury Opera Co. Will Present…” Negro Music Journal 1 no. 5(February 1903), inside front cover.
Black Voices in Opera. However, Aida’s prominence was not without its downsides. Mezzo-soprano Grace Bumbry explained in 1977, “I prefer to sing Aida [as opposed to Amneris] because I don’t have to go through the whole hassle of that make-up. I mean, putting on that light makeup [Bumbry used “white” makeup to play Amneris] and then I’m the last one at the opera house leaving, and the first one getting there.”\(^2\) However, she also complained that “Carmen is the same sickness for black mezzos as Aida is for sopranos.”\(^3\) Tenor George Shirley was just as blunt when discussing soprano Florence Cole Talbert, the first Black woman to perform Aida in Europe in 1927 alongside an otherwise-white cast. He said in 1997, after finding a recording of her, “This was not an Aida voice. She had high notes, but certainly not the heft that Aida requires. Nevertheless, she was black; her debut had to be as Aida.”\(^4\)

The Ethiopian princess is one manifestation of an enduring tension for Black opera singers. Aida has been a major gateway role for African Americans both in all-Black companies and on predominantly white stages. Yet the role can also become a box: cast yet again because of one’s appearance rather than voice type. Selika, Carmen, Porgy, Bess, and all of the others—singers chafed, and still chafe, at the typecasting and the stereotypes, even as they have done what is necessary to get a chance to sing. As Langston Hughes observed, when Sidney Poitier reversed his initial refusal and appeared in the 1959 movie of Porgy and Bess, “Nobody faulted him much. Blacks are familiar with baskets that are also traps.”\(^5\)

These are not the only roles which have an outsize representation in the history of

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\(^4\) Wallace McClain Cheatham, Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 104.

African American opera singers. Verdi’s *La Traviata, Il Trovatore*, and *Rigoletto* provided three heroines, and numerous baritones took on the role of *Rigoletto*’s title character and *Faust*’s Mephistopheles. The verismo operas *Tosca, I Pagliacci*, and *Cavalleria Rusticana* are also unusually prominent in the efforts of the Drury Company, the Aeolian Opera Company, and other ventures. It is obvious what made Aida an “appropriate” role for a Black woman. But why Violetta or Tonio the clown?

I propose that all of these roles were possible at this point in history because of the interlocked nature of the “basket and the trap.” Black performers had to combat public perception and naked racism in order to perform publicly on the operatic stage. One way of gaining access to the operatic stage and its professional legitimacy was to pick parts from canonic operas that hewed close to “acceptable” (potentially stereotypical) roles for Black men and women. Nina Sun Eidsheim uses another analogy to depict the ambivalence of these roles: “Which door (was it really the front door?) had been opened for [Marian] Anderson to step through when she was only being engaged to portray the other?”6 Mephistopheles, Rigoletto, and Tonio, for example, potentially resonate with stereotypes of Black male brutishness and treachery, and centuries-old associations of Blackness with the heathenish or the outright diabolical. Violetta, the ill-fated courtesan, mirrored the “tragic mulatta” of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and a myriad of nineteenth-century antislavery works—her inevitable doom was always played for maximum drama, but also intended to garner the audience’s sympathy. Though the operatic roles are “unmarked” or “white,” their literary geneses and evolving cultural resonances left them positioned in ways that made it easier for Black singers to bridge the gap.

The evidence for these strategies on the part of Black companies and singers is just as

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complex and layered. This is about a level of discourse most often beneath the spoken and printed word, since my subjects usually do not openly say why they are performing certain repertoire or roles. These are the basic assumptions that underlie reviews, or choices of repertoire, or producers’ and audiences’ senses of who “fits” a certain role: the assumptions and attitudes that shaped the lived experience. For example, many nineteenth-century American operagoers would have attended *La Traviata*, in which a woman who cannot be with her lover due to her past dies tragically, also having attended many theatrical melodramas in which the “tragic mulatta,” who cannot be with her lover due to her heritage, also dies tragically. While I use reviews, interviews, and period sources, these concepts of the “basket and the trap,” or the mediation through which “white” roles become accessible to Black singers, are rarely stated outright: a reference, such as Drury made, to an obviously exotic role such as Aida being “suitable” for an African American performer is the extent of the discourse.

Even so, though there is rarely an explicit explanation for why a role was offered or an opera was chosen, the effect is still unmistakable. In the segregated world of opera in the early twentieth century, and the barely-less-segregated world of opera at midcentury, operatic audiences saw Black singers performing roles that were exotic, antagonistic, or some type of outsider who lay at the boundaries of whiteness. They were much less likely to play romantic leads, idealized masculine heroes, clever comics, or any figure who embodied idealized whiteness. The Black sopranos in this chapter often played Aida or Carmen, but not Isolde or the Countess. Black tenors did not take up Siegfried’s sword or Figaro’s insubordinate patter. The patterns in which operas are staged with Black singers make it clear that there was a race-based logic behind the choices of managers and producers, whether conscious or not.

Thus, I turn to contextual evidence and analysis in order to show how these performers fit
into contemporary contexts, within and beyond the world of opera. I also draw upon scholarship that has examined how Black singers and companies engaged with canonic repertoire. This includes Naomi André in *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*, and André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor with their contributors in *Blackness in Opera*. Beyond these studies, I use scholarship which analyzes works outside my own purview for a model. Juanita Karpf’s “An Opportunity to Rise: Reinterpreting *Esther, the Beautiful Queen*” analyzes how African Americans reinterpreted oratorio through their costumed stagings of the Biblical story of Esther, and adds to my interpretation of how operas, as well as oratorios, can be used to depict history. I also draw on Ralph Locke’s work on exoticism: his “*Aida* and Nine Readings of Empire,” in particular, helps frame the process by which a work takes on multivalent meaning, which is as true for *Carmen* and *La Traviata* as it is for Verdi’s Egyptian epic.

However, the most valuable perspective in understanding how Black singers negotiated canonic opera roles comes from singers who knew and lived in these roles. They knew how they learned to “fit” them, and how directors and audiences saw them. I draw on numerous collections of interviews with singers such as George Shirley, Simon Estes, Leontyne Price, Grace Bumbry, and Shirley Verrett. All of these singers belong to the generation after Bledsoe and Jarboro, after Marian Anderson had performed at the Met, and they worked along the spectrum from entirely Black companies to being the only person of color onstage. Though they were a generation or two removed from my focus period, they described longstanding, enduring ideologies of race and performance that had weighed just as heavily upon their predecessors. Leontyne Price was able to speak out about her career and her experiences as Aida, and audiences today can still engage with recordings of her performances. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Marie Selika, Sissieretta Jones, and Jules Bledsoe left few if any records of their voices or of their thoughts on
these roles: the work of this chapter is to attempt to reclaim something through understanding how they paved the way for the singers who followed them.

This chapter focuses on how Black singers and companies negotiated canonic operas, whether they were already “Black,” such as Aida; could align in the Euro-American imagination with some sort of “Other,” in the case of Carmen or Cavalleria rusticana; or seemingly “white,” such as La traviata or Faust. My principal omission is Porgy and Bess, which the Gershwin estate stipulates must be performed by a Black cast. I am also not considering the premieres of operas by Black composers, or operas such as Gruenberg’s The Emperor Jones which quickly dropped into obscurity, though these works appear elsewhere in this dissertation.7 This is the story of opera’s household names. Aida. Traviata. Faust. Of stories that have been sung thousands of times, on stages across the world. In her analysis of Carmen, André proposes three rubrics which guide this discussion: Who is in the story? Who speaks? Who interprets the story?8 When an African American singer takes on the role, who is in the story and who speaks—or sings—changes, and this is about what happens when they make these roles their own.

**Canon Fodder: Black Companies and Their Repertoire**

The performance choices of African and African American opera companies through the first half the twentieth century shed particular light on the work these operas do for Black companies. Figure 4.1 collects the operas performed by eleven Black American groups and one South African group over a century of performances.

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7 See especially Chapter 5: “‘His Brilliant and Manly Voice’: Jules Bledsoe and Opera.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company (City)</th>
<th>Years of Operation</th>
<th>Repertoire (as known)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colored American Opera Company (Washington, D.C.)</td>
<td>1873</td>
<td>Eichberg, <em>The Doctor of Alcantara</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freeman Opera Company (Denver, CO, and Chicago)</td>
<td>1891-1893</td>
<td>Freeman, <em>Ephelia</em></td>
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<td>Freeman, <em>The Martyr</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Grand Creole and Colored Opera Company (New York)</td>
<td>1891</td>
<td>Verdi, <em>Il Trovatore</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afro-American Opera Company (Chicago)</td>
<td>1896</td>
<td>Planquette, <em>Les cloches de Corneville</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theodore Drury Opera Company (Washington, D.C., East Coast)</td>
<td>1900-1910</td>
<td>Bizet, <em>Carmen</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>Gomez, <em>Il Guarany</em></td>
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<td>Gounod, <em>Faust</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leoncavallo, <em>Il Pagliacci</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mascagni, <em>Cavalleria Rusticana</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Verdi, <em>Aida</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negro Grand Opera Company (New York)</td>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>Works of Harry Lawrence Freeman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aeolian Opera Company (New York)</td>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Gruenberg, <em>The Emperor Jones</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mascagni, <em>Cavalleria Rusticana</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detroit Negro Opera Company (Detroit)</td>
<td>1938-1940s</td>
<td>Bizet, <em>Carmen</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leoncavallo, <em>I Pagliacci</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mascagni, <em>Cavalleria Rusticana</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Verdi, <em>Aida</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Negro Opera Company (Pittsburgh, nationwide)</td>
<td>1941-1962</td>
<td>Gounod, <em>Faust</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Verdi, <em>Aida</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Verdi, <em>La Traviata</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White, <em>Ouanga!</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chicago Negro Opera Guild (Chicago)</td>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Verdi, <em>Aida</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dra Mu Opera Company (Philadelphia)</td>
<td>1940s-1950s</td>
<td>Bizet, <em>Carmen</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Gounod, <em>Faust</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mascagni, <em>Cavalleria Rusticana</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Verdi, <em>Aida</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>White, <em>Ouanga!</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eoan Group (Cape Town, South Africa)</td>
<td>1956-1975</td>
<td>Bizet, <em>Carmen</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Donizetti, <em>L’Elisir D’Amore</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Leoncavallo, <em>I Pagliacci</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mascagni, <em>Cavalleria Rusticana</em></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Puccini, <em>La Bohème</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Puccini, <em>Madame Butterfly</em></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Fig. 4.1: Selected Repertoire of Black Companies

The list of operas suggests a “core repertoire” performed by Black companies. Verdi’s Aida and Bizet’s Carmen head the list. Also common: Faust, La Traviata, I Pagliacci, and Cavalleria Rusticana. There are some exceptions. The Eoan Group, much longer-lived and with a busy schedule, had a larger repertoire of canonic operas. Other choices reflect groups’ personalities. Many of the singers in the Colored American Opera Company had studied under Julius Eichberg at Boston Conservatory, and were probably familiar with his work. Clarence Cameron White worked with Dra-Mu and the National Negro Opera Company to get his Haitian epic Ouanga! performed in the 1940s and 1950s. The Aeolian Opera Company chose The Emperor Jones as a vehicle for star Jules Bledsoe, who had succeeded with the role in Europe. These patterns suggest two main performance strategies: on the one hand, “standard” repertoire, and on the other premieres or less well-known works with a specific connection to the group.

There are as many practical reasons as there are artistic or activist motivations for African American singers and companies to produce popular operas. Figure 4.2 contains the twenty-five most-performed operas at the Metropolitan Opera between 1883 and 2015. I have used the Metropolitan Opera here as a barometer of public taste—throughout the twentieth century, the Met has been the gold standard in American opera, and its outreach efforts, from radio and TV to

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movie theaters and streaming, mean that the Met’s standard repertoire serves as shorthand for the operatic canon in the American imagination. The operas which were often performed by African American singers or companies are in bold.10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Opera</th>
<th>Composer</th>
<th>Number of Performances</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>La bohème</td>
<td>Puccini</td>
<td>1,259</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Aida</td>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>1,132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Bizet</td>
<td>985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>La Traviata</td>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>984</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Tosca</td>
<td>Puccini</td>
<td>937</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Rigoletto</td>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>863</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Madama Butterfly</td>
<td>Puccini</td>
<td>855</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Faust</td>
<td>Gounod</td>
<td>752</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>I Pagliacci</td>
<td>Leoncavallo</td>
<td>712</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cavalleria rusticana</td>
<td>Mascagni</td>
<td>671</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Il trovatore</td>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>637</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Lohengrin</td>
<td>Wagner</td>
<td>618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Il barbiere di Siviglia</td>
<td>Rossini</td>
<td>607</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Lucia di Lammermoor</td>
<td>Donizetti</td>
<td>591</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Don Giovanni</td>
<td>Mozart</td>
<td>538</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Die Walküre</td>
<td>Wagner</td>
<td>537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Tannhäuser</td>
<td>Wagner</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Le nozze di Figaro</td>
<td>Mozart</td>
<td>458</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Tristan und Isolde</td>
<td>Wagner</td>
<td>455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Die Zauberflöte</td>
<td>Mozart</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg</td>
<td>Wagner</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Der Rosenkavalier</td>
<td>Strauss</td>
<td>384</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Romeo et Juliette</td>
<td>Gounod</td>
<td>329</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Otello11</td>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>325</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Un ballo in maschera12</td>
<td>Verdi</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 4.2: Twenty Most-Performed Operas at the Metropolitan Opera, 1883-2015

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11 Despite Othello’s position as one of the classical Black roles, Verdi’s Otello has never been performed by a Black man at the Metropolitan.

12 Though Ulrica in Ballo was Marian Anderson’s debut—the first African American to sing at the Met—the essentially ceremonial part has never been a major vehicle for other African American singers.
A glance reveals that two of the major vehicles for African American performers, *Aida* and *Carmen*, were second and third on the Met’s list. Almost all of the operas in this chapter, with the notable exception of Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine*, are top-10 Metropolitan standbys. At the simplest level, popular operas are pragmatic choices for amateur, semi-professional, or small-scale opera companies, whether Black or primarily white. From the Colored American Opera Company in the 1870s to the National Negro Opera Company and South Africa’s Eoan Group in the 1940s and 1950s, “shoestring budget” fails to capture the precarity of Black opera ventures. Jules Bledsoe’s Aeolian Opera Company only lasted for a single night’s performance and never did end up paying the chorus. These groups already struggled to interest audiences in their endeavors: a popular, well-known opera might make the difference between success and permanent failure. Even the premieres of operas by composers of color suggest a mix of activism and practical capitalism: a new or little-known opera by a Black composer would draw attention from the Black press and appeal to Black audiences, thus further distinguishing the company.

But, in addition to these practical concerns, some writers and singers specifically mapped out a complex color line. In 1933, in the first flush of Caterina Jarboro and Jules Bledsoe’s *Aida* triumph at the Hippodrome, a writer for the *New York Amsterdam News* prophesied:

> Some day in the not too distant future Negroes will be called upon to take leading roles with the Metropolitan and with other grand opera companies. Color lines will be erased and Negroes will sing not only in operas depicting darker peoples, but also in Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*, Alfano’s *Resurrection*, and many others. We hail Jarboro and Bledsoe as pioneers blazing a trail for others who are often asked to sing spirituals only. We salute Salmaggi as a true impresario who puts art above all else.13

Here, Wagner is held up as the epitome of what has not been reached. Singer Camilla Williams, whose career took off in the 1940s and 1950s, perceived similar limitations to the roles in which she could be cast.

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I was never given a chance to sing a Mozart role until 1951 as Ilia in the first New York complete performance of *Idomeneo*.... I would have loved to have sung the Countess and Susanna in *Le nozze de Figaro*. Mozart was so right for my voice. But they were afraid to put me in a white wig and whiter make-up. Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly* and Mimi (*La Bohème*), Leoncavallo’s Nedda (*Pagliacci*), Gounod’s Marguerite (*Faust*), as well as Menotti’s Annina (*The Saint of Bleecker Street*) apparently were not quite as white.  

Both Williams and the *New York Amsterdam News* writer lay out a spectrum of theatrical roles. Characters who were non-white (or less “white,” as Americans at the time regarded Italians) or lower class/peasant characters were more “acceptable” to audiences than lords and ladies or the Austro-German supposed masterworks of Wagner and Mozart (who, despite writing opera in Italian, was claimed as a part of the Teutonic tradition.) Both of these composers were integral to the canons of symphony and orchestra as well as opera, and performing a Mozart or Wagner opera entailed engaging not just with the tradition of operatic culture, but with that of classical music as a whole. However, if legacies of the composers presented one problem, the roles themselves presented another. Wagner’s characters were mythological archetypes: larger-than-life depictions of powerful masculinity or idealized womanhood. The gentry who populated Mozart’s works were mortal, but counts and countesses were no more “realistic” roles for Black performers than the god-heroes of Wagner.

**Intermezzo: What About Wagner?**

In the annals of Black companies, Wagner is conspicuous by his absence. The primarily African American Douglass High School in Maryland performed *The Flying Dutchman* in 1929, and Wagner pieces have featured on solo recitals, but I have found no performances by

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professional or semi-professional companies. Wagner’s corpus sits at the intersection of two major currents in this dissertation: high art and race. By the 20th century, Wagner was the pinnacle of high culture, beloved by the “high art” advocates of the symphonic tradition as much as by opera enthusiasts. Wagner’s philosophy and his recreation of Norse/Germanic mythology, especially in his cosmos-spanning Ring tetralogy, made him as attractive to intellectuals as he was to opera buffs. Wagner is also steeped in idealized whiteness, due to his own antisemitism and the well-known association of his legacy with the Nazi party and German nationalism. The history of Black engagement with Wagner—from the writings of DuBois to Grace Bumbry’s Venus debut at Bayreuth to Jessye Norman’s performances—emphasized just how complicated these relationships were, as is opera’s relationship with both whiteness and with Black stars.

W.E.B. DuBois framed Wagner as a model for educated African Americans in his books and newspaper articles. DuBois was a lifelong devotee of Wagner’s operas, dating from his graduate studies in Berlin (1892-94). The influence of Wagner on his thought emerges as early as his 1903 The Souls of Black Folk. The penultimate chapter, “Of the Coming of John,” is the only fictional chapter in the book, preceding the climactic “Of the Sorrow Songs.” “Of the Coming of John” chronicles the ultimately tragic story of John Jones who leaves Georgia for an education in New York. Wagner’s Lohengrin serves as a structural pillar of the story. First, the opera is a transformative experience in New York, cut short when John is evicted from his seat by a white man from his hometown, also named John. Then, at the end, John Jones kills the white John, who was attacking his sister. As John waits for the inevitable lynch mob, he once again turns his mind to Lohengrin. DuBois was even more explicit in his later writing. In 1936, he wrote a column entitled “Opera and the Negro Problem” in which he admitted potential opposition: “I

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can see a certain type of not unthoughtful American Negro saying to himself: ‘Now just what has Bayreuth and opera got to do with starving Negro farm tenants in Arkansas or black college graduates searching New York for a job?’” Instead, he made his case for Wagner as an analogue for the African American experience: struggling, in debt, misunderstood, at one point a political exile, and concluded, “Wagner tells of human life as he lived it, and no human being, white or black, can afford not to know them if he would know life.”

It might read as strange to a modern audience, for a Black man to claim kinship with Wagner. But the three decades from “Of the Coming of John” to “Opera and the Negro Problem” show that, for DuBois, Wagner was an integral part of the world stage he wished to claim.

DuBois was not alone in this glorification of Wagner, and the amount of support for the German composer in Black artistic communities shows the breadth of his cultural shadow. Theodore Drury proclaimed Wagner his ultimate goal with the Drury Opera Company, and Harry Lawrence Freeman’s massive operatic works led him to be dubbed “The Black Wagner”—his final project, a “Zulu tetralogy,” is clearly modelled after the Ring. The promotion of Wagner from both educated Black and white sources seems to have had an effect: African American newspapers reported HBCUs and Black musical and literary clubs holding Wagner evenings, including lectures on his life and works and musical excerpts. Wagner was the epitome of the sort of cultural goods to which African American proponents of racial uplift aspired.

But, while Marian Anderson and Roland Hayes both occasionally included Wagner arias on their concert programs, the enthusiasm did not extend to stage performances by all-Black companies.

This barrier was not broken until after the central period of this dissertation, and Grace

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Bumbry’s casting as Venus in *Tannhäuser* at the 1961 Bayreuth festival only illuminates the tensions between Wagner and Black interpreters. Bayreuth’s color barrier had nearly been overcome before by Luranah Aldridge, the daughter of famed African American Shakespearian Ira Aldridge. Luranah sang several *Ring* cycles in London, and was even asked to Bayreuth in order to play one of the Valkyries in the second complete *Ring* performed in the theater (in 1896), but ended up unable to perform due to illness. However, it does bear noting that Luranah was fairly light-skinned, though she did not attempt to “pass”—her father’s theatrical reputation and her fair complexion allowed her to sidestep racial prohibitions without breaking them. On the other hand, in Grace Bumbry’s case, Wieland Wagner emphasized her Blackness and exoticism. Kira Thurman argues that this was central to his goals of separating Bayreuth aesthetically and politically from its recent Nazi history. This was, unsurprisingly, criticized.

Thurman translates a telling quotation from the *Deutscher Anzeiger*:

[Venus] is neither Cleopatra nor the “Queen of Sheba,” nor the Ethiopian Aida, nor Meyerbeer’s “L’Africaine,” [roles] in which one is—without reservation—entitled to have a brown to coffee-brown skin color. But this black Venus is a contradiction, one diametrically opposite to what the idea of the work stands for. That is, unless one casts the entire opera with Negroes, as was done in Gershwin’s “Porgy and Bess.”

The author seems to be implying that casting a Black woman as the ideal of feminine beauty in a cast which included white performers is incongruous. Just as confounding, however, is the way Wieland Wagner ultimately staged the role. Venus only appears at the beginning and the end of the opera—the role is essentially ceremonial, much like Marian Anderson’s Ulrica at the Metropolitan. She is also an antagonistic figure, the symbol of carnal delights pitted against the saintly love of Elisabeth. In this production, Bumbry was entirely covered in gold paint, reigning

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in a dark cavern amid red stage light. According to Thurman, Wagner’s goal was “to present
eroticism in a repulsive way.” Once more, a breakthrough role was a basket and a trap: a major
stage performance at Bayreuth gained, but in a way that portrayed a Black woman as menacing
and “heathen” in her sexuality. There was no question of Bumbry playing the Madonna-like
Elisabeth, the sacrificial Senta, or the idealized Isolde.

Black performers have since performed most of the roles in the Wagnerian canon, though
not without struggles. Thurman notes the continued trouble that African American men had in
German circles compared to African American women: for example, after Grace Bumbry
became the first Black woman to perform at the Bayreuth Opera Festival in 1961, Simon Estes
did not become the first Black man to do the same until 1978, in the titular role in The Flying
Dutchman. Estes and Jessye Norman became two of the most high-profile Black singers to
embrace the role of Wagnerian. However, making a career as a Wagner specialist requires a
specialized voice, strong enough to project over a massive orchestra for the duration of a four-
hour opera. Doing so for any length of years is even more difficult. Leontyne Price, for example,
recorded some Wagner, but freely admitted that that wasn’t her strong suit. More recently,
bass-baritone Eric Owens played Alberich at the Metropolitan Opera, and Wotan at the Chicago
Lyric. There are Black singers performing this repertoire. What is more difficult to disentangle is
how race interacts with whose voices are suited to sing Wagner, which companies have the
resources to put on his operas, and how often they do so—for example, the shorter and more

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22 Kira Thurman, “A History of Black Musicians in Germany and Austria, 1870-1961: Race, Performance, and
Reception,” (Ph. D. diss, University of Rochester, 2013), 295.
23 Jessye Norman has played Sieglinde (Die Walküre), Kundry (Parsifal), Elisabeth (Tannhäuser), Isolde (Tristan
und Isolde) and Elsa (Lohengrin). Estes has sung King Mark (Tristan und Isolde) Wotan (Die Walküre) and
Amfortas (Parsifal).
accessible Tannhäuser and Lohengrin play a bigger part in this chronology than the Ring Cycle, though the Ring is the crown jewel of Wagnerian achievement. I have not found contemporary discussions of the Ring and the potential of Black cast members, but the New York Amsterdam News’s reference to Tristan as a future possibility, the controversy around Bumbry as Venus, and Simon Estes’ eventual casting as a damned ghost in The Flying Dutchman suggest that it would not even have been taken seriously as a possibility. Luranah’s role as a subordinate Valkyrie in London is as the most notable Black Wagnerian role before the mid-twentieth century, and her case has its own special considerations.

This is not a neat summary of Wagnerian practice shaped into a tale of triumph or a continued condemnation of structural racism. It is messy, unsettled, and still very much being written, but the shadow Wagner casts on race and the operatic canon is too prominent to bypass.

Queens and “Gypsies”: “Colored” Opera Roles

Aida has haunted this dissertation from its origin. I knew I would have to address Verdi’s Egyptian epic, and the weight it bore on the careers of Black singers: Sissieretta Jones, who never so much as performed an aria from the role, was nonetheless referred to as “a veritable Aida in Parisian dress.” Aida and her father Amonasro are two of the most high-profile explicitly Black characters in the canon, in one of the most well-known and oft-performed works. In Aida, the title character is an Ethiopian princess enslaved in Egypt, hiding her identity for her own safety. These identities are defined by the libretto, but further inflected with nineteenth-century racial categories. Ancient Egyptians (as opposed to contemporary Egyptians)

25 “Masonic Temple Theater,” The Critic (no city or date), Dr. Carl R. Gross collection.

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were considered the immediate predecessors of Greece, and thus part of “white” culture.26

Ethiopian, on the other hand, was both a specific nationality and a shorthand for “Black”: minstrelsy was sometimes referred to as “Ethiopian opera.”

Drury, Bumbry, and Shirley all explained, in one way or another, that it made perfect sense for audiences to see Black women in a role that was ostensibly written as Black. The same can be said for other “exotic” heroines, as defined by Ralph Locke in his tongue-in-cheek summary of the “paradigmatic exotic opera plot” and the stereotypes it promulgates:

Young, tolerant, brave, possibly naïve or selfish, white-European tenor-hero intrudes (at risk of disloyalty to his own people and to colonialist ethic, with which he is identified) into mysterious brown- or (less often) black-skinned colonized territory represented by female dancers of irresistible allure and by deeply affectionate, sensitive lyric soprano, thereby incurring wrath of brutal, intransigent priest or tribal chieftain (bass or sometimes baritone) and latter’s blindly obedient chorus of male savages.27

This plot provides one explanation as to why African American sopranos and mezzos so often play, not only Aida, but Carmen and Cio-Cio San: a conflation of all “exotic” identities into mere non-whiteness, an all-encompassing “Other.” When said woman of color is the only one in the cast, it also leaves racial divisions intact and further reified on the stage.

_Aida_ has developed this particular multivalence for both singers and audiences. Ralph Locke maps its layered reception through a list of potential interpretations in his article “Aida and Nine Readings of Empire.” The opera could be a fantasy, a specific allegory for Italian liberation from the Hapsburgs, a commentary on European colonialism, or a generally applicable story about oppression.28 Locke’s own interpretation of the work—that it exists in a tension between the scenario requested by the Egyptian khedive, who commissioned it as a spectacle of

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26 See chapter 1 of this dissertation: the progression from Egypt to Greece, then Rome, and finally Europe was a common feature of mainstream music histories.
Egyptian glory, and Verdi’s sympathy with peoples seeking self-determination—suggests that this multivalence might have been part of the work from its conception.\(^{29}\) Leontyne Price claimed Aida as “a very personal role,” not just because of her skin color, but because of the inherent power and nobility that drew Amneris and Radames to the character despite her captivity.\(^{30}\) Price and other singers engaged with a role that could be both blessing and curse, that simultaneously attracted, empowered, and repelled.

Looking at the companies who performed these exoticizing operas and the singers who voiced their principal characters helps to elucidate the work these operas did for Black performers, their career consequences, and how these stories could be re-shaped to serve the needs of singers and audiences of color. *Aida* is at once a relic of colonialism, and potentially also a story which encourages the audience to sympathize with the oppressed. The Ethiopian princess has been a breakthrough role for Black sopranos, and it was important for other African Americans to see these singers on the stage, but some of these singers wished they would be allowed a wider range of roles. All of these can be true at once, and the specific solutions and balancing acts were different for different singers, different companies, different productions, and different decades.

**African Queens: L’Africaine and Aida**

Two principal operas—Meyerbeer’s 1865 *L’Africaine* and Verdi’s 1871 *Aida*, each named for their African royal heroines—are at the root of the connections between the African queen and the prima donna. Soprano Marie Williams took the soubriquet “Selika” from *L’Africaine*’s title character, Sissieretta Jones’s admirers suggested Aida and Selika as potential

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 163.

Metropolitan debuts in the same breath, and Jules Bledsoe counted *Aida’s* Amonasro and *L'Africaine’s* Nelusko among his roles. Richard Wagner made the connection between character and role before the premiere of *L'Africaine*, and was unsurprisingly alarmed by the potential. He wrote to his sister, “But Johanna—for whom I wrote Elsa—makes herself black and brings Meyerbeer’s *L'Africaine* to the world.” Wagner viewed this as a corruption of Johanna Wagner (no relation), who had sung Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*. He saw her as a white soprano being “blackened” by the character of the African queen, even if she would not have performed the role in blackface, as the singer at the premiere, Marie Sasse, did not.

![Marie Sasse](image)

*Fig. 4.3: Marie Sasse in costume as Selika*

Black singers, however, found different significance in associating themselves with this role. An African American woman, without any civil or social rights to speak of in the late

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31 Richard Wagner to Franziska Wagner, 13 October 1852. In de la Cruz, “Giacomo Meyerbeer’s *L’Africaine* And the End of Grand Opera,” 164.
nineteenth or early twentieth century, could inhabit a noble character onstage, associating herself with mythical royalty and with the aristocratic mien of the operatic tradition. In fact, Daphne Brooks suggests that the various African American “queens of song” in the late nineteenth century might have resonated with African American associations with Biblical or African royalty during this same period. Sometimes this discourse was satirical: In the Williams and Walker 1903 Black-cast comedy *In Dahomey*, the song “Evah Dahkey is a King” treats the subject satirically, claiming African royal titles as the last resort for failed social climbers. However, star Bert Williams was influenced by his copy of *Africa*, John Ogilby’s 1670 collection of travelers’ narratives, which described the sophisticated kingdoms of Africa. Williams was inspired by this book and its narrative of a proud Black past to create the show, and he claimed—only partly in jest—that he thought he could prove that “Every Pullman porter is the descendant of a king.” When Amelia Tilghman performed the title role in a costumed production of William Bradbury’s oratorio *Esther, the Beautiful Queen*, she was part of a long tradition of African Americans associating themselves onstage with Biblical heroes and peoples. Marie Selika made the connection from singers and historical figures to operatic characters explicit: all were part of the grand sweep of a new approach to history in which people of African descent would control their own narratives.

*Aida*, much more widely performed than *L’Africaine*, takes up this mantle of Black royalty and operatic excellence. When companies such as Drury’s or the National Negro Opera Company cast Black singers as both Egyptian and Ethiopian characters, they insisted upon a completely Black antiquity. They claimed Egypt, one of the “cradles of civilization,” as their

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own, at a time when Egyptian civilization was considered the ancestor of modern-day Europe. A Black artist or two playing Aida or Amonasro was “verisimilitude.” An entirely Black-cast Aida turned the contemporary White understanding of the world on its head.

Fig. 4.4: Florence Cole Talbert, Caterina Jarboro, and Leontyne Price as Aida.

Aida’s canonic status was as important as its characters and mythos to African American companies who adopted it. Drury may have called it “especially suited for my use,” but the contributors to the Negro Music Journal did not focus on the resonances of the plot. Rather, Robert W. Carter is more typical. He writes, “Aida is a masterpiece of a great Italian master; the poetry is beautiful, and the music exquisite.” Carter focused on the perceived value of the work, and the value of a mixed-raced cast and audience perceiving that African Americans appreciated it as much as white audiences. In this particular instance, focus on race came from white reviewers. Kristen Turner writes that, in 1906, “The New York Times, which had completely ignored the company save for a short concert announcement in 1905, printed a review of Aida that sought to minimize the importance of the event by treating it as a display

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36 Ibid., 4.
devoid of artistic meaning. The article centered on the appearance of the singers.”37 Avoiding focus on race was part of the strategy to be taken seriously as artists: the Times’s insistence on color was a way of defining Drury’s Aida as a curiosity or a spectacle. Aida may have been seen as an “Ethiopian opera,” but that did not mean that companies wanted to hire Black singers for the role. Kira Thurman cites a contest in 1925, in which Italian singer Edoardo Ferrari-Fontana staged a competition at the Metropolitan Opera to find a Black woman to play Aida. Over two hundred fifty women responded, including Muriel Rahn and Florence Cole Talbert, both of whom went on to have operatic careers. The Metropolitan cancelled the auditions.38

However, other Black singers and audiences immediately claimed power in the role. In 1927, the African-American New York Amsterdam News described Florence Cole Talbert’s victory as Aida in Italy, linking her interpretation of the role to the African American experience. “Her voice soared and sank and soared again, till all the pent-up suffering of a race throbbed forth in the words ‘Sempre Soffrir,’ ending with a long sob.”39 The writer also insisted that Talbert’s success was not just due to an inborn affinity for the role. “It is harder to become a successful opera singer than it is to become a United States Senator, and when a colored woman reaches the operatic goal one cannot speak too highly of her talent and force of will.”40 Also in the 1920s, Nora Douglas Holt wrote that “Aida yet lives as one of the most gorgeous of operas, and with all the prejudicial rantings, this Ethiopian princess remains the adored of the fair-skinned captain and most important character of the play.”41 She insisted on both the canonic value of the work and the importance of seeing a Black character front and center.

38 Kira Thurman, Singing Like Germans, 6.
40 Ibid.
While baritone roles often lack the dramatic prestige of *prima donna* characters, *Aida* and *L’Africaine* each put forth a Black male secondary character in addition to their Black soprano heroines. Nelusko’s role in *L’Africaine* parallels Amonasro’s—devoted to the heroine and actively opposed to the tenor’s suit. Nelusko is also a character who can shift from a villain to a hero, depending on staging and historical perspective. Meyerbeer himself described him in an early draft as, “A mixture of evil, irony, and hatred against anything Christian, as well as superstitious veneration, a boundless devotion, and an intense love for the royal blood of Selica.” – what Gabriela Gomes de Cruz refers to as “the western vocabulary of Orientalia” and “dark Otherness.”42 Yet de Cruz additionally notes Nelusko’s “radical gesture of resistance” in which he leads his Portuguese captors into a fatal ambush at the hands of his countrymen.43 This resistance was what drew Black baritones such as Jules Bledsoe to the role—perhaps a villain, perhaps a zealot, but never simple or straightforward, and a place in which they could do the same labor to break through onto the operatic stage as their female counterparts.

Just as Aida and Amonasro became the archetypal breakthrough roles, *Aida* and *L’Africaine* also created the archetypal “basket and trap.” Naomi André captures the duality of the role. She uses *Aida* as an example of how white culture exoticizes Black characters: “*Aida* is a made-up story by Italians and Frenchmen set in the time of the Pharaohs with little knowledge of the historical Egyptians and Ethiopians and makes no reference to living Egyptians or Ethiopians during the late nineteenth century.”44 However, she also responds to the power Leontyne Price brought to the role:

For me, and I suspect many others, Price’s most famous signature role was the title character in Verdi’s *Aida*. It was one of her most frequent roles, and it was the one with

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43 Ibid., 213.
which she chose to close her career at the Met Opera house in 1985. In the case of Price, the most pristine voice available for the role does not have to don the blackface makeup to sing the mythic captive Ethiopian princess.\textsuperscript{45}

She heard the way Price took the role and its signature aria, “O patria mia,” and brought her own experience to them. André continues,

I watch and hear Price sing Aida throughout her career and feel how real these words are: “Oh my country, how much you have cost me.” It feels like a moment when the drama onstage and the reality offstage crash together, and I feel as if I understand something new—each and every time I experience it. This voice comes out of a body that lived through the end of Jim Crow and segregation, was part of the continuous waves of the Great Migration to the north and west… As Price was stepping onto the leading opera stages around the world, people were marching into the burgeoning civil rights movement…. As the regal and long-suffering Aida, Price was the African American singer whose voice fit the character perfectly; in this role, she proved so many people wrong for their bigotry and violence.\textsuperscript{46}

Resistance and remaking are the heart of the figure of the African queen. The “exotic Other” of nineteenth-century opera was stereotypically framed as the object of a white man’s desire. However, by claiming these roles, African American singers could reframe them as dignified royalty in the minds of their audiences. The constructed lineage of African royalty from the nineteenth century thus became a real lineage of singers. Lucy Caplan points out that amateur African American music clubs were named in Aida’s honor: Aida Club of Musical Art, Aida Choral Club, and the Aida Choral Society being three of them.\textsuperscript{47} On the March 24, 2021 episode of the podcast \textit{Aria Code}, soprano Latonia Moore, who made her Met debut as Aida, said, “I was ready to be a part of the Aida legacy. You know, as a Black soprano, there’s an authenticity there that you can’t deny, and it was an amazing feeling. I just felt like I was joining

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 19-20.
the club, in a way.”

The “authenticity” of Aida, and the legacy of the role, was created by the performers who, generation after generation, labored to take up the mantle.

_Carmen and her Sisters: “Gypsies” and Other “Others”_

Grace Bumbry declared, “Carmen is the same sickness for black mezzos as Aida is for sopranos.” Unlike Aida or Selika, Carmen is a Spanish Roma woman. But although Theodore Drury claimed that _Aida_ was “especially suited” for his cast, he chose _Carmen_ for his very first outing with the Drury Opera Company in 1900. Marian Anderson’s historic debut at the Metropolitan Opera was as _Un ballo in maschera_’s “Gypsy” sorceress Ulrica. In the nineteenth-century United States, “colored” people such as Asians, Jewish people, Native Americans, and even southern Europeans were on the “non-white” side of a “Whites vs. Others” binary. The Other was often internal, as well as external—and both African Americans and the Roma were variously feared, oppressed, and scorned minorities in the midst of white-dominated nations. These comparisons indicate why audiences at this time could accept Black opera singers in roles that were not explicitly coded as Black, but also as roles marked as racial/ethnic “Others.” Indeed, it was of these characters that Eidsheim asked whether it was really the _front_ door that had been opened to Marian Anderson and her successors.

While not specifically Black, the heroines of other exotic operas work on axes which translate easily into stereotypes of Black women. Locke ties together two sets of dramatic spectra

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49 Story, _And So I Sing: African-American Divas of Opera and Concert_, 167.

50 “Gypsy” was used to describe the Roma people in the nineteenth century, but is now considered a slur. When speaking of the stereotype, I will use the term when absolutely necessary (such as in a quotation), but I will use Roma to refer to the people.

which can help to explain this set of characters. One is the continuum running from *femme fatale* to *femme fragile*, both literary/artistic/cultural archetypes which solidified and rose in prominence at the end of the nineteenth century as a reaction to the increasing visibility of women in American and European social life. The *femme fragile* was the ideal woman, passive and virtuous. The *femme fatale* was her opposite, transgressing social mores and her proper role in the domestic sphere. Exotic heroines can play any role in the continuum, from Lakmé (who remains silent in the conflict between her Brahmin father and English lover until she commits suicide) at one end to Carmen and Delilah at the other. Racism is not a particularly creative force, and these stereotypes have analogues in American racial caricatures. Black women faced the same continuum in the character they played onstage, portrayed as either loyal mammies and virtuous light-skinned women such as Aunt Chloe or Eliza in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or as demanding, sexual Sapphires and Jezebels.

The other principal factor is casting based on voice type: in his work on specifically Middle Eastern exoticism, Locke points out that Carmen, Selika, Aida’s Amneris, Delilah in *Samson Et Delila*, and the title role in Massenet’s *Cléopâtre* are all mezzo-sopranos. Mezzo voices are often associated with worldliness and sexuality: as part of the “witches, britches, and bitches” triumvirate of mezzo-soprano roles often referred to in voice studio culture, seductresses reign alongside old women and trouser roles. Women of color, even lyric sopranos of color, are often described as having “depth,” “warmth,” or “darkness” of tone: a cultural construction, rather than anything actually intrinsic to a singer’s voice. Eidsheim explains that, through
minstrelsy, blues, jazz, and other genres, listeners *expected* to hear darkness, huskiness, velvet, etc., in African American voices, and would thus interpret a singer’s voice in that way.⁵⁵ (A similar phenomenon occurs when listeners insist that they can tell whether musicians on a jazz recording are white or Black sight unseen, which is also based on cultural constructions of what these performers *should* sound like rather than technique or performance choices.) With all of these interactions between the conventions of “exotic” heroines in opera—to answer Eidsheim’s question, side doors, back doors, or other less-than-obvious passages—the roles of Black women in melodrama and minstrelsy, and conventions in how Black singers’ voices were heard, these non-white roles became accessible to Black women.

![Fig. 4.5: Theodore Drury as Escamillo, c. 1905](image)

*Carmen* is both easily the most familiar of these operas and a case in point. Kristen Turner has delved into the reception history of *Carmen* in the United States and by African

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American performers. The two strands of history combined when the Theodore Drury Opera Company performed *Carmen* as their first fully staged performance: Drury had previously organized concert versions of the last act of *Il trovatore*. Turner reports that “The reviews of the [Drury Opera Company’s] performance of *Carmen* in the African American press were very positive. Unlike the white press, which was often not sure whether English-language opera was art or entertainment, Black publications always presented Drury’s productions as unequivocally high art.” *Carmen* may have been slightly scandalous *opera-comique*, but it was still opera, and that made it high culture and suitable for uplift and opportunity. Drury wrote in the playbill, “This being the first time in the history of the world that the Negro has ever given a complete performance of Grand Opera, Mr. Drury does not hesitate to ask his former subscribers to lend their moral and financial support in this step forward in the musical world.” Drury did comment that he had chosen *Carmen* partially because of its popularity at the Metropolitan that same season. However, his other choices—*Il Guarany*, by a Brazilian composer of color, and *Faust, Cavalleria Rusticana*, and *Aida*, all of which were later taken up by other Black companies—suggest that the “suitability” of the work was already at play.

Both Carmen the character and *Carmen*’s setting and music have been specifically linked to Blackness ever since the original Paris premiere. Nietzsche wrote that “This music is cheerful, but not in a French or German way. Its cheerfulness is African; fate hangs over it; its happiness is brief, sudden, without pardon.” He later admiringly refers to “This more southern, brown,
burnt sensibility." In the United States, Turner describes similar rhetoric among white writers:

Authors described Carmen and her music in ways most similar to sexualized and dehumanizing American stereotypes about black women. Boston’s leading critic, Louis C. Elson, wrote that Carmen possessed a “wild and unrestrained passion of a tropical nature.” At a time when many commentators thought of the “Habanera” as a tropical dance, one of America’s most important critics, Henry Krehbiel, asserted that “The Habanera…is indisputably of African Origin.”

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Caribbean, Cuban dances such as the Habañera, and the “tropics” more broadly, would have been understood as “Black” to white audiences. This association has been further intensified by adaptations which turn Carmen into an explicitly Black story. Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Carmen Jones was the first of these, premiering on Broadway in 1943. When explaining his adaptation, Hammerstein said, “The nearest thing in our modern American life to an equivalent of the gypsies in Spain is the Negro. Like the gypsy, he expresses his feelings simply, honestly, and graphically. Also as with the gypsy there is rhythm in his body, and music in his heart.” The link is explicit: these racist stereotypes translate to racist stereotypes about African Americans.

Carmen’s well-known plot and music also make it ripe for reinterpretation: is Carmen a villain? A tragic heroine? A proto-feminist? Some combination of the above? Subsequent adaptations have further explored different angles of Carmen’s character: MTV’s Carmen: A Hip-Hopera, starring Beyoncé Knowles, which first aired in 2001; the 2001 Senegalese movie Karmen Geï; and the 2005 South African film U-Carman eKhayelitsha. And these are only the rewritten versions: it would be impossible to list all of the productions—such as Drury’s—that use Bizet’s original book and reinvent it through casting and staging choices.

Reworking Carmen as a Black-cast production, removing the racial difference between

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Carmen and the other characters, gives a particular intimacy to the plot. André states,

With the all-black versions of the story, the difference between Carmen and the other people in the narrative has dissipated and the distance between the insiders and the outsiders to the story is gone. The murders of the black Carmens resonate differently than in the earlier versions. Carmen Jones, Carmen Brown, and U-Carmen are not a contagion to the communities onscreen or in the audience; instead, they have been brought into the mainstream of the world of their respective films and cultural times. Since they are now members of their larger community, there is a new element of sacrifice to their deaths.64

Susan McClary suggests that, in Carmen Jones, eliminating race thus eliminates one of the reasons for Carmen’s murder. “Seen from this angle, the piece becomes perhaps less racially-oriented than the original; gender and sexual propriety remain as the sole tensions organizing the plot.”65 McClary goes on to examine gender in various Carmen productions. However, I think McClary minimizes the aspects of race which inflect entirely Black-cast shows. André points out that James Baldwin criticized the Carmen Jones cast, arguing that Carmen, Joe, and Husky (the Escamillo analogue, a boxer) were relatively light-skinned, Cindy Lou (Micaela) was lighter still, and the darkest-skinned characters were either malevolent or immoral.66 Even aside from these aspects of colorism, race is not removed from consideration when the community of Carmen is stereotyped as superstitious, sexually promiscuous, violent, and criminal, stereotypes which have also been applied to Black communities.

This conflation of Blackness with other marginalized or “exotic” groups affects many canonic operas. For example, in Il Trovatore, like in Carmen, while Manrico and Azucena are the “gypsies,” the other characters are still “exotic” Spaniards, including Leonora, with whom Leontyne Price made her Metropolitan debut.67 The same logic of the “side door” also

64 André, Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement, 162.
65 McClary, Georges Bizet: Carmen, 132.
66 André, Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement, 145.
illuminates why *Cavalleria rusticana* and *I Pagliacci* became popular choices for Black companies. These verismo operas, which centered on southern Italians—townsfolk in one story, and travelling entertainers on the others—claimed “realism” in their treatment of sensational and violent events. It is not for nothing that Locke profiles *Cavalleria* in *Musical Exoticism*:

> Is it coincidental that, of all Pietro Mascagni’s fifteen operas, the one that has lodged itself in the repertoire is *Cavalleria rusticana*, which trades rather heavy-handedly in stereotypes about violent, emotionally destructive townspeople in the composer’s native Italy. The stereotyping starts with the sarcasm of the title. “Rustic chivalry” amounts here to deceit, marital infidelity, jealousy, gossip-mongering, and murder. What can one possibly expect, the work declares, shaking its head ruefully, of crude Sicilian villagers? This, too, is autoexoticism, by someone who is still today taken as a “native informant.”

When performed with a Black cast, *Cavalleria* arguably fit the same all-too-widespread stereotypes of Black communities as *Carmen*. And yet, when Abbie Mitchell sang Santuzza as part of the Aeolian Opera Company’s *Cavalleria* performance, she was fifty years old, a *grand dame* of African American theater and music. The work can be taken as a slur on any community it purports to represent. But on the other side is its place in the operatic canon: the *characters* are a community of violent Italians, but the *actors* are a community of highly trained singers and professionals performing a work marketed to educated elites. That was what was applauded whenever the *Negro Music Journal* or the *Chicago Defender* encouraged African Americans to turn out and see a performance. These uses could not—and perhaps should not—reconcile the contradictions in these operas, or the ambivalence performers sometimes felt about their roles. Cleaning up the messiness of these multivalent performances is neither a possible nor a desirable goal: as with *Aida*, the answer remains “all of the above.”

Yet another example is *Madame Butterfly*: Leontyne Price singing Cio-Cio San at the Metropolitan Opera could be seen as one of the sillier examples of reducing any woman of color

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to any exotic role. Rosalyn Story, when describing Camilla Williams’ triumph in the role at New York City Opera in 1946, focused on colorblind reception: in her words, “a black diva could not only sing the role, but also look the part and act it convincingly.”⁶⁹ It is hard to know what Story means when she says that Williams “looked the part”: for example, Williams does appear to have used “yellowface” makeup. But this may also be one example of the slippage between different incidences of the Other.

![Camilla Williams and as Madame Butterfly](image)

*Fig. 4.6: Camilla Williams, and as Madame Butterfly⁷⁰*

Leontyne Price also sang Butterfly numerous times and even recorded the role in 1962. However, in his interview with Wallace Cheatham, published in 1997, baritone and voice teacher Andrew Frierson pointed out a particularly poignant link:

> This story reminds one of so many black women who bore children by white men during slavery. These men had no intention of loving that woman or caring for that woman. So Miss Price not only brings her magnificent voice to the role of Butterfly, but she also brings her history, the history of her people, and the African musical practices of coloring, intonation, and a deep, deep level of understanding to the role of Madam

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⁷⁰ Danville Museum of Fine Arts and History.
Frierson suggests that, at least for him (and perhaps for other listeners), an African American singer performing Butterfly illuminated a link between the Japanese woman’s story and the history of African Americans under slavery. Instead of a stranger, Frierson thought that Price had found a kinswoman in Butterfly, just as she had in Aida, and for some of the same reasons.

![Leontyne Price as Madame Butterfly](image)

*Fig. 4.7: Leontyne Price as Madame Butterfly*

I would like to remind readers that the risks Black singers took with “exotic” roles went deeper than being pigeonholed by these parts: they could also pose a danger to singers’ vocal health. Aida and Otello, for example, are roles with fairly strenuous vocal demands, and any singer who regularly performs parts which do not sit well in their voice risks permanent damage and a foreshortened career. The particular demands of typecasting—basing a role on looks, rather than voice type—exacerbated this for Black singers. George Shirley relates that Gian-Carlo Menotti asked him to perform Otello in Europe in the early 1960s: “When I protested that

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72 Metropolitan Opera Collection.
role was too heavy for me, Gian-Carlo said, ‘But you would look wonderful!’”.73 Menotti later offered him the less-stereotypical but equally vocally unsuitable role of Tristan: the two men finally settled on Carmen and Don José. In another example, at the Metropolitan Opera, Gloria Davy sang Aida (of course), Pamina in The Magic Flute, Nedda in I Pagliacci, and Leonora in Il Trovatore. Cheatham suggested that, in addition to Pamina, Davy’s voice was more suited for bel canto work like Rossini and Donizetti.74 Davy’s tenure at the Met only lasted from 1958-1961, and singing repertoire that was a strain for her voice cannot have helped, either in the sense of her own vocal health or in how her listeners responded to her.

Verdi’s Otello is a strange counterexample, in that it is an explicitly Black role that is still regularly played by white men. The role in Shakespeare’s play has often been claimed by white male actors as a prestige part, though Black dramatic actor Ira Aldridge successfully interpreted it in mid-nineteenth century. Verdi’s demanding setting requires a very specific and rare type of dramatic tenor, and opera houses tend to use that as an excuse for casting white actors. Howard Haskin was the first Black dramatic tenor to sing Verdi’s Otello in full production in an opera house: at the Opéra de Nice, in 1995, not even thirty years ago. Just the previous year, they refused to audition him. Other Black tenors have sung the role since.75 However, the Metropolitan’s most recent performance of Otello, in 2015, cast the Latvian tenor Aleksandrs Antoņenko in the title role. Instead of putting him in blackface—as they had in 2012 with white Afrikaner tenor Johan Botha—the Met simply dispensed with the makeup, the production team stating that this production was about “otherness” in general, rather than race specifically.

African queens and other “exotic” roles were the gateways by which men and women of

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color accessed the stage. These roles traded in stereotypes of Blackness and Otherness, and ran the risk of pigeonholing actors in their careers and even ending them early through vocal strain. However, these roles also offered the possibility of resistance: claiming a position in the operatic tradition, and re-interpreting characters as figures of dignity, nobility, and strength. Through these roles, Black opera singers have created their own traditions. Aida, for example, may be a burden, but the singers who have taken up her mantle have also made her into a heritage. And the connections led to other roles, in which the links were there, but more subtle.

**Outcasts, Jokers, and Rogues: “White” Opera Roles**

*Aida* and *Carmen* may have immediately apparent choices for Black companies. But what about *Rigoletto, La Traviata,* or *Faust?* Operas that don’t traffic in exoticism or heroines of color? I argue that these build on the same stories and resonances as operas which feature non-white roles, creating similar “side doors” to roles which were more explicitly coded as “white.” Eidsheim connects these roles: “The black body in opera has been so consistently associated with certain categories of roles that this association amounts to a typecasting of African Americans in the role of the other: Japanese war bride slowly going insane, enslaved Ethiopian princess, Roma seductress, the cripple (a liminal figure), and so on.”76 I argue that the “liminal roles” in which audiences could imagine Black singers were influenced by melodrama and popular theater, literature, myth, and religion. These pathways to the stage and links between operatic roles and societal expectations allowed Black musicians to expand beyond explicitly “non-white” roles.

76 Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 84.
Women Who Die at the End: Tragic Mulattas and La Traviata

La Traviata, performed by the National Negro Opera Company and a standby of the Eoan Group, is yet another perfectly practical choice for a Black opera troupe. Tuneful, memorable middle Verdi, very well known in both Italian and in translation, Traviata is a well-loved canonical warhorse perfectly suited for a high-profile mission of cultural uplift. However, the connections run deeper than the practical. Traviata already had a position in what André refers to as the “shadow culture,” since the source novel, La Dame aux Camélias, was written by the mixed-race Alexandre Dumas fils. I would add that Violetta’s role and eventual fate also bear similarities to the traditional plot trajectory of the “tragic mulatta,” a common character type in nineteenth-century melodrama and popular literature, who most often falls in love with a white man and suffers for it. The “tragic mulatta” or “tragic octoroon” was a mainstay of American melodrama and antislavery literature, as well as European dramas depicting the United States. Currier and Ives even produced a lithograph entitled “The Beautiful Quadroon.”
Violetta’s story follows a similar trajectory to the traditional fate of the “tragic mulatta.” For example, in Dion Boucicault’s 1859 hit play *The Octoroon*, George, the white scion of a formerly-wealthy plantation family, falls in love with Zoe, who has to admit to him that she is an octoroon, or one-eighth African. Amid other drama, Zoe is sold with her deceased father’s plantation in order to recoup his debts. George attempts to buy her freedom, but is outbid by the evil M’Closkey. Zoe poisons herself in order to escape M’Closkey, and dies in George’s arms. George then marries the wealthy, white Dora. Zoe was even played by Boucicault’s (white) wife Agnes Robertson. Another famous “octoroon,” Eliza in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, was also typically played by a white actress, but even this slight Blackness is enough to place her

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79 Ibid., 35.
“perilously outside the bounds of true womanhood’s social codes.”

M’Closkey informs Zoe that he could not possibly marry her, but he can make her his mistress. Violetta may be “pure” racially, but she, like Zoe, is morally a mix of “pure” in her love for Armand and “debased” in her life as a courtesan. Armand cannot marry her any more than M’Closkey (or George) could marry Zoe. Like the “taint” of mixed blood, the remedy for her condition is death.

Fig. 4.9: Eoan Group La Traviata

The Eoan Group’s La Traviata performance gives additional insight into what made Traviata so appealing for Black or mixed-race casts. Juliana M. Pistorious points out that the

80 Ibid., 36.
82 This applies to the American version of the Octoroon. In the London performance, Zoe lives, and she and George sail away to England to get married. Brooks states that this version still upholds whiteness: in this case, British national pride, easing British consciences about their empire. (Brooks, Bodies in Dissent, 44.)
83 The Eoan Group was a South African organization for “colored,” or mixed-race individuals, originally founded to prepare them for domestic service in white homes before it began producing operas and oratorios. Extensive archives remain of their activities, and, despite the different cultural contexts, reports of their Traviata illuminate similar currents and themes to those present—but less well-documented—in the Traviata of the National Negro Opera Company.

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above photograph from Act II, Scene 2 is nearly identical in design to La Scala’s staging for the same scene.\textsuperscript{84} Pistorious argues that by presenting themselves as faithful to the Italian opera tradition, the Eoan Group performers asserted their right to be part of that tradition, complete with all its glamor and luxury. Through their resplendent sets and European connections, the Eoan group would thus have been understood to have been evoking whiteness, linking the mixed-race actors directly to Italians.\textsuperscript{85} Hilde Roos also suggests that both \textit{Traviata} and, later, \textit{Cavalleria Rusticana}, were primarily picked for pragmatic reasons: popular, \textit{cantabile} pieces already familiar to the Italian director, Joseph Manca, who was not trained as a musician and limited in what he could teach an amateur group.\textsuperscript{86} However, Roos also gestures at a comparison between Violetta and the Eoan Group: “Being socially and politically of ‘dubious’ standing and living on the fringes of ‘respectable’ (and in the case of Eoan, \textit{white}) society, both the character Violetta and Eoan itself were enchanted by a utopian world for which they sacrificed all they had.”\textsuperscript{87} Whether true love or opera, these enchantments almost never end well.

\textit{At the Crossroads: Faust, Rigoletto, Whiteness, and Myth}

Black male singers performed canonic roles in \textit{Faust, I Pagliacci}, and \textit{Rigoletto}, accessing high art but combatting their own sets of stereotypes: the unearthly, the diabolical, and the deformed. In these works, the exotic and the diabolical function as two sides of the same coin. This traditional association dates back to medieval Europe, which associated Blackness

\textsuperscript{85} Ibid, 75.
\textsuperscript{86} Roos, \textit{The La Traviata Affair: Opera in the Age of Apartheid}, 55, 65.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 5
with both. McClary points out that, in Carmen, an augmented second motive at the end of the prelude is associated both with Carmen and Don Jose’s ill-fated attraction to her. In addition to being a marker of exoticism, “The motive also resonates with conventional musical semiotics of evil: the tremolo, diminished sevenths, and foreboding timpani strokes… all descend from Weber’s demonic imagery in Der Freischütz, one of Bizet’s favorite works. But whereas Weber used them to refer to the devil, Bizet aligns them with the ‘Oriental’ femme fatale.” In the case of Black singers, women are assigned the attractive exotic role—with or without possible air of menace—while men are assumed to be threats. This is why this section includes not just Faust and Mephistopheles, but the cruel jesters Rigoletto and Tonio, and the menacing dwarf Alberich of the Ring Cycle. Jesters have a history of being twisted into diabolical figures of menace, such as the titular character of Edgar Allen Poe’s 1849 story “Hop-Frog,” who takes revenge on his tormentors just as Rigoletto does, with considerably more success.

The Theodore Drury Opera Company’s staging of Faust relied primarily on its associations with whiteness. Kristen Turner explains that the company’s 1902 performance followed Carmen and the Brazilian work Il Guarany, both of which were coded “non-white.” This did not escape African-American reviewers: when discussing C. Marie Rovelto, who performed Marguerite, Sylvester Russell observed that she “looked the part to perfection,” and the Colored American magazine called her “the real Marguerite.” It was important that Rovelto sang Marguerite well, but it was just as important to assert that a Black soprano had successfully embodied such a paragon of ideal white womanhood, as well as voiced her. White reviewers

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88 For more on this, see Ralph Locke, Music and the Exotic from the Renaissance to Mozart (New York, Cambridge, 2015), especially Chapter 3, “The Early Cultural Background.” For a more specific example about Black musicians in the 17th century, see Arne Spohr, “Mohr und Trompeter:’ Blackness and Social Status in Early Modern Germany,” Journal of the American Musicological Society 72 no 3 (Fall 2019).
89 McClary, Georges Bizet: Carmen, 66.
recognized the threat: one article was entitled “Ma Dusky Belle to Sing in Faust”, making the performance sound like a minstrel burlesque rather than opera.\textsuperscript{91} The \textit{New York Herald} complained that it was “unoriginal,” and that Drury had “followed too closely upon the traditions which obtain in the Metropolitan Opera House.”\textsuperscript{92} As Riis has observed in musical theatre, complaints of being “derivative” or of “imitating” white performances typically meant, as they did with the Black Patti Troubadours, that the performers had diverged too far from stereotypes of what Black performance \textit{ought} to be.\textsuperscript{93} If Drury was attempting to trouble the waters, he clearly succeeded, even though most of the white press simply ignored the performance.

However, \textit{Faust} also potentially evokes the stereotype of the menacing Black man. For example, \textit{The Magic Flute}’s Monastatos is characterized as “black,” and his alliance with the Queen of the Night and his attempted rape of Pamina render him both literally diabolical and a stereotype of brutish Black men. This simplistic reduction of Black men to devils led to Mephistopheles becoming another gateway role for Black baritones when entering predominantly white stages. Jules Bledsoe performed the role in Europe, and Simon Estes considered it part of his repertoire. There are two separate factors at play in these roles: first, the conflation of Blackness with devilry, whether conscious or not, made it “logical” to place a Black man in a role of menace. Second, Mephistopheles and other malignant baritones roles are rarely love interests, thus sparing directors—and the actors themselves—the backlash of casting a Black man opposite a white woman as a romantic lead.

\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 746.
\textsuperscript{93} Riis, \textit{Just Before Jazz: Black Musical Theater in New York, 1890-1915}, 142.
In addition to playing Faust, George Shirley also performed devilish roles in Europe, including Loge in *Das Rheingold* and Pluto in *Orpheus in the Underworld*. In the latter two cases, he complained that German directors had typecast him based on his race. He then joked, “When Simon Estes made his debut at Bayreuth in 1978, it was as the Flying Dutchman. I joked with Simon about that because The Dutchman is a ghost, or, in German, ‘spuk.’ We had something of a laugh…. It was staged so that the Dutchman didn’t come anywhere near Senta. She was in some kind of structure upstage, and the Dutchman was placed elsewhere."° The edge to the joke—and the “artistic” staging preventing a white soprano who had to fall in love with a Black baritone from coming too close to him—are a reminder of the constant weight of these stereotypes. Eric Owens has since performed Wotan, as did Estes, but his 2010 Metropolitan performance as Alberich in *Das Rheingold*—the only person of color in the cast, playing an evil, selfish dwarf—shows that the unfortunate implications of these castings, whether intentional or not, are still part of the experience of Black men in theatre.

In *Rigoletto* and *I Pagliacci*, the devilish and the monstrous are tied together. Rigoletto and Tonio, both common roles for Black baritones in mixed-race companies as well as Black troupes, are both hunchbacked jesters with nasty streaks. Rigoletto is more antihero than villain, and his love for his daughter makes him sympathetic—but his lack of sympathy for another father and daughter wronged by the Duke, and his turn to violence in revenge for his daughter Gilda’s rape ends up directly causing her death. In the bloody finale of *I Pagliacci*, Canio, egged on by Tonio, is the “monster clown” of horror in operatic color as he kills his wife Nedda and her lover mid-performance. Minstrelsy’s popularity in America and Europe since the nineteenth century had spread the image of Black men as buffoonish entertainers. Monstrous jesters capitalize on the fear of what lies behind that mask, or of what happens when the butt of the jokes stops having fun. This fear of rebellion was endemic to slaveholding societies. The slave or jester who fought back was a feared phantom, just like the Flying Dutchman or Mephistopheles himself. Shirley and Estes’ conversation highlights the similarity between the monstrous, the supernatural, and the devilish to the Black baritones who played these roles: the sheer obnoxious repetition of playing some nasty stereotype of Black masculine brutishness and violence in operatic dress again and again. And yet they kept working to make what they could of the roles, taking the same steps to perform them with dignity which Black female singers found in “exotic” roles or tragic heroines, and using these parts to create careers and platforms from which they could speak out about the obstacles they had faced, and those which still remained.

**Conclusion: Written into History**

Underneath operatic tropes, minstrel stereotypes, melodramas, and folk tales lies a simple question: who is in this story? And at the center stand the directors, troupes, and actors who said,
“We are part of this story.” Juanita Karpf writes that the Black singers in Amelia Tilghman’s performances of *Esther, the Beautiful Queen* took the story’s Biblical setting, “from India to Ethiopia,” as a reference to Africa: they were thus writing themselves back into a legacy which had originally been theirs. Specifically Black works such as *Ouanga!* and *Tom-Tom* insisted on Black history and achievement, and were critical to a Black presence in opera. However, the projects of Black composers were never going to gain a wide institutional reach. It was the singers who led the way onto “white” stages and into the mainstays of the canon. When African American singers performed in *Aida*, they insisted on their own visibility both in ancient history and in contemporary performance. André suggests, “Opera embodies an expression of national identity for new voices. This is especially true when opera is written about a specific country’s history…” Writing new Black stories was an important part of this project, just as Czech and Russian operas in the nineteenth century were part of creating a national identity. However, African Americans and other Black performers were not creating national identities wholesale, but insisting on their identities and rights in countries where they had been enslaved and still faced oppression and discrimination. Biblical history, ancient mythology, and old stories—both operas and cultural narratives—thus became a crucial part of this work.

In addition to appearing in stories which had previously been the province of white actors, these singers also insisted on their place in music history and in the operatic canon. *Aida* and other exotic roles may have been the first, but Black women and men performing these “exotic” parts also opened other parts of the canon where Blackness was not immediately evident but still an implicit possibility, and they still continue to work in these roles to break down barriers to the operatic stage as a whole. In André’s words, “Opera has become a space where

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black people are writing themselves into history. In a genre where blackness has been routinely seen in negative stereotypical ways, a new generation across the Atlantic in the United States and South Africa is rewriting the terms for representing blackness in opera.” André referred to a “new generation” in 2018, but her statement has been true in one way or another since the latter half of the nineteenth century. The central work of this chapter, and of this dissertation, is to center the work that all of the “new generations” of Black opera singers and directors have done, and continue to do, to take the old and new materials of opera and to make something meaningful. Through their acts of resistance and reinterpretation, Black opera singers insisted on their place in opera’s stories, and their right to tell them themselves.

97 Ibid., 196-97.
Chapter 5
“His Brilliant and Manly Voice”: Jules Bledsoe and Opera

Introduction

Jules Bledsoe’s voice was compared to an organ, to a fanfare of trumpets: at the peak of his career in the early 1930s, his voice rang out through the stadiums full of people who had come to see Aida and hear him perform as Amonasro. When he originated the role of Joe in Show Boat, he found himself tied to “Ol’ Man River” for the rest of his life, yet whenever he had the chance, he abandoned musical theater and vaudeville to seek the operatic stage. He brought American and European audiences to their feet with his portrayals of Amonasro and the Emperor Brutus Jones, making a name for himself alongside Paul Robeson as one of the preeminent African American baritones of the interwar period.

Jules Bledsoe, born Julius Lorenzo Cobb Bledsoe, (c.1898-1943) was firmly convinced of his own importance in the annals of African American and operatic history. His scrapbooks, preserved in the Texas Collection at Baylor University with the majority of his papers, testify both to the wide range of his musical activities and his view of their importance. He filled hundreds of oversized pages with newspaper clippings, cataloguing everything from advertisements and reviews to reports of his appendectomy during the run of Show Boat. He marked particular phrases with pen before he labelled each clipping with its newspaper of origin and stamped it with a date. The care Bledsoe took suggests that these were not merely keepsakes. This was an archive preserved for posterity, once Bledsoe had received the vindication that he
sought. In an interview in the early 1930s, he proclaimed, “You have asked me what my hobby is… I have but one real hobby and that is working toward an ultimate end—success. If one sets out to be the best in any field and to rise above the mass, despite handicaps and drawbacks, there must never be anything to detract the mind or the soul from the ultimate objective. One should dream and live the very success so desired.”

Fig. 5.1: Jules Bledsoe Promotional Poster

Show Boat remains Bledsoe’s best-known legacy. Outside of musicals, however, he

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1 “At Keith-Albee Theater,” no paper or date, Box 17, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
2 An example of Jules Bledsoe’s typical reticence, from his first season as a recitalist. Jules Bledsoe Collection.
starred in the Cleveland premiere of Shirley Graham’s opera *Tom-Tom* in 1932. He then performed the role of Amonasro in *Aida* first in Cleveland that same summer—stepping in as an alternate—followed by multiple performances in New York. As Amonasro, Bledsoe became the first African American male singer to take the opera stage alongside an otherwise-white cast. He also starred in the European premiere of Louis Gruenberg’s opera *The Emperor Jones* as he continued to sing Amonasro on European stages and added Mephistopheles from Gounod’s *Faust*, Tonio from Leoncavallo’s *I Pagliacci*, and the title role of Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov* to his repertoire. From Bledsoe’s musical debut at New York’s Aeolian Hall in 1924 to his death in 1943, he interspersed these breakthroughs with a flurry of other activities: concertizing, radio performances, vaudeville, movies, and both writing and marketing his own compositions, as well as managing a farm in the Catskills as a resort for African Americans.

Despite his efforts, Bledsoe was eclipsed by other performers. After Paul Robeson took over *Show Boat* and made “Ol’ Man River” his own, he became the iconic African American baritone in the American imagination. In the meantime, Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson both made their reputations as recitalists. In *The Music of Black Americans*, Eileen Southern lists Robeson, Hayes, Anderson, and Dorothy Maynor as “the first black Americans to win secure places in the galaxy of concert stars; their accomplishments not only inspired others to emulate them but also lowered the barriers of race discrimination. On a less lofty plane other black singers of the 1920s-30s also were taking giant steps.”3 Southern places Bledsoe on this “less lofty plane” along with opera singers Lillian Evanti, Todd Duncan, Caterina Jarboro, La Julia Rhea, Anne Brown, and Etta Moten. Duncan, Brown, and Moten starred in *Porgy and Bess*, and the others found venues in *Aida*, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, and the small handful of shows.

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which provided an early operatic home for African American singers. Jules Bledsoe can often be found in these lists of “other important figures,” which would have rankled a man who once upgraded his passage on an Atlantic voyage because he refused to travel second-class while Paul Robeson was in first. It is undeniable that he had neither as long nor as illustrious of a career as Robeson, Hayes, or Anderson. His ambitions were hampered first by his death from a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 43, and second by his tireless pursuit of opera, which ended in stymied hopes and failed productions as often as it did in successful performances.

I argue that Jules Bledsoe’s operatic career reveals how he navigated ideals of racial uplift and contradictory stereotypes of Blackness, masculinity, and artistry, giving insight into the lived experience of Black men on the operatic stage. Bledsoe cultivated the image of an “intellectual” classical performer and leader among African American artists through his performances of new and canonic roles, his concert programming, and his own compositions throughout his career, continually reinventing himself in order to reach his goals. Even as he deliberately acknowledged and made use of what was expected of him, he dealt with an apparent “mismatch” between how he performed and how his critics thought he ought to appear. He was called “stiff,” described as a “waiter” in evening dress, and conflated with Show Boat’s Joe regardless of his repertoire. Bledsoe might not be remembered as a major figure in the annals of opera history, but his role in the vanguard of African American performers was invaluable, as part of the groundwork that allowed Marian Anderson to take the stage at the Metropolitan Opera twelve years after his death. His archive is just as invaluable in understanding his life, the lives of his contemporaries, and the world in which the seeds of Black opera grew.

In my analysis, I draw primarily on Bledsoe’s extensive archive at Baylor University.

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4 See Chapter 4, “‘Baskets and Traps’: Black Singers and the Operatic Canon.”
5 “Touchy Fellows These Artists,” Baltimore Afro-American, 2 May 1931, 9.
This collection consists of twenty boxes of letters, sheet music, scores, publicity materials, programs, two massive scrapbooks, and his own compositions. Some of his materials also survive at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. I augment Bledsoe’s own review collection with information from African American publications and entertainment industry magazines such as *Variety* and *Billboard*. These sources include Black and white journalists, both classical critics and vaudeville reviewers, creating a picture of a man who confounded all of them at various points in his career.

In addition to these materials, I draw on the limited secondary material available on Bledsoe. Lynnette G. Geary, who also compiled Bledsoe’s information at Baylor, wrote a biographical overview of Bledsoe in the late 1980s. Katie M. Johnson’s 2015 article for the *Eugene O’Neill Review* focuses on Bledsoe’s performance of *The Emperor Jones*, Gruenberg’s operatic adaptation, and Bledsoe’s attempts to compose his own version of *Jones*. Johnson is also the only scholar who has made explicit what is implicit in Jules Bledsoe’s papers: his partnership with Adrian Frederick “Freddy” Huygens, whom he met in The Hague in 1931 and remained with until his death. Aside from these two scholars, the rest of the academic work on Bledsoe consists of brief mentions in works primarily about others. These are most often in conjunction

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with *Show Boat*, such as when Todd Decker details Bledsoe’s performance in the musical.\(^9\)

The lived experience of an African American baritone such as Bledsoe is also underrepresented in scholarship. The work that does exist on masculinity in opera, such as the 2013 collection *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History, and the New Musicology*, focuses primarily on characters within works rather than the men who play them.\(^10\) Kate Whittaker’s introduction focuses on how men have been treated as the default, and how scholarship has changed to emphasize their status as gendered actors.\(^11\) However, as a Black man, Bledsoe never had that luxury. Elsewhere, Whittaker refers to the traditional hegemonic materials of masculinity as sexism, racism, and homophobia.\(^12\) She quickly distinguishes between institutional masculinity and individual prejudice, but that does not change the fact that if ideal societal masculinity is straight, white, and male, Jules Bledsoe only held one card of three.

Scholars of African Americans in opera have done more to illuminate how African American singers approach both new and canonic roles. I draw heavily on Naomi André’s discussions of masculinity in opera, though she also takes the work—*Carmen, Porgy and Bess, Johnny Speilt Auf*, etc.—as her point of departure. The role of the work is inescapable in opera, since opera singers do not perform as *themselves*. Jules Bledsoe on stage as himself is giving a concert. Jules Bledsoe as Amonasro, as Brutus Jones, as Mephistopheles or the Voodoo Man: this is the stuff of opera. The singer never entirely disappears behind the mask of the role, such as the prima donna who is more vivid than the character she portrays. In the case of an African American performer, the audience might perceive a disconnect, or the singer and the character

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\(^11\) Kate Whittaker, “Performing Masculinity/Masculinities in Performance,” in *Masculinity in Opera: Gender, History, and New Musicology*, 10.

\(^12\) Ibid., 13.
might “mesh” in an unforeseen way. Both singer and role are crucial. Yet, at the same time, a work-focused lens is not enough to describe the experience of the singer. Those stories, thus far, have largely come from African-American men themselves: from George Shirley’s chapter in *Blackness in Opera*, or the interviews that Shirley, Simon Estes, and others compiled for the *HistoryMakers* database project and the documentary *Aida’s Brothers and Sisters: Black Voices in Opera*. Bledsoe’s archive illuminates yet another one of these stories. These materials outline his long quest for the spotlight with all its thorns, and the labor he undertook to make it happen.

**The Crowning of the King**

In 1933, when Jules Bledsoe and Caterina Jarboro starred in an integrated *Aida* in New York, writers and artists hailed their triumphant performance as the dawn of a new era. One commenter, Salem Tutt Whitney, was both a writer and an alumnus of the Black Patti Troubadours and the travelling show *Silas Green from New Orleans*. He had spent forty years working and waiting for a night such as this, and his evocative review bears quoting in full.

> It was a sizzlin' hot night. The heat and the humidity were running a neck and neck race to see which would be the first to reach the top of the glass. Humanity sweltered. But oodles of that sweltering humanity had an objective. It was the mammoth Hippodrome theater. They descended from all parts of Manhattan and environs. Sugar Hill rubbed elbows with Park Ave., Riverside Drive and San Juan Hill. St. Nicholas Ave. jostled Lenox Ave. The old-timers and the late climbers signed a temporary truce, smiled and spoke to each other. The devotees of the Tree of Hope postponed their regular nightly session in favor of an excursion to the Hippodrome.\(^{13}\) It was a truly wonderful, heterogenous crowd of music lovers and curiosity seekers that converged and fought for entrance to the theater.

> Brud and yours truly occupied lodge seats. We had to secure them a week in advance for this Monday night’s performance. The huge auditorium seats 5,000 persons. We glanced about. Every seat was occupied. And there must have been a thousand standing. The boxes were occupied by the elite, a beautiful picture, enhanced by here and there a touch of color. The musicians took their places in the orchestra pit. The buzz and hum of

\(^{13}\) The Tree of Hope was a popular place to purchase and smoke marijuana.
conversation immediately subsided to be replaced by a tenseness that fairly vibrated like the electrified atmosphere before a thunderstorm.

Whitney’s scene-setting adds to the weight of his account, as he preserves every detail in the same way someone remembers where they were when they received the news of a national triumph or tragedy. He continues:

Hurriedly I glanced at my program: “Maestro Alfredo Salmaggi presents *Aida*, a grand opera in four acts by Giuseppe Verdi. *Aida* by Caterina Jarboro. Amonasro by Jules Bledsoe.” Two Race artists. The wonder of it all filled my eyes with tears and blinded my sight so that I could not see the names of those wonderful white artists, whose love for their art and devotion to their art ideals, completely erased all thought of racial prejudice, and in so doing proved that art is universal and international. Those who feel otherwise about it are traitors to art. I must pay tribute to those white artists, everyone a truly great singer, who worked whole-heartedly as a unit to further the remarkable triumph of our two great artists—Caterina Jarboro and Jules Bledsoe.

Whitney holds up this performance as a triumph of musical universalism and racial uplift. Through hard work, two African American artists had proved themselves the equal of white singers, and prejudice had been overcome by “true art,” which he acclaims as “universal and international.” Bledsoe himself invoked these same ideals: while Whitney elucidates them in this moment, they form the background of Bledsoe’s entire career in opera.

When our own Caterina glided gracefully upon the stage and seemingly floated to the footlights, paused and swayed to the tumultuous acclaim of 6,000 enthusiasts before the dulcet tones of her rare voice filled the theater with its lyric beauty. And when Jules Bledsoe, as the savage chieftain and irate father of Aida, brought the large audience to its feet by his remarkable vocal and dramatic portrayal, my feelings ran the complete gamut of human emotionalism. Only once before have I been so magnificently thrilled, and that was at the occasion of Richard B. Harrison’s hysterical and historical triumph in “The Green Pastures.” Both were history-making epochs. Both occasions signified and glorified the triumph of art over prejudice: a red letter day in our patient, persistent march of progress. We have triumphed in the drama and we have triumphed in the opera. The accomplishments of these great artists have moved us all a bit nearer to the goal of our ambitions: to the recognition for which we have been struggling and fighting: to an open door of opportunity, the mechanism of which cannot be affected by the manipulations of color prejudice.

I wish I had the ability to adequately describe the triumph of Caterina Jarboro and Jules Bledsoe. No panegyric symposium of words of my mustering could do it: no
pyrotechnical word-burst of superlatives that I might assemble could describe my emotions. I can only falter at His feet and humbly murmur my gratitude to the God of our forefathers for the wonders he has permitted me to see.  

Whitney’s account is beautiful in its naked emotion, shot through with a joy elevated to religious awe. African American singers had performed in interracial casts before: Caterina Jarboro had previously played the role in Italy, and Bledsoe had sung Amonasro in Cleveland the previous summer. *Aida* had also been staged by African American groups such as the Drury Opera Company. But for both of the “Ethiopian” roles to be performed by African American singers in an otherwise-white cast, before a massive, multiracial audience of New Yorkers? This was something new, and Whitney’s article glows with the light of a new epoch: the ideals of merit and uplift and art for which he had worked his entire career coming true before his eyes. Salmaggi’s New York production was the first in America in which African American singers were intended to take the stage alongside white singers from the start. The *Afro-American* heading in Example 2 suggests that this was Salmaggi’s “hook” for the performance, using African American performers for a sort of verisimilitude.

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Whitney was not the only onlooker who emphasized the production as history in the making. Eva Jessye, who would lead her singers in the premiere of *Four Saints in Three Acts* in the following year, commented, “To some who do not read the signs this recognition in the world of the opera in America came as a bolt from the blue, but it was by no means unexpected by those who have been gazing hopefully, confidently, in the heavens for a good long time.” Both Bledsoe and Jarboro rose to the occasion, as evidenced by reviews. Whitney’s review describes the standing ovation Bledsoe received, and Jessye was similarly enthusiastic:

Thereafter the performance was dominated for an appreciable time by the impressive portrayal of the King of Ethiopia by Jules Bledsoe. Where his tempestuous interpretation permitted one caught passages of great beauty, resonance, sweetness, and in the duet scene with his daughter, Aida, where he demands that she forget love for her country, conjuring up the spectre of her dead mother who curses her disloyalty, he was the personification of retribution, driving her to submission with organ tones of doom.”

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17 Ibid.
While the performance was not as widely covered in the white press, reviews were also favorable. The New York *Herald Tribune* was less generous in its praise than Jessye or Whitney, stating that Bledsoe’s voice was occasionally “forced” and that he seemed uncomfortable at times, but the opera still met with approval.\textsuperscript{18}

![Fig. 5.3: Bledsoe in Costume as Amonasro, 1937\textsuperscript{19}]

Bledsoe returned to *Aida* and Amonasro multiple times, in both complete productions and scenes presented in recitals. Figure 3 shows the costume from a 1937 performance in The Hague. While he was never associated with opera to the extent that he was with *Show Boat*’s Joe, *Aida* was his most visible operatic triumph. Amonasro may have lost his war against the Egyptians, but from the heights of the Ethiopian king’s rage Bledsoe could see his dreams within reach.

In *Aida*, Bledsoe navigated ideals of both racial and musical uplift as he took on a major


\textsuperscript{19} Box 8, Folder 9. Jules Bledsoe Collection.
role in the operatic canon. For almost a decade, however, Bledsoe had striven in both recitals and in smaller theatrical roles to reach the point where he could take on Amonasro. He had also performed in *Show Boat*, published music, and presented himself throughout it all as one of the up-and-coming New Negro elite, a man whom other African American writers and leaders would be proud to claim represented them to the world. Bledsoe’s early career is foundational to understanding that sweltering night in 1933 when Salem Tutt Whitney hailed him as the harbinger of musical destiny.

**How We Got Here: Bledsoe’s Classical Training and Early Opportunities**

Jules Bledsoe had the familial and educational background to present himself as a “learned” or “intellectual” musician, one of the standards to which he aspired. The Bledsoes and Cobbs were part of Waco’s African American upper class, and Bledsoe’s maternal aunt Naomi Cobb gave him piano lessons from the time he was five or six years old. Bledsoe enrolled at Columbia University to study medicine after World War I, in which he had served as a member of the ROTC at Virginia Union University in Richmond, as well as secretary for the Civilian Chaplain Service and arranger of musical entertainment with the YMCA.20 However, once he reached New York, he abandoned his medical goals to focus on his musical career. Throughout the 1920s, until he starred in *Show Boat* (when he celebrated his success by changing his name from Julius to Jules) Bledsoe worked in Harlem at the height of the Renaissance as a concert singer, composer, and operatic baritone. To many African American critics, Bledsoe was the model of the “New Negro” gentleman. From the beginning of Bledsoe’s career, he set himself apart by working on multiple fronts, attempting to avoid being pinned down in the raced and

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gendered landscape of New York in the 1920s through his myriad roles.

Opera was among Bledsoe’s ambitions from the beginning. In 1918, he sent his mother the program of a YMCA concert, on which he opened with Tonio’s Prologue from Leoncavallo’s *I Pagliacci* and sang “Dio fossente” from Gounod’s *Faust*.\(^{21}\) In a letter dated April 1, 1919, Bledsoe informed his mother that he would be performing excerpts from *Carmen* and *Martha*. He also described a recent experience performing for a composer: “You know I sang right behind a white singer and it did me good to see his flag totter while I put it on him and when I finished he quietly excused himself.”\(^{22}\) Bledsoe’s sense that he had something to prove to the world was as implacable as his ambitions. When Bledsoe made his solo debut at Aeolian Hall in 1924, he was clearly a classical vocalist. He opened with Caccini’s “Amarilli, mia bella” and Handel’s “See the Raging Flames Arise,” followed by a mixed set of German and French art songs, an aria from Massenet’s *Herodiade*, and a set of English art songs, finishing with a group of spirituals.\(^{23}\) Bledsoe’s choice of a spiritual set mirrored the recitals of Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, Taylor Gordon, and Paul Robeson, as he framed himself as yet another young singer marrying classical training and a new pride in the heritage represented by the spirituals.

Bledsoe’s own arrangement of “Go Down, Moses,” one of his standbys throughout his career, shows how he interpreted this calling card of the new African American singer. Bledsoe’s arrangement is essentially a performer’s interpretation set to paper, which he never attempted to publish, even though the *New York Evening Telegram*, a white paper, reports that “several songs” of his enjoyed popularity in the 1920s.\(^{24}\) Bledsoe was familiar with the intellectual and artistic landscape of the spiritual, having programmed arrangements by such authorities as Harry

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\(^{21}\) Jules Bledsoe Collection Box 1, Folder 1.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
\(^{24}\) Negro Baritone for Jazz Opera,” *New York Evening Telegram*, 1928.
Burleigh, Clarence Cameron White, Hall Johnson, and James Rosamond Johnson. I have compared Bledsoe’s “Go Down, Moses” to Harry T. Burleigh’s widely-published arrangement, as Burleigh’s spirituals tended to be quite “traditional” in interpretation. Burleigh’s edition is in G minor: other copies of “Go Down, Moses” can be found in F or E minor. As a baritone, Bledsoe chose to sing in the middle key, allowing him to belt out a high F at the end while remaining in a comfortable tessitura for the body of the piece.

![Musical notation of Bledsoe's arrangement of "Go Down, Moses"](image)

Fig. 5.4: Harry T. Burleigh, “Go Down, Moses,” refrain

The opening measures of Bledsoe’s arrangement highlight the difference in his approach. In the first refrain, reproduced below, Bledsoe smooths out sharply dotted rhythms, while the piano doubles the voice in open octaves. After this initial presentation, he repeats the refrain with fuller accompaniment before transitioning into the verses. The most dramatic change is his extension of the phrase “Tell ole Pharoah to let my people go.” In Burleigh’s arrangement, this

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25 Published Ricordi, 1917.
phrase is four measures long, creating a balanced eight-measure refrain. Bledsoe lengthens this phrase to five measures through an extended descent on “Pharoah,” allowing him to showcase his vocal strength in long, low lines. By deliberately committing this irregularity to the page, Bledsoe underscored the importance of flexibility in what he considered an important moment.

Fig. 5.5: Bledsoe, “Go Down Moses” refrain.

Bledsoe’s innovations to “Go Down, Moses” lie in embellishments, rather than major changes to the melody or the text. The verses are full of simple modifications, such as syncopated rhythms that Burleigh set as quarter notes. Bledsoe also varied his accompaniment for dramatic effect. The finale builds to a quasi-operatic height with register shifts and thick chords marked with heavy accents. One can hear the pianist marshalling all the volume the piano can muster, allowing Bledsoe to do the same as he ascended to a final thunderous “Let my

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26 Bledsoe arrangement found in Box 18, Folder 1, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
people go!” Bledsoe already had a sense for his dramatic and vocal strengths, and “Go Down, Moses” allowed him to emphasize them.

Fig. 5.6: Bledsoe, “Go Down, Moses,” final eleven measures.

Bledsoe quickly set himself apart from the other recitalists in Harlem through his determination to perform in opera. He worked in spirituals, art songs, and musical theatre, but he also performed arias and a costumed scene from Aida on the recital stage in 1930 as he continued to aim for the “real thing.”

27 In an interview entitled “Opera is Brightest Dream Still Unrealized: I have been unable to determine whether or not this was widely practiced in 1920s New York, though I suspect that a complete Amonasro costume was out of the common way.
Singer of Old Man River Wants to Do Otello”, Bledsoe observed, “I think there are enough roles suited to my race to make it worthwhile to strive. Rigoletto, L’Africaine, Otello… and maybe the devil from Faust.” Not only was Bledsoe aiming for opera, he had targeted particular roles in which a majority-white audience would be able to accept an African American man.

The role of Tizan in Frank Harling and Lawrence Stalling’s Deep River proved to be this sort of opportunity in 1926: an exoticized, menacing character, but one who allowed Bledsoe to show his operatic strength and proved a gateway to bigger roles. Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. describes Deep River as “native opera,” (quotation marks his own) set in antebellum New Orleans, complete with Congo Place, a quadroon ball, and a voodoo scene. Bledsoe, playing a “minor but effective” role, was one of few African Americans in the cast. Deep River was short lived, and Maud Cuney Hare pronounced that only the second act was true opera (relegating the first to operetta). Nevertheless, she concluded, “The work caused a stir in music circles, served to call attention to the possibilities of the Negro artist in serious opera, and added materially to the growing reputation of Julius Bledsoe.”

James Weldon Johnson agreed, writing that “This was Mr. Bledsoe’s first appearance on the theatrical stage, and his singing in the voodoo scene was one of the highest spots of the opera.” Bledsoe never mined Deep River for recital material, and the production has largely faded into obscurity. However, Deep River continued to influence how Bledsoe saw his role and his own potential on the operatic stage.

After Bledsoe’s triumphs in Deep River, the straight play On Abraham’s Bosom, and finally Show Boat, he was heralded as one of the up-and-coming artists of Harlem. Bledsoe was

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30 Cuney Hare, Negro Musicians and Their Music, 360.
portrayed as simultaneously gifted and down-to-earth in a way which recalls the verbal portraits of nineteenth-century prima donnas: as both singer and socialite, he was a man who would likely be identified with the ideal of the “New Negro.” He regularly made the social column in the New York Amsterdam News. One report describes how Harlem’s elites went from a weekend party at A’Lelia Walker-Kennedy’s Villa Lewaro to an after-party at Bledsoe’s farm in the Catskills.32 Bledsoe also saved a memento of one of his own parties. After Naomi Cobb finished her studies at Columbia, he threw her a celebration whose guests included A’Lelia Walker and writer and future NAACP head Walter White. The reporter also alluded to “many another [guest] who cannot be recalled after 3:00 A.M.”33 Bledsoe was both an artist and a celebrity.

![Colored Gentlemen Prefer England](image)
![Bledsoe as Gentleman, London, 1931](image)

Fig. 5.7: Bledsoe as Gentleman, London, 1931.34

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33 Untitled clipping, Box 16, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
34 Jules Bledsoe Scrapbook, Box 17, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
The images and captions above emphasize the rarefied world in which Bledsoe moved: the fashion, the champagne, and Bledsoe’s broad, confident smile which states that he is clearly at home among London’s elite. The second also raises an eyebrow at “Ol’ Man River,” and the refrain “He don’t plant taters, he don’t plant cotton, them that plant ‘em is soon forgotten.” In the musical, Joe conflates himself with the forgotten laborers, but the columnist uses the same line to set Bledsoe apart. The headline of the first article, “Colored Gentlemen Prefer England” makes the lesson implicit. Bledsoe becomes an image of European sophistication, luxury, and potential freedom from prejudice. The article casts London as such a potential paradise, warning that French business owners have become more prejudiced because of white Americans and their money. To suggest that white Europeans bore no prejudice was overly optimistic, but throughout his career Bledsoe found success easier to achieve in Europe than North America.

Bledsoe’s focus on concert and operatic repertoire aided his reputation as a model of uplift and of the “New Negro”. The Chicago Defender proudly reported, “Jules Bledsoe, who was headliner at the Capitol theater, New York, last week, appeared in evening clothes and scorned the usual spirituals to open with the ‘Toreador Song’ from the opera Carmen. Score a point for Jules in breaking up the age-old American idea that every nonwhite singer must begin with spirituals and be surrounded with cotton for a setting.” Even in a vaudeville setting, Bledsoe framed himself as an opera singer first. Another Defender review quoted, “Says Irving Weil in the Evening Journal, ‘Most people think of him only as ‘Ol’ Man River’ of Jerome Kern’s Show Boat, but he can get as far away from the Mississippi musically as the Danube and Seine, and

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35 “Colored Gentlemen Prefer England,” 6 July 1931, Box 17, Jules Bledsoe Collection. For more on the experience of African Americans in Europe, see the work of Kira Thurman.
interest you mightily in what he finds there.”³⁷ Weil and the *Defender* both take pains to separate Joe from the sophisticated and educated Bledsoe. Weil’s invocation of the Danube and Seine in contrast with *Show Boat*’s Mississippi suggested that Bledsoe had the same ownership of European “classical” repertoire as he did folk songs, spirituals, or musical theater.

In Shirley Graham’s *Tom-Tom*, Bledsoe took on a role which married both folk and classical sensibilities to his operatic vocal power in his first appearance in fully-staged opera. Graham, who would later marry W.E.B. DuBois, had crafted a sweeping epic of African and musical history and brought it to a massive venue at the Cleveland stadium.³⁸ The three acts were set in Africa at the dawn of the slave trade, on an antebellum plantation, and modern Harlem, respectively. They were tied together by recurring, archetypal characters designated the Girl, the Boy, the Mother, and Bledsoe’s enigmatic Voodoo Man.³⁹

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³⁸ Harry Freeman’s *Voodoo* and Clarence Cameron White’s *Ouanga!* also included voodoo scenes, Freeman’s with an explicitly New Orleans setting.
Fig. 5.8: Bledsoe in Costume as the Voodoo Man\textsuperscript{40}

The Voodoo Man is a shape-shifting role, both villain and hero. In the first act, he is an antagonist bent on sacrificing the Girl to appease the gods and turn back the slavers. By the third act, he morphs into a savior who helps people of African descent return to their homeland, becoming a recurring representation of Africa’s spirit and heritage. Archie Bell of the \textit{Cleveland News} described Bledsoe and his role thus: “Vocal honors last evening were for Jules Bledsoe, best remembered as the ‘Ol’ Man River’ of \textit{Show Boat}. A resounding, vibrant voice, used with power, but discretion. In some of the scenes, the vast stage is cleared and his singing constitutes an intermezzo that links what has come before and what is to come.”\textsuperscript{41} Just as the role of the

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{The Stage}, September 1932, Jules Bledsoe Scrapbook, Box 16, Jules Bledsoe Collection.

Voodoo Man was integral to the opera, Bledsoe was a highlight of the cast. This review also insists on a particular masculine refinement in its description of vocal “power, but discretion.”

Bledsoe was one of the biggest names recruited for the production, and even when reviewers criticized the opera itself, Bledsoe’s performance of the Voodoo Man was praised. Herbert Elwell of the Cleveland Plain Dealer said that “To say this epic of Negro life and Negro Music is an impressive spectacle is to pay it only a mild tribute. It is all of that, though whether it lives up to all of the claims that have been made for it is somewhat doubtful.” At the same time, he placed Bledsoe and his “enormous baritone” which “rolled out like thunder” at the top of his praise of a solid vocal lineup. On the same page of the newspaper, J.C. Daschbach wrote that “Jules Bledsoe, foremost among Negro baritones, received an ovation for his work as the Voodoo Man, the principal character of the opera.”

The Stage, which ran the image of Bledsoe above, said that after Bledsoe’s performances in Cleveland he was bound for the Metropolitan. Bledsoe appeared at the height of his powers, holding his own amid a cast of over one hundred singers, his voice perfectly suited to the job of filling an amphitheater.

Tom-Tom was heralded as something new and important in opera, and in the first flush of the reviews, it seemed that the performance could be transferred from Cleveland to New York or even to Europe. Bledsoe would have welcomed such a vehicle and the opportunities a dramatically interesting role provided. However, the production was not without troubles. In addition to uneven reviews of the score, the Afro-American chronicled problems ranging from the women of the chorus rebelling when the costumes for the first act included exposed breasts, to numerous injuries which delayed the production, to troubling news that not everyone involved

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44 The Stage, September 1932.
had yet been paid. Also, while Tom-Tom had been acclaimed in the African American press, and its premiere had been a social event, the average of 7,000 people at a performance for the season was still fewer than what the Cleveland stadium needed to recoup its expenses. Tom-Tom’s luck did not improve after Cleveland. Even though Graham revised the opera, she was unable to find a conductor and orchestra in New York. Bledsoe also attempted to find a home for it, but came up dry. However, Bledsoe’s presence in Cleveland led to one of the next major breaks of his career, when he was asked to step in and sing the role of Amonasro in Aida.

Bledsoe was a rousing success in Cleveland’s Aida, buoyed by his reputation, his willingness to step into the role at the last minute, and his own performance. A brief from the New York Amsterdam News reports that he took no fewer than sixteen curtain calls, and that the Cleveland Stadium added an additional night of Aida to the season. The Chicago Defender proudly proclaimed the same, emphasizing that Bledsoe had sung with twenty-four hours’ notice and that “Bledsoe, having greater histrionic opportunities in the Verdi opera [than in Tom-Tom], proved that he was not only a fine singer but also a fine actor. This verdict is in accord with all the critics who were fortunate enough to hear him.” The performance was a critical success, if not a financial one. More importantly, Bledsoe had now performed Aida in the United States once, paving the way for his triumph at the Hippodrome.

Bledsoe’s early career provided Bledsoe with both the experience and the persona he needed to take on these roles. His Show Boat fame gave him the weight of a guest star, drawing attention to the entire production. Graham’s opus and the canonic weight of Aida lent him

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gravitas, bolstering his reputation as an agent of musical uplift, and seemingly setting the stage for a full-fledged operatic career. However, even as Bledsoe ascended to higher-profile engagements with larger audiences, he still ran into conflicting ideals about how a Black man should present himself—or be presented—on the operatic stage.

Black Masculinity and Opera

“Opera is when a soprano and a tenor want to make love but are prevented from doing so by a baritone.” – George Bernard Shaw

Despite the wealth of material Jules Bledsoe saved, the archive is nearly silent on his own perspective on his life as an African American man trying to sing opera. Bledsoe was more than happy to paint himself as a quasi-mythological figure in the public eye, Prometheus striding forward for the causes of Art and the Race. In the July 1928 issue of Opportunity, Bledsoe penned an editorial entitled “Has the Negro a Place in the Theatre?” Unsurprisingly, his conclusion was “yes.” He proclaimed, “It is up to the few of us that have gotten past the sentinels at the gate, to fling the gates wide open for our successors.”50 He portrayed himself as a leader among African American artists, a trailblazer, and a beacon for others to follow. However, while he crafted grand images with grand words, he kept his constructions and his day-to-day carefully separate. His daily experience, including his relationship with Freddy Huygens, is only the most obvious of the many things that he never commented on publicly or committed to paper.

Bledsoe traded in images he did not necessarily create himself, born of stereotypes, ideals, and expectations. The New Negro gentleman who appeared in African American papers is one such image, whether socialite or agent of racial uplift. Reviews that question whether

50 Jules Bledsoe, “Has the Negro a Place in the Theatre?” Opportunity, July 1928, Box 16, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
Bledsoe had become too “refined” to sing spirituals in the appropriately “rugged” fashion suggest another view.⁵¹ Yet a third image arises in the New York Times’s review of The Emperor Jones, which emphasized that “He used his brilliant and manly voice with prodigality and with telling dramatic effect.”⁵² Bledsoe dealt with all of these conflicting stereotypes and images through his operatic roles, occasionally deflecting them, at other times leaning in, in order to take the stage. He presented himself as a “gentleman,” but one whom had not forgotten his roots in Texas, as well as a figure of masculine strength which critics read into his vocal affect. However, Bledsoe was still limited in the sort of men he could embody, restricted by prejudice and the weight of tradition to villains, antiheroes, and primitivist stereotypes.

Bledsoe consistently portrayed himself and was portrayed as “manly” or a “gentleman,” skirting any associations of opera with femininity. Some profiles in African American papers emphasized his traditionally “manly” occupations, portraying him as a role model who still embodied Christian, middle-class values. The 1932 column entitled “Bledsoe Hearty Eater, Likes Good Food” is a case in point. It portrays Bledsoe as a meat-and-potatoes man, true to his Texas upbringing, who “does not allow artistic temperament to interfere with his appetite,” instead walking twenty blocks to the theater in order to settle his dinner before performing.⁵³ Earlier that year, Andy Anderson’s profile opened: “The sophistication developed in European capitals and in concert and opera appearances has not robbed Jules Bledsoe of the human touch he revealed here last week when he attributed his success to the prayers of his mother and aunt.”⁵⁴ While European capitals and opera stages were certainly worth bragging about—Anderson also devotes space to Bledsoe’s foreign-made cars and London wardrobe—they were potential dangers which

⁵¹ “The Theater: Jules Bledsoe,” Wall Street Journal, 2 April 1930, 4. This review is discussed in more detail below.
needed to be counterbalanced with a Southern upbringing, respect for family, religious faith, and other signifiers that he remained “one of us.” Bledsoe’s resort in the Catskills further bolstered this image, as he positioned himself as a “gentleman farmer” who also worked with his hands.

Bledsoe’s voice was a key component of these constructions of masculinity. Studying how is complicated by the fact that, despite existing recordings, we cannot actually know what he sounded like. The descriptions of Tom-Tom and Aida, in which Jules Bledsoe fills massive auditoriums with a presence worthy of an ancient Voodoo Man or a raging king, emphasize this disconnect. The vast majority of Bledsoe’s recordings were “Ol’ Man River” or spirituals. Geary states that he recorded Schubert’s “Du Bist die Ruhe” and his own composition “Does Ah Luv You” in England in 1931, but I have been unable to locate or access these recordings. This in itself is significant: only Bledsoe’s spiritual recordings were deemed to be worth chronicling, putting online, or reissuing. When Bledsoe recorded a spiritual, he may have used a “classical” style, but hearing him sing “Ol’ Man River,” “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” or even a French parlor song cannot give an idea of the sheer force it must have taken to fill the Cleveland Stadium or the Hippodrome, bringing thousands of onlookers to their feet in response.

Descriptions of Bledsoe’s voice help, but even they are influenced by the sonic color line. In 1930, Sylvester Russell evaluated him as “A well-trained baritone singer whose voice is sweetest in the middle register with a resonant flow, somewhat racial in timbre.” Russell had been a reviewer for over a quarter-century, and his judgement was likely good. But even good descriptions of timbre fail to convey actual sound, and Russell’s description of “racial” timbre, with no further explanation considered necessary, is a reminder of the influence of the sonic color line on both white and Black listeners. A translation of a review from The Hague also

alludes to the sheer power Bledsoe could muster. “… Jules Bledsoe is complete master of his voice, and can restrain himself whenever he wants. Being a man of good taste, he does this as much as possible. Naturally, he sometimes lets himself go, and then his voice makes us think of the trumpets of Jericho, causing our ears and the very walls themselves to tremble. But even then, it is a trumpet of noble—never of brute force.”\(^57\) If European audiences expected a “primitive,” the reviewer instead insisted that Bledsoe’s power is of a more respectable sort. However, even stating that Bledsoe does not fit the stereotype reinforces it as a potential reality.

Bledsoe’s vocal powers and “thunderous” affect invited perceptions of masculine strength. The vocal strain sometimes described in his singing may have added to that impression. Both Keen of the 1930s \textit{Wall Street Journal} and Todd Decker’s 2015 book describe Bledsoe “straining” for effect, and words such as “pushed” and “strained” were used throughout his career.\(^58\) First, in 1931, a vaudeville reviewer observed that “The singer revealed what seemed to be a very fine high voice, rich and capable of every sort of treatment, despite the fact that in most cases it was very badly pushed.”\(^59\) While Bledsoe’s performance in \textit{Aida} at the New York Hippodrome in 1933 was highly praised, The New York \textit{Herald Tribune} also observed that “He has sung better than he did last night, when, in this scene, his voice sometimes forced and its surface occasionally ruffled.”\(^60\) Carl Diton’s Town Hall review in 1940 suggested that “strain” might have influenced Bledsoe’s high notes: “His personality is commanding but I wonder why he has allowed the years to “roll” around without perceiving the need of the development of a robust top voice. I have heard him make a Leoncavallo A flat on this occasion his G’s were

\(^{57}\) Scrapbook of Jules Bledsoe, Box 17, Jules Bledsoe Collection.  
causing him anxiety.” Bledsoe sought additional vocal coaching in the early 1940s, suggesting that he may have done long-term damage to his voice. “Strain” also suggests struggling and striving, and thus “strain” and “power” in Bledsoe’s voice might have been code for masculinity. The “ideal” operatic sound is effortless. Was Bledsoe simply working through a flaw in his technique? Or was the sound of strain meant to convey a particularly masculine image?

As with many aspects of his career, the baritone roles Bledsoe played were double-edged swords: they gave him access to the stage, but they also trapped him in a particular subset of stereotypes. Nina Sun Eidshiem points out that it was easier for Black baritones to succeed than Black tenors, because baritones often voiced antagonists. Bledsoe was aware of this, having suggested as early as 1930 that not just Othello and Nelusko but Rigoletto and Mephistopheles were roles “suited to his race.” Racism made the very thought of placing a Black tenor in a romantic role—even if he were opposite a white soprano—a ridiculous, even dangerous, notion. In contrast to the happy-go-lucky Joe of Show Boat, most of Bledsoe’s roles were of the antagonistic variety suggested by George Bernard Shaw’s epigram. A few of these were re-inscribed with sympathy by Bledsoe and his audience. Amonasro’s rage at his country’s plight, demanding that Aida betray Radames for the sake of her people, may well have been sympathetic to audiences who faced prejudice and exclusion because of their race. Nelusko in L’Africaine fares much the same way. There is less commentary available on Meyerbeer’s opera, but Gabriela Gomes de Cruz refers to Nelusko’s “radical gesture of resistance” in which he leads his Portuguese captors into a fatal ambush at the hands of his countrymen and wholeheartedly

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63 “Opera is Brightest Dream Still Unrealized,” Milwaukee Leader, 30 Jan 1930, 13.
opposes his queen falling in love with Vasco de Gama.\textsuperscript{64} But Bledsoe’s other canonic roles are a rogues’ gallery of antiheroes and villains: Rigoletto and Boris Godunov, each tragic but the author of his own demise; Tonio of \textit{I Pagliacci}, who turns his fellow clowns against each other with Iago-like flair; the petty tyrant Brutus Jones; and \textit{Faust’s} Mephistopheles.

These roles, in various ways, fit uncomfortably well with pernicious stereotypes of Black masculine violence, brutishness, and lack of self-control. Brutus Jones and Boris Godunov are both unfit monarchs, as the former essentially conned and bullied his way to his throne, and the latter ordered the murder of his eight-year-old nephew to remove him from succession.\textsuperscript{65} Rigoletto and Tonio are cruel jesters, physically and morally deformed, and Mephistopheles is a corrupting libertine. André observes that, even in roles that are not explicitly raced, the audience will still notice the race of the singer, and interpret it through their own cultural history.\textsuperscript{66} The stereotypes of cruelty, cunning, brutishness, and treachery would have been far too familiar to contemporary audiences. Even if Bledsoe never performed in \textit{Johnny speilt auf} or \textit{Porgy and Bess}, he was still viewed through the lens of these characters whom André refers to as “antiheroes,” and through decades of the tawdry trappings of every minstrel show that had ever purported to represent authentic African American life. Audiences were primed to accept Black men as villains, rather than as princely operatic heroes, and Bledsoe’s comments about being “suited” for these roles suggest that he was aware of this ugly weight.

Little detail remains on how Bledsoe played these roles. He never recorded an aria, nor was he filmed in an opera. One is left to glean scant details from newspapers. This is especially true when Bledsoe took the stage as Rigoletto, Boris, Tonio, and Mephistopheles, whom he only

\textsuperscript{64} Gabriela Gomes de la Cruz, “Giacomo Meyerbeer’s \textit{L’Africaine} And the End of Grand Opera,” (Ph.D. Diss, Princeton, 1999): 192.
\textsuperscript{65} Historians have since determined that Godunov was not involved in the murder of Tsarevich Dmitriy Ivanovich, but Mussorgsky believed the legend that Godunov was responsible. (Much like what \textit{Amadeus} did to poor Salieri.)
sang in Holland, Paris, and Stockholm. I have been unable to ascertain whether he performed the roles in full productions or in concert scenes. His previous choices suggest that he would have attempted to “uplift” these roles into a tragic hero or a magnetic villain. At the very least, he was not a man to be content for long with the spotlight resting on anyone besides himself.

Whenever Bledsoe was lionized as “manly,” he also had to contend with exoticism and the idealization of the “primitive” African man. Joseph Auner emphasizes how Krenek’s Jonny spielf auf drew on the popular idea that African and African American entertainers were rejuvenating Europe with fresh blood and invigorating rhythms: primitivism in a nutshell, as European thinkers sought some mythical return to the “natural.” Even though Bledsoe sang classical music and spirituals, rather than Jonny’s jazz, he incurred the same expectations. On his first English tour in 1931, the Defender republished Hannen Swaffer’s review from London, in which he wrote, “Like Paul [Robeson], he has the frame of an athlete. Indeed, when I saw him changing after, he stripped like a heavyweight boxer. Yet, at the Carnegie hall he has been giving high class concerts. When he sings, all the restrained fervor of a race that has been cruelly treated comes out in every note, and there is on his soft tones a quality you seldom here in the voice of a white man.” One could use a checklist: the boxer comparison, mild surprise at the thought of Bledsoe in Carnegie Hall, and the attribution of a “black” quality to his voice, which is explicitly credited to slavery. Yet a Black paper reprinted this as high praise, and Bledsoe may have deliberately intended to evoke athletic masculinity: he opened with “The Toreador Song,” in which Escamillo the bullfighter boasts of his exploits in the ring.

This ideal of primitive masculinity is even more pronounced in discussion of *The Emperor Jones*. Based on O’Neill’s play, Brutus Jones is a former Pullman porter and escaped murderer who swindles his way into becoming the petty tyrant of a Caribbean island before his subjects turn against him and he goes mad and dies in the jungle. In addition to the racial stereotypes inherent in the work, Johnson points out racialized masculinity in the *New York Times* and in European reviews: “Just as Robeson was received as a ‘Giant Negro’ when portraying Brutus Jones, so too Bledsoe was portrayed as having a ‘broad chest’ and a ‘Herculean physique’…. The reviewer evokes Greek mythology and primitivism to marvel at Bledsoe’s ‘enormous’ black masculinity.”

Bledsoe kept translated excerpts of these reviews, and many of them follow the same pattern. Amsterdam’s *De Tribune* attributed “superhuman physical strength” to Bledsoe when emphasizing his fitness for Brutus Jones. The same city’s *Het Volk* wrote that “Exceptionally sonorous of sound is also his speaking voice, and imposing is his musicianship. And in his figure he was the brute, who, at last, does not escape his fate, and who, in spite of his crimes, knows how to evoke sympathy for the tragedy of his lost years.”

The *Residente-Bode* of The Hague emphasized “the great demands on his physical and psychic strength.” These sorts of descriptions were echoed by the American press. When Bledsoe performed *The Emperor Jones* with the Aeolian Opera Company, the *New York Evening Telegraph* praised Bledsoe by saying, “His performance was the sort of thing that baffles description and turns criticism into a vain thing. Here was a primitive magnificence of sheer power which is an exceeding rarity whether in the drama that is spoken or is sung. And it was projected largely through the native splendor of Mr. Bledsoe’s voice.”

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71 Scrapbook of Jules Bledsoe, Box 16, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
simply mean “natural,” a part of Bledsoe’s particular timbre. However, “native splendor” in the same paragraph as “primitive magnificence” is telling. While Sanborn is praising Bledsoe, the adjectives could apply to Brutus Jones just as well.

The fact that these reviews are meant to be positive heightens the impact of their reductionist images. These writers enjoyed the opera, but part of what they enjoyed was this image of the primitive superman, which had as much or more to do with Eugene O’Neill and Louis Gruenberg as it did with Bledsoe. Bledsoe clearly saw Jones as a potential avenue for success, based on his attempts to stage Jones in the United States and to compose his own opera based on O’Neill’s play. However, as with many aspects of Bledsoe’s life, he never explained how he saw the Emperor, how he reconciled the primitivist characters of the European imagination with his own operatic ambitions. Eidsheim observes that Miles Davis and John Coltrane modeled unambiguous masculinity and heterosexuality, offering African American men a space where Blackness was equated with hypermasculinity.73 Jazz Age musicians such as Jonny embodied a similar hypermasculine vibrance. Did Bledsoe enjoy playing this sort of role? Did he use it to further shore up the wall he between his public personae and his private life?

Throughout the creation of all of these images—New Negro gentleman, operatic antihero, symbol of the primitive, unrestrained body—the archive remains completely silent on the subject of Freddy Huygens. The occasional comment or joke in a letter implies that some of their friends knew they were a couple, but nothing is ever said openly. For example, a woman named Millicent wrote to Bledsoe in 1941 (when he had moved to Los Angeles and was living with Huygens) with news from New York, including several couples who had separated or divorced. She commented, “This only leaves you, and Carrie intact. For a while Carrie was

rocking but the boat is sailing nicely now I think."\textsuperscript{74} The clear implication is that Bledsoe is in a relationship which Millicent views as a permanent partnership. While personal letters often mention that Bledsoe should greet Freddy for the writer, Bledsoe’s romantic life is a subject of notable 	extit{incuriosity} among society columns of the 1930s. When writers described his cars or his St. Nicholas Street apartment, they left out any people who accompanied him. Bledsoe certainly seems to have gone to lengths to keep his personal life private, but the lack of interest on the part of any biographical sketch writer makes one wonder if they did not ask because they suspected, and preferred not to confirm.

The gay men at the center of the Harlem Renaissance, with whom Bledsoe was familiar, knew this silence all too well. The 1920s were relatively open compared to the surrounding decades. For example, the Hamilton Lodge drag ball was one of the most-covered events in Harlem by the 	extit{New York Amsterdam News} and other Black newspapers.\textsuperscript{75} But Chauncey goes on to observe that “Gay members of Harlem’s middle class were well aware of this injunction [against public homosexuality] and felt obliged to exercise greater discretion than many workingmen did. This was the case even among the most avant-garde of Harlem’s middle class, the writers and poets of the Harlem Renaissance.”\textsuperscript{76} Even in the 1920s, when Harlem had a flourishing gay community, Bledsoe’s wider ambitions required him to be “discreet.” Once he had met Freddy in the 1930s, at the same time both public opinion and public policy had turned against them, silence was even more important. No matter what public image Bledsoe bore, whether crafted himself or imposed on him by others, a white man as a life partner did not fit.

Scholarship also remains silent about this facet of Bledsoe’s life. Most biographies of

\textsuperscript{74} Letter from Millicent (last name unknown) to Jules Bledsoe, 19 April 1941, Box 1, Folder 20, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
\textsuperscript{75} Chauncey, 	extit{Gay New York}, 259.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 264.
Bledsoe are short lists of his musical achievements. However, Geary, writing in 1989, states that “Bledsoe began a new phase of his career in mid-March 1940 when he and Freddy Huygens, his manager and closest friend, moved to Los Angeles so that Bledsoe could study with Lazar Samoiloff…”77 Did Geary accept the archive at face value, or deliberately decide to extend its silence? She does mention that, at Bledsoe’s funeral, “A spray of red roses from his friend Freddye Huygens covered the casket.”78 Was this merely a description of the scene, or was this Geary’s way of leaving another implicit hint? Geary’s account, and the archival silence, emphasizes why the constructed images of Bledsoe are so important. A man as keenly aware of his legacy as he was did not leave unvarnished accounts. These constructions are what he has left us to work with.

All Things to All People: Bledsoe and “Mismatch Discourse”

The sheer pervasiveness of images of “primitive” or “unrestrained” or “rugged” masculinity conflicted with the opposing images of the opera singer and of the icon of racial uplift. These clashes create a consistent undercurrent in Bledsoe’s reception, whether discussing a recital, a vaudeville set, or simply his public appearance: the “mismatch” between Bledsoe and his repertoire, his surroundings, or some other aspect of his performance. Even if the writer did not actually perceive a disjunction, a conclusion is occasionally so off-base that it is clear something about Bledsoe simply did not register. This “mismatch discourse” followed Bledsoe throughout his career, emphasizing just how contradictory Bledsoe’s reception was. At one time or another, Bledsoe expected to be all things to all people, both the consummate cosmopolitan opera singer and the folk hero of the spiritual, and no one man could bear those expectations.

78 Ibid., 49.
without sometimes falling short.

Bledsoe’s approach to singing spirituals was one of the first targets of this mismatch discourse and the accompanying scrutiny. Irving Weil, who had acclaimed Bledsoe’s European repertoire, later commented, “In fact, he presented [Brahms’ Four Gypsy Songs] in a way that made one forget how alien they must really be a singer of his training and experience.”79 Brahms was not alien to Bledsoe’s extensive training, but Weil allowed a stereotype of Black singers to obscure his view of Bledsoe himself. The vaudeville critic Nat Green was yet more explicit, writing, “Jules Bledsoe, colored vocalist, walked away with the show, despite the fact that he sang Irish and Hebrew songs.”80 His discussion of Bledsoe’s set was just as revealing:

Following intermission, Jules Bledsoe, “Ole Man River” himself, proved a showstopper. Why he doesn’t choose a repertoire of Negro spirituals instead of singing an Irish love song, the Hebrew ‘Eli, Eli,’ and anything but the appealing songs of his race, is a mystery. For most vaudeville audiences his present repertoire is impossible. But at the Palace he was given the greatest reception that has been accorded any artist in a long time, and stopped the show cold with his singing of “Old Man River,” the nearest he got to a “native” song. Has a wonderful voice and would be a sensation anywhere with the right sort of songs.81

What is most remarkable is the sheer air of mystification: Green clearly did not understand how Bledsoe was successful. Green may have focused on his choice of Irish and Hebrew selections, but his immediate suggestion was that Bledsoe should return to “the appealing songs of his race.” So-called “ethnic” songs were common enough fare from white vaudevillians, leaving the impression that Green thought Bledsoe had strayed too far from his “proper” sphere.

Bledsoe also caused concern among both Black and white listeners who assumed that his classical training and popular success meant he had lost his affinity for the spiritual. A Wall

81 Ibid.
Street Journal writer worried about Bledsoe’s pursuit of opera affecting his “natural” (or African American) musicianship as early as 1930. Even if this was merely concern about his ability to sing spirituals, it still sets up a dichotomy between education and technique on the one hand and “authentic” African American expression on the other.

Mr. Bledsoe has apparently been making a study of the song literature of other languages recently, judging from his selections for the current program, which includes the Hebrew lament, ‘Eli, Eli,’ and the ‘Toreador Song’ from Carmen. Mr. Bledsoe sang these songs with ease, understanding, and excellent technique. His venture into this realm seems to have affected the simplicity of his style in the singing of his native negro songs, however.

‘Ol’Man River,’ as Mr. Bledsoe now renders it, is not the rugged work song of Show Boat, nor is ‘Water Boy’ the simple, powerful cry of the southern negro convict which it is meant to be. There is too much affectation and straining for operatic effect in Mr. Bledsoe’s new manner. The fact that he can now sing operatic arias effectively speaks much for his versatility, but he should not allow himself to forget the simple style of folk-song interpretation which established his early reputation.

One can legitimately criticize applying operatic style to non-operatic genres. Todd Decker also describes Bledsoe’s recordings of “Ol’ Man River” as too formal and operatic compared to Robeson’s rendition. Unlike the 1930s concert reviewer, however, Decker acknowledges that Bledsoe’s primary goal was classical musicianship. Also, like Weil, this reviewer suggests that Bledsoe’s art music was “recent,” rather than his primary goal.

Bledsoe’s spirituals also came under criticism from the African American press. Frankye A. Dixon of the New York Amsterdam News applauded Bledsoe’s ventures into opera and Schubert, but mused that “In listening to Mr. Bledsoe’s singing of spirituals, we wonder whether the philosophy of Negro life, absolutely essential to the proper singing of the spiritual, is now missing as a result of ultra refinement.” But Dixon does not make it clear what was missing. A review in Paris voices one possible concern: “At a Paris concert, the Chicago Tribune mused,
“Mr. Bledsoe’s spirituals sounded more or less as if their interpretation had been ‘prepared’ for the white man; while his lieder singing sounded as if he were striving to feel like the white man. If he remained what he is, he would be unique in the history of singing.”

Did Dixon believe, as the Tribune did, that Bledsoe’s spirituals sounded too formal, too operatic? Or was it that Bledsoe seemed to have lost something deeper about his heritage?

These reactions suggest that rather than a simple misalignment of technique and genre, some of Bledsoe’s audience saw and heard a mismatch on a deeper level, the breaking of an ideal. The Wall Street Journal writer’s choice of “rugged work songs,” “simple, powerful cries,” and “native negro songs” descriptors also suggest a certain vision of masculinity: the “primitive” so popular in the 1920s imaginary of jazz, Harlem, and African Americans. A man who appeared in evening dress, whose vocal technique bespoke training, and who sang Carmen on the same vaudeville bill as “Show Boat” was certainly not the “primitive” ideal. As Bledsoe continued to make a name for himself as an opera singer, he continued to face these obstacles.

A sense of a mismatch can also be found in comments about Bledsoe’s deportment and dress. He always performed recitals and vaudeville sets in the manner of a classical singer, in concert dress and with formal manners. One untitled clipping about a vaudeville performance described him in a “waiter’s costume.”

Despite all indications to the contrary, the writer still saw a Black man in a suit through the lens of domestic help. Other writers found Bledsoe’s comportment incongruous, though he was far from the only vaudeville performer to appear in evening dress. One noted bluntly that “Colored baritone, opening after intermission, was a grand slam despite his overbaked concert-hall mannerisms.”

Elias Sugarman described a situation in which Bledsoe’s trunk was late, forcing him to perform in his street clothes. He said, “We like

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85 “Ex-Pres Borno Hears Bledsoe Paris Concert,” Box 17, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
him in street clothes. He looks more like a human being.”

Gail Borden of the Chicago Daily Times made it even clearer just how easily Bledsoe’s hopes could be dismissed when she reflected, “No white could possibly sing [Ol’ Man River] as well, no matter how much better technically he might do it. And in the same argument, I doubt if Bledsoe would do well over at the Civic Opera.”

Bledsoe saved the clipping in his scrapbook, as he saved every review. However, such an offhand rejection—delivered by an African American paper in the cause of “race individuality,” no less—must have rankled.

The idea of a mismatch between Bledsoe and his setting came to a head in the 1933 revue Hi-De-Ho. Maud Cuney Hare’s otherwise-glowing biographical sketch of Bledsoe, whom she had met personally, is very clear on the subject: “The fact that the season of 1932-33 was a difficult one for artists and serious music in general, owing to the world-wide financial depression, may account for Bledsoe’s appearances in Hi-De-Ho, a distinct mélange, which in spite of praises by the press is a vehicle unworthy of his great talent.”

Cuney Hare’s marked preference for the “serious” over the popular is apparent here. But Robert Reiss of the Philadelphia Record describes the scene with similar bemusement.

The star of ‘Hi-De-Ho,’ of course, is Jules Bledsoe, who, as they say in the opera reviews, is in magnificent voice. Having attained the status of star, Bledsoe now appears in evening dress among the mammys, cotton-pickers, and Harlem ruffians of the rest of the cast, and sings, among other selections, a Parisian piece—in French. It’s good, but why do it? Still, with equal appropriateness, Bledsoe might ask, why not?

Randy Dixon, for the African American Philadelphia Tribune, noticed the same phenomenon, reporting, “Mr. Bledsoe, very discreetly, is kept apart from the dizzy pace in which his

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89 Gail Borden, “Negro Gets on American Stage,” Chicago Daily Times, 30 December 1929, Box 17, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
90 Cuney Hare, Negro Musicians and Their Music, 361.
contemporaries engage. He comes out ‘all tuxedo-ed up’ and with rare eloquence and with that rare finesse which only the truly great possess ‘sells’ his numbers.” 92 One could compare him with Sissieretta Jones, who appeared in an evening gown after the caricatured comedy of the first act. By the 1930s such a mélange was no longer common performance practice. However, Bledsoe continued to place his own repertoire and deportment first and foremost, holding himself above the action of Hi-De-Ho, such as it was. J.H. Keen wrote,

Jules Bledsoe, as I have indicated a paragraph or two earlier, wins ringing acclaim for his well-pitched and resonant baritone voice and his admirably selected repertoire of suitable ditties. But when he is called upon to contribute to the slim ‘plot’ of the extravaganza by singing ‘Down Home’—the mammy song entry—he is placed somewhat at a disadvantage by being required to put his pipes to a task that might better have been accomplished by Al Jolson, even though there would have been no possible comparison of the two voices that would not have caused the Jolson face to become crimson. 93

The review is complimentary, in a decidedly backhanded fashion. It is clear that Keen was impressed by Bledsoe’s musicianship and vocal abilities, and the revue, such as it was, was entertaining. But the Jolson comparison draws one short. What does it mean when a blackface performer would be better suited for a role than an actual Black baritone? Is it only a matter of voice type, in which case Keen and Cuney Hare would likely argue that Bledsoe had merely chosen the better part? Or had Bledsoe lost something of his Blackness in the eyes of the audience by separating himself in this way? In some of these commentaries, Bledsoe’s transgression of the sonic color line through “sounding” like an opera singer is read as a deeper betrayal of Blackness, unsettling boundaries that were held to be immutable.

Fall of the Emperor: Bledsoe’s Later Opera Career

“Opera happens because a large number of things amazingly fail to go wrong.”

After Bledsoe’s success in *Aida* in New York, he returned to Europe for yet another triumph: starring in the European premiere of Louis Gruenberg’s *The Emperor Jones*. He wrote exultantly to his aunt Naomi Cobb, “I have never had such wonderful things said of me in my life. And if I never do again, I shall not have lived in vain.”94 Bledsoe’s words were uncannily prescient. His attempts to recreate the success of *The Emperor Jones* in the United States, to headline his own opera company, to star in new operas, and even to write his own work were all stymied. His triumphs in *Aida* show the heights to which Bledsoe could ascend, but his struggle to retain the operatic spotlight highlights the myriad difficulties that attended that quest.

Unlike *Aida*, *The Emperor Jones* has become an obscure relic of the past. The operatic adaptation of Eugene O’Neill’s 1920 play premiered at the Met in 1933 (with Lawrence Tibbett performing the title role in blackface), was staged throughout the 1930s, and then largely disappeared. It has never been videotaped or even recorded in full. Bledsoe was familiar with the requirements and risks of the role, as both Bledsoe and Robeson had starred in the straight play. While one report credits Bledsoe with having appeared in an eight-week run, he was more likely to recall his disastrous single night in Harlem. A retrospective account recalled that the first act went well, but that Bledsoe’s appearance in rags, “reduced to the primitive,” was met with anger and derision from the Harlem audience. The writer suggested that, while the “Intelligentsia” – defined as “Sugar Hill folks and those who knew Carl Van Vechten etc.” had been in favor of O’Neill’s work, the show was not as appreciated by the theatre-goers as a whole, who jeered, “Go home. Put on your clothes. What is this crap?”95 But Bledsoe was one of those “intelligentsia,” down to the address, and the play caught his imagination at once. He made

94 Letter from Jules Bledsoe to Naomi Cobb, 22 March, 1934. Box 1, Folder 3, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
notes, and perhaps even went so far as to write his own operatic setting of *The Emperor Jones*: Johnson found that he attempted to obtain the rights that were ultimately given to Gruenberg, as well as inconclusive evidence that he might still have performed it. A clipping from 1928 states that Bledsoe would be leaving musical theater to star in an opera he wrote himself. “The opera, which Bledsoe spent two years in writing, is based on a stage success of several seasons ago. It is designed somewhat along the lines of Laurence Stalling’s ‘Deep River,’ the American ‘jazz opera’ in which Bledsoe starred.” This may well have been a reference to *Jones*.

Despite Bledsoe’s own hopes—and previous work with Gruenberg, singing his setting of James Weldon Johnson’s sermon-poem “The Creation” with the Boston Symphony Orchestra—he was also not able to take part in the American premiere. Tibbett, one of the Met’s leading baritones, was criticized on multiple fronts for his interpretation, including by the African American press. After having seen Paul Robeson in the film of *The Emperor Jones*, and Jules Bledsoe performing in *Aida* that same summer, writers saw no reason why a white man should play Brutus Jones. R. Vincent Ottley of the *New York Amsterdam News* argued that either Bledsoe or Robeson should have had the role: “This desire is aside from any standard racial reason or reaction. They are accredited and sensitive performers. The blackfaced Tibbett produced a pathetic burlesque.” However, Bledsoe had his chance when he returned to the Netherlands to perform in *Aida* and to premiere *The Emperor Jones* in the spring of 1934.

The European premiere of *Jones* was everything Bledsoe had hoped, and his scrapbook includes several pages of Dutch newspaper articles and translations. Both his singing and acting were praised in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht until he reached the pedestal reprinted by the *Chicago Defender*: “Bledsoe rose here and grew to such a height of humanity,

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98 R. Vincent Ottley, “Are You Listenin’?”
until he stood, without denying his race, as a living link between that which God created white and that which God created black.” 99 The language of uplift associated with his Aida performances still accompanied the primitivism and exoticism of his European reception in reviews such as this, which emphasized Bledsoe as a symbol of something far more widespread than himself. Bledsoe was larger than life in the Emperor’s boots, and the Netherlands performances may have been followed by others. For the first time, Bledsoe had spent several months at a stretch primarily singing in opera, and he came back to the United States determined to claim The Emperor Jones as his own.

Thus began one of Bledsoe’s more ambitious but ill-fated projects, as he labored throughout the rest of 1934 to stage opera in the United States. On July 10, the Aeolian Opera Association made its debut at the Mecca Auditorium with a double-bill of *The Emperor Jones*, starring Bledsoe, and *Cavalleria Rusticana*, featuring Abbie Mitchell as Santuzza. The cast

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*Fig 5.9: The Emperor Jones*¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰From Top left: Photo of Bledsoe in uniform as Jones, photo from Act 2, photo from act 2, publicity poster by Willie Sluijter. First three photos: Box 6, Folder 10, Jules Bledsoe Collection. Sluijter poster reproduced on Artnet.
included Todd Duncan as *Cavalleria’s* Alfio, a year before he originated the role of Porgy in *Porgy and Bess*. A bulletin from the *New Journal and Guide* promised that *I Pagliacci*, *Lakme*, *Rigoletto*, *Carmen*, *L’Africaine*, *Aida*, *Boris Godunov*, and *Otello* were among the upcoming offerings, and the last two would feature Bledsoe as Boris and Iago, respectively. The venture was led by white producer Peter Creatore, but the cast was entirely African American aside from one white tenor, Ternay Georgi, who played Turridu in *Cavalleria* and the Cockney Henry Smithers in *Jones*. This ambitious program seems to have been heavily influenced by Bledsoe: he had already performed *Jones* and *Aida*, but he also claimed familiarity with *Pagliacci’s* Tonio, *L’Africaine’s* Nelusko, Rigoletto, and Boris. If it had worked, Bledsoe could have firmly established his reputation as a baritone in major, well-known operatic roles.

*If*, however, is the operative word, because the Aeolian Opera Company only lasted for a single performance. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported both a small crowd and the fact that conductor Aldo Franchetti was ill. The reporter said Jules Bledsoe had “scored” as Jones, but highlighted some of the problems with the production: a delayed start and an overlong intermission, which suggest organizational issues, and that the chorus was not paid for rehearsals or the single performance. The *Chicago Defender* acclaimed the performances, calling it “some of the finest singing of the year,” and referred to “Harlem turning out en masse,” but these reports seem to have been based more on optimism than reality. The *New York Times* was also impressed with Bledsoe’s performance, observing that “He used his brilliant and manly voice with prodigality and with telling dramatic effect.” The *Afro-American* labelled the

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problem succinctly in an article titled “New York Not Ready for All-Colored Opera.” New York may well have not been ready for African American opera, but a double-bill of Gruenberg and Mascagni was not the easiest to sell. Both works were framed in the press as “popular opera,” and *Cavalleria* was a moderately well-known selection which had also been performed by the Drury Opera Company in 1904. *The Emperor Jones*, however, relied heavily on *sprechstimme* and recitative, with few points that could even be isolated as “arias.” This not-precisely-hummable affair was also still laden with the baggage that had caused it to be booed out of Harlem. Would it have been better to begin with *Carmen* or *Aida*? Regardless, Bledsoe immediately announced plans to take a caravan of *The Emperor Jones* on the road. However, after that first notification, aside from a possible Chicago performance, there was no more word of the Emperor. Bledsoe soon took a role in the Shubert musical *America Sings*, about the life of Stephen Foster, forced to return to *Show Boat* stereotypes in the role of “Old Black Joe.” Bledsoe also sang in *The Emperor Jones* and *Aida* at the Hippodrome in the winter of 1934 with the Cosmopolitan Opera Company, but neither performance drew particular attention.

Since Bledsoe had succeeded in Europe, and his American attempts at opera had mostly been thwarted, it is no surprise that he turned to Europe, living there almost full-time from 1935 through 1938, when he returned to the United States in the shadow of World War II. In early 1935, he wrote to his aunt Ruth that, in the wake of his grandmother’s death, “I am just staying home, studying and preparing for a greater work, a bigger life.” By November, he was at sea, and he wrote to his aunt Naomi that “I decided I’d come and work here for a while. By hanging around New York, I would have been forced to accept terrible cuts in salary and work when and how they pleased. Well, you see I’ve come too far to turn back now. I must maintain my dignity.”

and that of my accomplishments and talents. I expect to appear in concerts, opera, and high class musical and theatrical productions.”¹⁰⁷ Several letters from Freddy Huygens to Naomi Cobb outline how he was seeking opera and concert opportunities rather than music halls, though he played the latter as well. The men saved press accounts from Europe, sending Cobb clippings in Dutch, Swedish, and German. However, Bledsoe’s return to the United States found him with an even steeper slope to navigate as he dealt with a public which had moved on in his absence. Bledsoe once again responded with yet greater ambition, in the form of his own opera.

The opera Bondage was an adaptation of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, in which Jules Bledsoe intended to play Uncle Tom. It was also the second of his opera compositions, after the jazz opera/Emperor Jones attempt of the early 1930s. After Bledsoe’s return from Europe, he lived at his farm in New York, drafting the hundreds of sheets of material that now reside at Baylor University and the Schomburg Center. Most of the pages are outlined in a piano/vocal format. Some scenes consist only of melody lines, with a few sketched accompaniment notes. Bondage was meant to be a showcase of African American artistry and culture on the order of Tom-Tom, deliberately avoiding stereotypes of African American performance practice. Bledsoe’s role would have been that of a leader, marrying cutting-edge music to an expansive sense of history. Bondage never materialized, but the opera still illuminates Bledsoe’s operatic ideals.

¹⁰⁷ Letter from Jules Bledsoe to Naomi Cobb, 9 November 1935. Box 1, Folder 5.
Fig. 5.10: Opening page of Bondage.  

Bledsoe’s ambitions for Bondage as the vehicle for his comeback dwarfed all of his previous enterprises. In January of 1939, Bledsoe laid out his plan to Lillian Hunter, a friend who worked for the New York Amsterdam News and who had helped him arrange concerts. He mentioned that he had reached out to the WPA about having it presented as part of the New York World’s Fair, explaining: “I have conceived and written the work with the sole idea of producing it in Harlem, amongst the people whose History and very existence itself have been influenced by this very famous story…. I would like to have my opera produced and sung right there on Seventh Ave. I want the scenery done by Negro Artists, I want a Negro orchestra as much as is

possible, and I want a Negro Exhibit in the lobby.’” Bledsoe goes on to explain that he wants to show on a world stage that Harlem and that African Americans have more to offer than what he dismissively refers to as “jungle-jazz.” It is difficult to tell from the context of the letter whether Bledsoe professed that opinion of jazz himself, or whether he merely referenced the stereotypes around the genre. Either way, Bledsoe makes it very clear that this is distinctly not a “jazz opera,” but an African American story in an operatic idiom. He continued to promote the opera in 1939: when working on a radio program with NAACP chair Walter White, Bledsoe offered both his African Suite and excerpts from Bondage as musical numbers, helpfully adding that Bondage was being dedicated to White himself.

Despite all of Bledsoe’s work, however, Bondage was never performed. For that matter, he never programmed any excerpts of it on his own concerts, seemingly dropping the project for good around 1940. Bledsoe’s subject matter was the first potential problem. Geary suggested, “…it presented such a sentimental view of the black experience that it did not appeal to a generation of blacks who wanted to cultivate the positive aspects of their culture.” Uncle Tom’s Cabin bore the weight of nearly a century of stage shows, minstrel parodies, and adaptations both aspirational and downright insulting. “Uncle Tom” had been an insult for at least a generation of African Americans by the late 1930s. Bledsoe, fresh from a different, if parallel, race conversation in Europe, may have been happy to ignore the associations of the book—after all, he reserved the role of Tom for himself—but he could not convince other performers, producers, and audiences to do the same. The nineteenth-century sentimentality of Uncle Tom’s Cabin may have been perfect for the operatic style that Bledsoe brought to the composition, but the result was a work that, regardless of its musical merits, was approximately

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109 Letter from Jules Bledsoe to Lillian Hunter, 14 January 1939. Box 1, Folder 7.
110 Letter from Jules Bledsoe to Walter White, 2 February 1939. Ibid.
fifty years too late. Bledsoe may have wanted to reclaim Tom and recast the work without minstrel associations, but he could not entirely free it from that shadow.

Bledsoe’s Bondage was a modern opera, employing the nineteenth- and twentieth-century idioms in which he had been immersed throughout his career. Bledsoe was particularly Romantic in his accompaniments, using dramatic effects such as melismas, runs, and thick chords in the orchestral parts to set off syllabic vocal lines meant to emphasize the text and the chorus’s close, hymn-like harmonies. Bledsoe also drew from techniques in the twentieth-century operas he had performed. While some of the text is rhymed, others sections are prose. There are some clearly demarcated musical numbers, but most of the sheaves of manuscript paper are marked in scenes rather than individual arias or duets, after the manner of Wagner and his proteges. Bledsoe chose both modernist and “traditonal” operatic techniques to keep focus on the actors and their emotional investment in their characters, bringing the power and nuance out of relatively simple vocal lines just as Bledsoe strove to do in his own performances.

Act 1, Scene 2: “Uncle Tom’s Prayer—O, Lawd, Have Mercy!”, which Bledsoe would have performed himself, articulates Bledsoe’s arioso style. Despite the name, Bledsoe avoids any aural hints of the traditional spiritual. There is no repetition or rhyme in the text, and the melody is full of wide jumps and chromatic lines. Instead, it sounds like twentieth-century opera, as Bledsoe’s B flats and G naturals rub against the A drone in the bass in an example of modernist-inflected tonal harmony. This scene exemplifies how Bledsoe attempted to step away from sentimental or minstrel productions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin, by avoiding the sonic signifiers of those works.
Fig. 5.11: Act 1, Scene 2, Tom’s Entrance.

As the aria progresses, the rhythm of the text accelerates just as the accompaniment thickens. Bledsoe resists steady or repeated rhythmic patterns, instead attempting to approximate speech in the lyrics. The sparse accompaniment suggests that Bledsoe intended to take full advantage of the possibilities of *parlando*. The clear and legible notation of this section, compared to the larger, scrawled hand of Figure 9, implies that it was a later draft, already subject to much thought and several revisions.
Fig. 5.12: Act 1, Scene 2, Continued

Despite Bledsoe’s care, *Bondage* had far too much stacked against it: Bledsoe’s own fading star, the difficulties attending opera production, and the baggage attached to the subject matter. Any one of those could sink a performance. All of them meant that *Bondage* never really had a chance. After dropping the opera, Bledsoe continued searching for a new route to the stage.

Bledsoe’s saga highlights nearly all of the issues which can befall an opera production or an opera singer’s career. Money is one of the first of these. None of his operatic ventures were
financial successes: they ranged from the “covered expenses” of the Hippodrome performance to the outright flop and unpaid singers of the Mecca Temple double bill. Bledsoe’s letters also reveal that for every opera which reached an audience, another was stymied in the planning. Clarence Cameron White’s *Ouanga!* was supposed to be presented in Paris in 1932, with Bledsoe playing Haitian leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines.112 Bledsoe and White corresponded about the opera through the 1930s, as multiple sponsors and opportunities fell through. *Ouanga!* was not actually performed until the 1950s, when it was staged by the Dra-Mu Negro Opera Company in Philadelphia and Xavier University in New Orleans. It reached its highest profile when Mary Cardwell Dawson’s National Negro Opera Company presented it in concert at Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera in 1956. This was a landmark of its own—the first time the Met allowed an outside company to perform on its stage—but the opera has not been performed since then.113

Mary Cardwell Dawson, the National Negro Opera Company’s indefatigable organizer, specifically pursued Bledsoe for her fledgling opera company in 1942. The NNOC had already performed *Aida* as their inaugural production in 1941, and she hoped that he would take on the role of Amonasro in a subsequent performance. She appealed to his talent and his duty: “It makes me so sad when I see persons of your caliber not taking the lead in these operas.”114 In her second letter, she promised to pay him in advance of the performances and said, “We must have you.” However, in the third and final letter, she offered Bledsoe $200 plus expenses for his part in the planned 1943 production. Bledsoe regularly charged $500 (or more if he could) for a

114 Jules Bledsoe Collection Box 1, Folder 1.
single recital. He did not save his responses to Dawson, $200 for the work that a production of Aida would entail could not have been an appealing prospect. Bledsoe was chronically short of cash (his letters attest to a habit of never paying any bill unless he had been asked at least twice) and he may have thought it would be easier and more lucrative to schedule a recital instead.

Bledsoe continued to work on opera projects with other composers into the 1940s. In his sparsely-kept daybook from 1940, Bledsoe mentions meeting with the composer Jacques Wolfe about an opera based on John Henry, after Wolfe’s musical version on Broadway, starring Paul Robeson, flopped earlier that year.\textsuperscript{115} Wolfe was the composer of “Short’nin Bread” and the quasi-spiritual “De Glory Road,” two of Bledsoe’s concert warhorses. Handwritten John Henry notes in Bledsoe’s papers suggest that he was also considering the project. In one of the many “What if’s?” of Jules Bledsoe’s life, one wonders what would have happened if World War II had not occurred when it did, or if he had lived to return to Europe in the aftermath, as Harry Freeman, who knew him personally, indicated that he intended to do.\textsuperscript{116} As it was, when he returned from Europe in 1938, he never performed in an opera again.

\textbf{Da Capo: Bledsoe’s Late-Career Recitals}

In some ways, placing Bledsoe’s concert programming at the end of his story is misleading, as he planned frequent recitals throughout his life. Reviews of concerts interspersed with vaudeville and opera performances illuminate how Bledsoe was viewed during those periods. However, from his return from Europe in 1938 to his death in 1943, Bledsoe’s primary activity was concertizing, and the way he went about programming concerts and arranging tours shows a consistent strategy as he aimed to be seen as both an interpreter of operatic and art song

\textsuperscript{115} Jules Bledsoe Collection Box 3, Folder 12. Texas Collection, Baylor University. Also David E. Weaver, \textit{Black Diva of the Thirties: The Life of Ruby Elzy} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004), 152.
\textsuperscript{116} Harry Lawrence Freeman, \textit{The Negro in Music and Drama}, 48. Columbia Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
repertoire, a voice for the oppressed, and a composer and intellectual in his own right.

In some accounts, Bledsoe framed this as a change of focus, or a return to his musical roots. Cuney Hare depicted Bledsoe as a concert artist at heart even in the early 1930s, quoting him thus: “I love concert work—for after all, that is my life, the life I love—the dignified, glorious work of the concert stage. It grips one with tendrils lighter than a mist yet drawing and holding as steel talons. That is my life; the life I have trained for.”\(^{117}\) Some of what Bledsoe stated rings true here. He had indeed trained as a concert soloist, and the idea of seeking out “dignified, glorious work” is much like what he told his aunt. However, Bledsoe was also not above telling someone what he thought they wanted to hear, especially when that person was a potential advocate and patron, with a distinct bias in favor of what she viewed as high art.

There were as many practical reasons for Bledsoe to turn to concertizing as there were artistic. The primary one was that, after he had spent most of his professional time and energy in Europe for the last several years, Bledsoe found it difficult to get work in 1938 and 1939. He needed to put himself back in the public eye, and he was all too familiar with the complications that attended large-scale productions. A recital only required himself, an accompanist, and a hall. Bledsoe had sung at New York’s Town Hall immediately upon his return in June of 1938, so he took out a mortgage on his farm and booked the same auditorium once more for January of 1940, preparing for a comeback concert and creating a model that he would follow in future performances. Figure 5.13 reproduces the program for the evening.

\(^{117}\) Cuney Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music*, 360-1.
### I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Composer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Per la gloria d’adoravi</td>
<td>Bononcini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In questa tomba</td>
<td>Beethoven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non piu andrai (<em>Le Nozze de Figaro</em>)</td>
<td>Mozart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ah! Non avea piu lagrime (Recitativo and aria from <em>Maria de Rudenz</em>)</td>
<td>Donizetti</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Composer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rondel</td>
<td>J. de Fontenailles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lied Maritime</td>
<td>D’Indy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandoline</td>
<td>Debussy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chanson Triste</td>
<td>Duparc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chevauchée Cosaque</td>
<td>Fourdrain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### III: Songs of Freedom and Hope

“This group of songs is dedicated to the victims of racial, religious, and political persecution, through whose suffering we in America have again been made conscious of the true meaning of Freedom and Democracy. Refugees of all creeds and faiths come to these shores from abroad to escape hysterical prejudices now prevailing in their homelands, in quest of the ideals which are the very foundation stones of Democracy. Our statutes may limit their numbers, but, there is no limit to our sympathy and to the efforts that we may exert in helping them become true Americans. This is the very essence and substance of Democracy.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Composer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>War Song of Tyrtaeus</td>
<td>Jan Sibelius</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biblical Song</td>
<td>Anton Dvořák</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pagan Prayer (Countee Cullen)</td>
<td>Jules Bledsoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Kaddish of My Ancestry</td>
<td>Marks Cherniavsky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Intermission*

### IV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Composer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gesang Weyla’s</td>
<td>Wolf</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Der blinde Knabe</td>
<td>Schubert</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ich grolle nicht</td>
<td>Schuman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Der Erlkönig</td>
<td>Schubert</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### V: Negro Spirituals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Song</th>
<th>Composer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O Mary! Where is Yo’ Baby?</td>
<td>Arr. R.E. Kennedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What a Tryin’ Time</td>
<td>Arr. H. Gaul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dere’s a Man Goin’ Roun’</td>
<td>Arr. C.C. White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Go Down, Moses!</td>
<td>Arr. Jules Bledsoe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Fig. 5.13: Bledsoe’s Town Hall Concert, January 28, 1940.*

In many ways, what Bledsoe did in this program mirrored how he had structured concerts throughout the 1930s. Those concerts followed the standard format of a vocalist’s recital,
opening with a set of Italian arias and art songs, followed with sets of arias in French and German. An English or American singer typically closes a program with a set of English pieces. Bledsoe used two, typically placing a set of secular “Negro Songs” before a concluding array of spirituals. On this occasion he opened with his Italian selections, nodding at Beethoven and using Mozart, Donizetti, and Boconcini to present his operatic credentials. He also included sets of French and German pieces, emphasizing that he was a master vocalist, fluent in all of the styles and languages one would expect a professional to know. Bledsoe had performed all of the Italian, French, and German pieces on concert before, as well as his concluding spirituals.

Bledsoe’s innovation on the Town Hall concert was his “Songs of Freedom and Hope”: a set of songs crafted for political as well as artistic unity. By calling out specific injustices and prejudices, even though the U.S. was not yet at war, he presented himself as an engaged artistic and a social leader. When he included his own setting of Countee Cullen’s text among Dvořák, Sibelius, and Cherniavsky, he also took the opportunity to remind the world that his compositional ambitions were undimmed. Bledsoe shrewdly placed himself among well-known nationalists, but did not attempt to appear equal to Schubert, Schumann, or Beethoven. The New York Times observed that “Mr. Bledsoe had arranged a program well calculated to display versatility in a wide range of styles. It contained a particularly significant group entitled ‘Songs of Freedom and Hope’.” The reviewer went on to quote Bledsoe’s explanation in the program at length. However, they said less about Bledsoe’s performance, only that “he was well received by an audience of good size,” and “The varied offerings were delivered with an

118 This was not the first time that Bledsoe had done this: at one point he did a radio show with Walter White of the NAACP providing music history, and he had starred in a three-part radio series from the BBC on the history of African music, featuring his own song cycle, the “African Suite.”
emotional warmth that made an immediate appeal.”

Bledsoe’s setting of “Pagan Prayer” illuminates how he wanted to portray himself as both a composer and intellectual. As he did with Bondage, Bledsoe avoided the sonic signifiers of the jazz or the spiritual. Instead, he used several of the tactics which he had previously applied to spirituals and operatic arias in the form of an early twentieth-century art song. He began by modifying Cullen’s text, as shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Pagan Prayer” Text by Countee Cullen</th>
<th>“Pagan Prayer” Lyrics by Jules Bledsoe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not for myself I make this prayer,</td>
<td>Not for myself I make this prayer,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But for this race of mine</td>
<td>But for this race of mine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That stretches forth from shadowed</td>
<td>That stretches forth from shadowed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>places Dark hands for bread and wine.</td>
<td>places Dark hands for bread and wine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For me, my heart is pagan mad,</td>
<td>Our Father God, our Brother Christ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My feet are never still,</td>
<td>So are we taught to pray;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But give him hearths to keep them</td>
<td>Their kinship seems a little thing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>warm In homes high on a hill.</td>
<td>Who sorrow all the day!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For me, my faith lies fallowing,</td>
<td>Our Father God, our Brother Christ,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I bow not till I see,</td>
<td>Are we alien kin?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But these are humble and I believe;</td>
<td>That to our plaints your ears are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bless their credulity.</td>
<td>closed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your doors are barred from within!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For me, I pay my debts in kind,</td>
<td>Our Father God, our Brother Christ,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And see no better way,</td>
<td>Retrieve my race again!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bless these who turn the other cheek</td>
<td>So shall you compass this black sheep,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For love of you, and pray.</td>
<td>This pagan heart of mine. Amen.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our father, God, our Brother, Christ -</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So are we taught to pray;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Their kinship seems a little thing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who sorrow all the day.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Father, God; our Brother, Christ,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or are we bastard kin,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That to our plaints your ears are</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>closed, Your doors barred from within?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

120 Ibid.
Bledsoe’s abbreviated setting of Cullen’s text slightly changes the meaning, while suiting Bledsoe’s favorite compositional strategy of building to a finale in order to showcase vocal power. Bledsoe cut the second through fourth stanzas of Cullen’s poem, leaving him with four verses and allowing every stanza after the first to start with the invocation “Our Father God, our Brother Christ”. This also, however, cuts the verses where Cullen frankly states his own unbelief. Without those stanzas, the poem’s speaker still wants to believe as they wrestle with their faith: a sentiment the churchgoing Bledsoe might have found closer to his own experience. Bledsoe’s only other edits are to punctuation and changing Cullen’s raw “bastard kin” to the more decorous “alien kin.” Bledsoe may not have cared for the phrase, or may not have wanted to refer to his audience as “bastards” in a comeback recital. “Alien’s” sense of “strange” works in context, and the word carries a Biblical resonance which Bledsoe would have appreciated.

In the composition, Bledsoe uses many strategies that he also applied in “Go Down, Moses,” nearly fifteen years before. The song opens in D flat major, which would likely have fallen within Bledsoe’s comfortable range. Bledsoe modulates to F minor for the last ten measures of the song as he repeats, “This pagan heart of mine. Amen.”, allowing him to ascend to a final F just as he did in “Go Down, Moses.” The first stanza unfolds over a simple, repeated eighth-note arpeggio pattern, which is further accented by rolled chords and crossed-hand notes (see mm 30 in Figure 5.15 below). In the third verse, Bledsoe uses recitative-like whole note chords, allowing him the freedom to emphasize the rhythm of the text. The importance of this line is further set off with accent marks, suggesting a half-sung, half cried-out delivery of the
expression of hopelessness. The accompaniment throughout the song is often repetitive, clearly meant to support the vocal line.

Fig. 5.15: “Pagan Prayer,” mm 30-35.

As part of his strategy to showcase his political and artistic savvy, Bledsoe turned the final verse of “Pagan Prayer” into an operatic climax. The final F minor section pairs extends high notes in the vocal line with crashing chords in the piano, while the pedal chord within the final F minor “Amen” echoes a plagal cadence and the more traditional “Amen” found in hymnody. F minor have also been a practical choice. Carl Diton commented that “on this occasion his G’s were causing him anxiety.”\(^{121}\) If Bledsoe was struggling with a G, the F might

\(^{121}\) Ibid.
have still had the confident ring Bledsoe was hoping to access.

Fig. 5.16: “Pagan Prayer,” mm 45-52.

Bledsoe avoided any audible signifiers of Blackness in “Pagan Prayer,” unless he counted his own voice as such. Even though it is a prayer, he did not set it like a spiritual, or with any syncopation or other markers of “jazz” or “Black music” in 1940. Countee Cullen was a major poet of the Harlem Renaissance, but Bledsoe took no other steps to evoke that era for his listeners. He left no notes about “Pagan Prayer” outside of the manuscript and the fair copy, and said nothing about his philosophy of its composition. Bledsoe composed other songs in jazz and spiritual idioms: likewise, he composed songs that would not have been out of place on a nineteenth century parlor piano. However, in “Pagan Prayer,” he married an influential African American poet to the idiom of the art song. His theatrical showmanship suggests that, even if he
could not sing opera, he could compose operatic songs. In doing so, he expanded what the cry of an African American man, his struggles with faith and with life, could sound like on stage.

During this same period, however, Bledsoe also struggled with his voice. While he insisted publicly that any difficulties related to the Town Hall were the result of a heavy cold, he acknowledged elsewhere that his voice was suffering as he reached his early forties. Lazar Samoiloff, who would become his voice teacher in Los Angeles, wrote to him, “I just read in the special edition of Musical America a notice about your concert in Town Hall. They found fault with your singing in comparison with old times when you sang so beautifully. Let’s hope you’ll be successful in your singing Sunday and that you will be able to come here to work with me and bring your voice back to the old standard.”

This is not necessarily surprising. It takes care, effort, and a certain amount of luck to continue to muster Bledsoe’s trademark vocal power into middle age. As Bledsoe left New York, he hoped to rebuild both his voice and his career.

In Los Angeles, Bledsoe and Huygens set to their work in earnest. The letters from 1940-1943 in the Baylor archive show how systematically the two men approached revitalizing Bledsoe’s career through concert performances. They informed colleges and universities when Bledsoe intended to be in the area, and kept track of who responded and how. Bledsoe’s personal letters to his contacts also show that he was aware of his market and his competition. In one letter to a friend, he requested: “I am coming East this spring to do some singing. I would like you to put me in touch with the biggest and most progressive church in Philadelphia, as I would like to sing there. I shall be that way in April or May.”

Bledsoe himself regularly attended a Baptist church in Los Angeles, and cultivated that connection to appear at other African American Baptist churches, but he was happy to cast a wider net for performance opportunities.

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122 Letter from Lazar Samoiloff to Jules Bledsoe, 19 February 1940, Box 1, Folder 10, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
123 Jules Bledsoe to Scholley P. Alexander, 4 February 1941, Box 1, Folder 17, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
He also kept track of other singers. He wrote to another acquaintance in Washington, D.C., “I expect to be East in April. I heard that Catherine Jarboro had a very successful concert in one of the local churches there last season and I would appreciate it very much if you would write me the name of church and pastor and give me an idea of prices charged for same.”

Bledsoe’s next major event continued to emphasize social and political engagement through his “Ode to America.” This piece, the cornerstone of his 1941 tour, was composed for baritone soloist (himself,) choir, and either orchestra or piano. He advertised the work as a way to give choirs of all ability levels a way to participate in his recitals. This work also brought him renewed national attention, after he performed it with the National Youth Administration’s Philadelphia Negro Mixed Chorus on a broadcast from Hyde Park with Eleanor Roosevelt.

![Bledsoe with Eleanor Roosevelt](image)

Fig. 5.17: Bledsoe with Eleanor Roosevelt.

Bledsoe deliberately sought this opportunity, dedicating the song (which prays for the preservation of the country’s leader), to President Roosevelt, and reaching out to contacts in

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124 Jules Bledsoe to Erskine Roberts, 4 February 1941, Box 1, Folder 17, Jules Bledsoe Collection.
125 Image One from the Historic Waco collection, image 2 from Texas Collection online.
Washington, D.C. to make sure it was seen. The broadcast also included African American spirituals, including Bledsoe singing his own arrangement of “Go Down, Moses.”

Roosevelt accepted the ode on behalf of the president, complimenting Bledsoe’s performance. Other details of the occasion are more difficult to find. While it was covered extensively in the African American press, but most of that coverage was focused on the historical significance of the event rather than musical analysis. The Chicago Defender quoted Bledsoe thus:

> Conditions have been far from ideal in the United States for the Negro race, but we have fundamentally sound reasons to be thankful that we are Americans, as have the people in every other minority group living in our country. I am sure the Negro people would not sacrifice their American citizenship to live in France or Germany, although in some superficial aspects they may receive better treatment there.

Bledsoe’s dismissal of prejudice might sound flippant, but he had already begun to raise the alarm about the progress of the war in Europe. In 1940, he opined in an interview:

> It is a very sad situation that these fine people should be exposed to ruthless invasion. For several years I had the pleasure of living with the peoples of Finland, Poland, Norway, Sweden, Holland, and Belgium. Nowhere have I received greater respect or consideration.

Since Hitler came to power in Germany, no Negro has been allowed to perform, so struct has been Hitler’s national program against non-Aryans. I have traveled in Germany extensively but was never allowed to give a recital there even though many influential art patrons appealed to the minister of arts.

Slavery and oppression are slavery and oppression and people are just as much slaves who are forced to yield mentally to the will of dictators as they are under any other condition of servitude. The defeat of these smaller nations of Europe is more serious than many of us are aware. They represented a formidable bulwark of tolerance, kindless, and culture of the highest order.

Bledsoe’s patriotic music—the Ode was the most successful of several attempts—was both directed toward current national sentiment and an expression of his own situation. His words to the Journal and Guide show his concern on the eve of war, and gratitude for a safe harbor, no

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126 “NYA Broadcast to Start Music Week,” Atlanta Daily World, 4 May 1941, 5.
matter how flawed that harbor might be.

Where “Pagan Prayer” is particularly personal, “Ode to America” is more general: a nationalistic prayer which Bledsoe intended to be accessible to other soloists and other choirs, while still serving as a vehicle for his own performances. The text, focusing on the beauty of nature, national virtues, and the good of the president, is similar to such patriotic hymns as “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee” and “America the Beautiful.” The Atlanta Daily World reported that Bledsoe had been inspired by the ode on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., looking out from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. He had finished the lyrics by the time he returned to California. The juxtaposition of national monuments and the quintessentially American coast-to-coast drive form a quasi-mythical origin story for the “Ode,” and portray Bledsoe as a composer and a performer acting as a vessel for some great American spirit

Throughout Bledsoe’s “Ode to America,” simplicity is Bledsoe’s byword. As he and Huygens advertised the “Ode” as the cornerstone of Bledsoe’s 1941 touring, they emphasized that performing the number would require minimal rehearsal on the part of local choirs. The choral parts for the Ode are written in homophonic four-part harmony, similar in both texture and harmonic content to what one might see in a hymnal. The idiom would have been familiar to church choirs and college groups alike.

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129 “Bledsoe Ode is Inspiring to Many,” Atlanta Daily World, 9 June 1941, 2.
The baritone solo was also written in this approachable style: unlike “Go Down, Moses,” and “Pagan Prayer,” which were primarily vehicles for Bledsoe, he wrote “Ode to America” with the intent to publish from its conception. Since he wanted the “Ode” to be accessible for high school as well as adult ensembles, he wrote the solo with those limitations in mind. The line is simple, stepwise, and very diatonic. The solo recurs three times as a verse, with different texts set to the same melody. It would have been solidly within Bledsoe’s comfortable range, with the long, stepwise lines and suspensions he could turn to dramatic effect. These techniques occur in “Go Down, Moses,” and “Pagan Prayer” as well, suggesting that Bledsoe’s handling of this melodic material may have been part of the emotional delivery for which he was praised.
Like the Town Hall Concert, “Ode to America” gained Bledsoe readmittance to the spotlight. The same Defender article which quoted him noted that the ode had been widely sung over Memorial Day of 1941, less than a month after the broadcast with Roosevelt.\textsuperscript{130} The Pittsburgh Courier also alludes to a nearly sold-out concert in the wake of the Hyde Park appearance.\textsuperscript{131} Bledsoe’s concertizing was hampered in late 1941, however, when he was acting in the film Drums of the Congo and broke his leg badly enough that he was bedridden for several months. The role of an African chief—one which had given Bledsoe so much success under the title of Amonasro—had dealt him one last career setback, from which he never fully recovered.

\textsuperscript{130} “Jules Bledsoe Goes Philosophical Again,” 20.
\textsuperscript{131} “Bledsoe Concert Points to ‘Sell Out’ House,” The Pittsburgh Courier, 10 May 1941, 8.
before his death in 1943. The “Ode to America” broadcast was his last endeavor which drew major national attention.

While not explicitly operatic, Bledsoe’s “Ode to America” performances were part of his overall program as an opera singer just as “Pagan Prayer” was. A larger-than-life paean to the United States and a larger-than-life plan to publicize it speak to a certain operatic scope. “Ode to America” also served as a hook. Bledsoe’s 1940s programs show that he continued to perform arias and art songs. By advertising the “Ode” as a concert anchor, providing a stage for a local choir and incentive for said choir to invite their friends and family, he gained access to a stage on which he could sing his customary variety of music.

Bledsoe’s performance of patriotism on the eve of World War II also speaks to a new image he was creating. As a near-expatriate, he wanted to burnish his reputation as a loyal American citizen. His patriotic activities—his last tour, in 1943, was to promote war bonds—can be compared to the strategies prima donnas used to bolster their public images. Jenny Lind, for example, used modesty, piety, and charity to win over skeptical audiences. Bledsoe rarely turned to modesty, but he used spirituals and religious language to convey “old time religion,” and framed his patriotic music and concertizing as a public service. Even as he took Hollywood jobs in 1942 and 1943, he continued to sing for scholarship funds and refugee collections, especially for refugees from Holland. In a press release from the Hollywood Concert Management (the official name under which Huygens acted as his manager), they claimed that “This great Negro artist will lift his voice for a cause that is not only racial in its scope, but civic.”132 Bledsoe continued to frame himself as an agent of uplift, regardless of the forum in which he stood, using the same strategies he had developed in his operatic career through the end of his life.

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Conclusion

Fig. 5.20: Jules Bledsoe, undated.

Jules Bledsoe was a man who loomed larger than life: a baritone with a booming voice who pursued opera with a quixotic intensity. His quest took him through America and Europe, and across vaudeville, concert, and operatic stages, singing canonic warhorses, new premieres, and his own compositions. Bledsoe’s operatic odyssey met with some successes, such as his historic portrayals of Amonasro and the European success of *The Emperor Jones*. He was also stymied by scores which were never performed, performances that could not turn profits, and the conflicting, exacting stereotypes which accompanied his audiences to the theater, leaving Bledsoe to reinvent himself and return to work once more. And Bledsoe did, through reinvention after reinvention, project after project, ceaselessly pressing forward to the moment when he had set his star firmly among the foremost ranks of operatic baritones and of advocates for African American music and theater. Bledsoe’s fleeting successes left less of a historical imprint than the careers of Roland Hayes or Paul Robeson. But a closer examination of his journey and his multifaceted career helps to illuminate the under-studied experiences of African American men on the operatic stage, as well as the strategies that one man used to make his mark despite all odds.
Coda: Passing the Torch

On September 27, 2021, the Metropolitan Opera opened its season with Terrence Blanchard’s *Fire Shut Up in My Bones. Fire*, based on the 2014 memoir of the same name by journalist Charles Blow, was the first opera by an African American composer and librettist to be staged at the Met.

In her program notes for the work, “Blaze of Glory,” Naomi André wrote,

*Fire Shut Up in My Bones* is an opera that encompasses multitudes. With Blanchard’s style of bringing jazz, gospel, and blues together, it creates a dynamic but lyrical operatic world that both propels the drama and allows it to bloom. The story has painful and tender moments, spanning the last third of the 20th century and into the present day, a period during which the United States has witnessed rapid yet uneven changes in attitude about manhood, sexuality, and their intersections with race.¹

However, André made it clear that the “multitudes” involved in the production were not merely musical genres. She foregrounded the multitudes of people who had contributed to *Fire’s* triumph and shared in its success. The opera is based on the autobiography of a Black man, adapted by a Black composer and a Black librettist (Kasi Lemmons), and staged by a Black production team and an entirely Black cast. All of these artists were necessary to bring a new sort of Black opera to the Metropolitan.

These “multitudes” extend beyond the present day. Terrence Blanchard observed, “But I know I’m not the first African American qualified to be in this position. I want the people whose shoulders I’m standing on to be honored by what we put on the stage. It’s because of them that I’m here doing this.” André cites Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Sissieretta Jones, Harry Lawrence

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Freeman, William Grant Still, and Scott Joplin as part of the legacy of African American
performers and composers that Blanchard cites: a legacy in which he and Lemmons consciously
placed themselves.

In this dissertation, I have worked to illuminate the roles that Black performers between
the Civil War and the eve of the Civil Rights movement played in this heritage as they crafted
their careers in ways that both reflected their own personal and professional ambitions and made
them models of uplift for their communities. Chapters One, Two, and Four analyzed practices
within scholarship, performance, and repertoire that informed these singers’ performance choices
and career trajectories. Chapters Three and Five take singer’s-eye views as to how these broader
trends played out in the lives of Sissieretta Jones and Jules Bledsoe, through their successes and
their dreams deferred. All of these case studies illuminate the complications and interweaving
layers of Black opera: race, gender, class, culture, and aesthetics manifesting in ideologies of
racial uplift, the social and artistic ferment of the Harlem Renaissance, and the entire project of
telling Black stories when Jim Crow laws and popular prejudice sought to silence them entirely.

Opera is an extraordinarily complicated endeavor, spanning numerous imagined cultural
divides, both synthesizing and exposing fractures. It is often penned by composers of “high art”
and funded by elite or even state support, but at the same time has broad popular appeal as a
source of spectacle and musical pleasure. Its’ connections to elite culture and highly-trained
professional musicians made it respectable, while risqué plots and the personal lives of singers
were a source of tabloid-style scandal. Opera is also a conspicuous display of personnel and
material resources, and remains a risky financial proposition at best. As far as opera is elite
entertainment supported by governments and indisputably canonized composers (such as
Mozart), it belongs to the culture of “high art,” but spectacle, scandal, and conspicuous
consumption often leave it at the fringes of traditional canons of classical music. It is precisely this fractured cultural position which made opera—already rich with established practices of literary, visual, and musical reinterpretation between productions—a place in which stories could be rewritten and made new. This multifaceted cultural position is the source of both the benefits and risks of an operatic career. It carries potential for national or international fame and prestige, but also risks of typecasting, financial ruin, or career-ending vocal injury. The singers I have explored built their careers because they sought the rewards and navigated the pitfalls at a time of egregious racism that denied or severely limited their access to stages, funding, or even a fair hearing.

Blanchard’s testimony also highlights that these stories hold meaning for present-day practitioners of opera. The scholarly work of recovering Black opera’s history is not just about giving the past its due, but about what it means for contemporary performers, audiences, and scholars. There is much more to be done in this field: my investigation into Bledsoe’s career highlights the relatively limited space for male opera singers in scholarship, and the extremely limited attention given to Black male opera singers in particular. Nor are the Queens of Song I have explored all the Black women who performed opera in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Archival studies to illuminate the histories of past performers can engage in rewarding dialogue with analyses of how Black opera fits into the bigger picture of opera studies, American music studies, and studies of the music of the Black diaspora. Historical research also stands alongside the strides currently being made, from new works such as Fire, to revivals of old works such as Opera Theater of St. Louis’s planned 2023 production of Scott Joplin’s Treemonisha, revised and edited by Black composer Damien Sneed.

This complex and continuing legacy illustrates the pliability of opera as a musical genre
and a cultural tradition. The demise of the art form has been forecasted in one form or another for over a century, especially in the United States. COVID-19 and its effects on live performance are only the most recent in a long line of aesthetic, social, political, and economic hurdles. But the labors of African American opera performers emphasize the continued importance of opera as a location of cultural storytelling, mythmaking, and creative engagement with a prestigious, yet flexible musical tradition. With works such as *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*; Anthony Davis’s *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (the Met’s next Black-authored and composed offering, scheduled for 2023); Nkeiru Okoye’s *Harriet Tubman*; and Jeanine Tesori and Tazewell Thompson’s *Blue*, the extravagance, expense, and virtuosity of a genre which originated in European court spectacle is put at the service of Black heroes, stories, and struggles.

This, too, is built upon multitudes. Black singers have been performing their stories on American operatic stages since the nineteenth century. Before *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* came to the Metropolitan, Black singers were performing *Porgy and Bess* or *Aida* on that same stage, rewriting canonic roles written by white men and potentially resisting stereotypes of people of color. When entirely Black casts performed *Aida*, or the oratorio *Esther, the Beautiful Queen*, or the Hyers Sisters’ numerous shows, they made themselves visible and audible as talented, highly practiced, dignified, and sophisticated artists. They also made visible a re-interpreted Black past, claiming ancient Egypt, Biblical epics, and African empires as their own domains through a medium synonymous with cosmopolitan high culture. From the first concerts in which Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield sang Jenny Lind’s repertoire, African Americans have suited opera to their own purposes, claiming an equal right to create new operas and interpret canonic works. Opera’s vibrancy, its larger-than-life plots and characters, and, as Daphne Brooks put it, its “anti-realist” nature, made the genre a field in which very real and practical statements could be made. Its very
extravagance presents a powerful and sought-after stage on which people can display their skills and tell their stories. Its vitality is a result of the people who bring it to life: the people who claim its stages as their own.
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