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BLACK SCHOLARS CONFRONT WHITE SUPREMACY IN CLASSICAL MUSIC

*The field must acknowledge a history of systemic racism
while also giving new weight to Black composers, musicians,
and listeners.*

By Alex Ross

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Major orchestras are finally playing such Black composers as Florence Price. Illustration by Anuj Shrestha

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Martin Luther King, Jr., in his book “Stride Toward Freedom,” wrote, “On a cool Saturday afternoon in January 1954, I set out to drive from Atlanta, Georgia, to Montgomery, Alabama. . . . The Metropolitan Opera was on the radio with a performance of one of my favorite operas—Donizetti’s ‘Lucia di Lammermoor.’ So with the beauty of the countryside, the inspiration of Donizetti’s inimitable music, and the splendor of the skies, the usual monotony that accompanies a relatively long drive—especially when one is alone—was dispelled in pleasant diversions.”

What does it mean, if anything, that King was listening to bel-canto opera as he made his historic journey to preach his first sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church? One response would be to find something curious, or even contradictory, in the image of King enjoying Donizetti behind the wheel of his car. He was poised to become a titan in the civil-rights movement; classical music is a world in which Black people have seldom been allowed to play a leading role. Much the same question could be asked about W. E. B. Du Bois, who admired the music of Richard Wagner to such an extent that he attended the Bayreuth Festival, in 1936. Even though Wagner was notoriously racist, Du Bois said, “The musical dramas of Wagner tell 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.”

Several scholars have conjectured that King was sending a cultural signal when he inserted Donizetti into “Stride Toward Freedom.” Jonathan Rieder says that the story demonstrates “King’s desire to cast himself as a man of sensibility and

distinction.” Godfrey Hodgson writes that such references were intended to “reassure northern intellectuals that he was on the same wavelength as they were.” Du Bois’s cosmopolitan tastes have elicited similar commentary. It is questionable, though, to assume that these two formidable personalities were simply trying to assimilate themselves to a perceived white aesthetic. Rather, they were taking possession of the European inheritance and pulling it into their own sphere. More elementally, they loved the music, and had no need to justify their taste.

It is equally questionable to assume that King’s and Du Bois’s fondness for classical music lends it some kind of universal, anti-racist virtue. In that sense, my attraction to these anecdotes of fandom is suspect. I am a white American who grew up with the classics, and I am troubled by the presumption that they are stamped with whiteness—and are even aligned with white supremacy, as some scholars have lately argued. I cannot counter that suggestion simply by gesturing toward important Black figures who cherished this same tradition, or by reeling off the names of Black singers and composers. The exceptions remain exceptions. This world is blindingly white, both in its history and its present.

Since nationwide protests over police violence erupted, in May and June, American culture has been engaged in an examination, however nominal, of its relationship with racism. Such an examination is sorely needed in classical music, because of its extreme dependence on a problematic past. The undertaking is complex; the field must acknowledge a history of systemic racism while also honoring the individual experiences of Black composers, musicians, and listeners. Black people have long been marginalized, but they have never been outsiders.

This spring, the journal *Music Theory Online* published “Music Theory and the White Racial Frame,” an article by Philip Ewell, who teaches at Hunter College. It begins with the sentence “Music theory is white,” and goes on to argue that the whiteness of the discipline is manifest not only in the lack of diversity in its membership but also in a deep-seated ideology of white supremacy, one that

insidiously affects how music is analyzed and taught. The main target of Ewell's critique is the early-twentieth-century Austrian theorist Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935), who parsed musical structures in terms of foreground, middle-ground, and background levels, teasing out the tonal formulas that underpin large-scale movements. Schenker held racist views, particularly with regard to Black people, and according to Ewell those views seeped into the seemingly abstract principles of his theoretical work.

Schenker was Jewish, but his adherence to doctrines of Germanic superiority blinkered him to such an extent that, in 1933, he praised Hitler, adding, "If only a man were born to music, who would finally exterminate the musical Marxists." Schenker's advocates have long been aware of his disturbing views but have insisted that his bigoted rhetoric has nothing to do with his theoretical writing. Ewell argued that Schenker's system is, in fact, founded on national and racial hierarchies. Reverence for the kind of supreme talent who can assemble monumental musical structures shades into biological definitions of genius, and the biology of genius spills over into the biology of race. Ewell concluded, "There can be no question that for Schenker, the concept of 'genius' was associated with whiteness to some degree."

Shortly after Ewell's article was published, a skirmish broke out in the music-theory community, incited not by the article itself but by a twenty-minute condensed version of the material that Ewell had presented at a conference seven months earlier. The *Journal of Schenkerian Studies*, which is based at the University of North Texas, chose to devote ninety pages to responses to that brief talk. Some were supportive, others dismissive; one accused Ewell, who is African-American, of exhibiting "Black anti-Semitism," even though Ewell had not mentioned Schenker's Jewishness. On social media, Ewell's colleagues came to his defense and questioned the journal's methodology. The historian Kira Thurman wrote, "Did the Journal of Schenkerian Studies really publish a response to Professor Ewell's scholarship that was 'anonymous'? Yes." *National Review* and Fox News

somehow stumbled on the episode and cast it as so-called cancel culture run amok; it was claimed that Ewell was trying to ban Beethoven, although nothing of the sort had been suggested.

At first glance, the Schenker debate looks to be of limited relevance to the wider classical-music world, not to mention the general population. Although his theories have been taught in American universities for generations, they are by no means universally accepted. German-speaking musicologists, for example, have never taken him as seriously. Even in the U.S., conservatory students can often undergo a thorough training without encountering his work. Yet the case of Schenker illustrates an implicit prejudice that is endemic in the teaching, playing, and interpretation of classical music. His method is far from unique in elevating the European tradition while concealing its cultural bias behind eternal, abstract principles. What Ewell calls “the white racial frame”—he takes the term from the sociologist Joe Feagin—has the special power of being invisible. Thurman, in her paper “Performing Lieder, Hearing Race,” makes a similar point: “Classical music, like whiteness itself, is frequently racially unmarked and presented as universal—until people of color start performing it.”

The hysterical complaints that Ewell was proposing to “cancel” the classical canon stemmed mainly from a blog post in which he called Beethoven an “above-average composer” who has been “propped up by the white-male frame, both consciously and subconsciously, with descriptors such as genius, master, and masterwork.” This is a provocation, though it is hardly the first to have been lobbed at the great man: Debussy wrote that Beethoven’s sonatas were badly written for the piano, and Ned Rorem memorably dinged the Ninth Symphony as “the first piece of junk in the grand style.” Ewell provokes with a higher purpose: he is goading a classical culture that awards the vast majority of performances to a tight circle of superstars, shutting out female and nonwhite composers who, until the mid-twentieth century, had little chance of making a career. In some ways, that Valhalla mentality is as entrenched as ever.

The whiteness of classical music is, above all, an American problem. The racial and ethnic makeup of the canon is hardly surprising, given European demographics before the twentieth century. But, when that tradition was transplanted to the multicultural United States, it blended into the racial hierarchy that had governed the country from its founding. The white majority tended to adopt European music as a badge of its supremacy. The classical-music institutions that emerged in the mid- and late nineteenth century—the New York Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony, the Metropolitan Opera, and the like—became temples to European gods, as Lawrence Levine argued in his 1988 book, “Highbrow/Lowbrow.” Little effort was made to cultivate American composers; it seemed more important to manufacture a fantasy of Beethovenian grandeur.

Immigrant populations supplied much of the workforce for those ensembles: Germans gravitated toward the orchestras, Italians toward the opera. Such activity exemplifies the process of assimilation and ascent that Nell Irvin Painter describes in her 2010 book, “The History of White People”: the expansion of the category of “whiteness” to encompass new groups. A large wave of German immigrants arrived in the period of the 1848 revolutions in Europe, which sent thousands of leftists and liberals into exile. The Germania Musical Society, which was founded in 1848 and toured America widely, offered itself as a model of democracy in action—“one for all and all for one.” Members of the group exercised a decisive influence on the development of the New York Philharmonic and other ensembles.

The wealthy white Americans who underwrote the country’s elite orchestras tended to see their institutions as vehicles of uplift that allowed the lower classes to better themselves through exposure to the sublime airs of the masters. The contradictions of such paternalism are evident in the case of Henry Lee Higginson, who founded the Boston Symphony, in 1881. In his youth, Higginson opposed slavery, and after the Civil War he briefly ran a plantation in Georgia, aiming to provide employment and education to formerly enslaved African-

Americans. When the project proved more difficult than he anticipated, he tended to blame his Black workers. In his later years, he adopted strident anti-immigrant rhetoric. By the time of his death, in 1919, he had become a leading member of the Immigration Restriction League.

Although a few well-dressed African-Americans would not have been unwelcome in the Boston Symphony audience, a Black musician had no hope of joining the orchestra. As Aaron Flagg recently recounted in *Symphony* magazine, the professionalization of the musician class in the late nineteenth century led directly to the segregation of musicians' unions—a system that lingered into the nineteen-seventies. Black musicians had to establish their own unions and form their own ensembles. Not until the forties and fifties did Black players begin joining upper-echelon orchestras: Jack Bradley in Denver, Henry Lewis in Los Angeles, Donald White in Cleveland, and, in 1957, the double-bassist Ortiz Walton in Boston. Black composers had entered the edges of the limelight somewhat earlier. In 1893, the young singer and composer Harry T. Burleigh befriended Antonín Dvořák, who had come to New York to serve as the director of the progressive-minded National Conservatory. Stirred by Burleigh's singing of spirituals, Dvořák declared that Black melodies should be the foundation of future American music. A couple of generations later, the work of a few African-American composers—William Grant Still, William Dawson, and Florence Price—began to appear on orchestral programs. Black opera singers gradually made headway in the same period, culminating in Marian Anderson's breakthrough appearance at the Metropolitan Opera, in 1955. The Met has yet to present an opera by a Black composer, though a production of Terence Blanchard's "Fire Shut Up in My Bones" is planned for a future season.

In the long view, the marginalization of Black composers and musicians was not only a moral wrong but also a self-inflicted wound. Classical institutions succeeded in denying themselves a huge reservoir of native-born talent. Dvořák's acknowledgment that African-Americans were in possession of a singular body of

musical material—one that broke open European conventions of melody, harmony, and rhythm—went largely unheeded. Instead, much of that talent found a place in jazz and other popular genres. Will Marion Cook, Fletcher Henderson, Billy Strayhorn, and Nina Simone, among many others, had initially devoted themselves to classical-music studies. That jazz came to be called “America’s classical music” was an indirect commentary on the whiteness of the concert world, although it had the unfortunate effect of consigning Black classical composers to a double nonexistence.

Of course, racism was endemic in the pop sphere as well, as a host of scholarly studies have made clear. In an essay titled “Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse,” Matthew Morrison marshals a formidable array of research and theory to argue that the American pop-music industry is inextricably rooted in the racist routines of nineteenth-century blackface culture. Some historians and critics have tried to find redeeming features in a practice that pervasively ridiculed African-American voices and bodies; Eric Lott, in his classic 1993 book, “Love and Theft,” argues that working-class blackface performers demonstrated a “profound white investment in black culture” even as they carried out appalling acts of exploitation. For Morrison, these “counterfeit and imagined performances of blackness” are better understood as affirmations of white identity, with racial mockery integral to the act. (Mockery of “élite” European art was part of the formula as well.) Black performers eventually took up careers on the minstrelsy circuit, but only at the cost of playing along with white fantasies.

That dismal history may help to explain why such Black leaders as Du Bois and King found sustenance in European music. White as the canon was, it appeared to stand outside of America’s racial horror. Du Bois’s veneration of German culture—cultivated during his student years in Berlin, in the eighteen-nineties—partly blinded him to the depravity of German racism, which led not only to the Holocaust but also to the genocide of the Herero and Nama peoples in what is now Namibia. Slavery was a European undertaking before it was an American

one, and it left its marks on the repertory. A few years ago, the scholar David Hunter made the disturbing discovery that George Frideric Handel was an investor in the Royal African Company, which transported more than two hundred thousand enslaved Africans to the Caribbean and the Americas.

The racism embedded in classical and popular music alike is the necessary background to understanding the hard-won achievement of Florence Price, who is the subject of a new biography, "The Heart of a Woman," by the late musicologist Rae Linda Brown. Price was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1887, to middle-class parents, and won admittance to the New England Conservatory, which had a history of accepting Black students. She initially made a living by teaching and by composing parlor songs and other short popular pieces. But in her forties, having escaped an abusive marriage, she broadened her ambitions and turned to symphonic composition. She won some high-profile performances but found herself isolated. Her bonds with Black communities weakened; the white world treated her as an interesting oddity. The resistance that she faced as a female composer made her progress all the more arduous.

Nevertheless, she stuck to her path, and her Third Symphony, which premiered in 1940, is increasingly recognized as a landmark in American music. Various majestic, sinuous, brooding, and playful, it gestures toward African-American spirituals and dance styles yet seems to enclose them in quotation marks, as if to acknowledge their ambiguous status in a white marketplace. Brown analyzes Price's work in terms of "double consciousness"—Du Bois's concept of the "warring ideals" inherent in Black and American identities—and then enlarges that tension to include Black traditions and European forms. Brown writes, "A transformation of these forms takes place when the dominant elements in a composition transcend European influence." The tradition will not survive without such moments of disruption and transcendence.

Classical-music institutions have just begun to work through the racist past. Scores of opera houses, orchestras, chamber-music societies, and early-music ensembles have declared solidarity with Black Lives Matter, in sometimes awkward prose. Because of COVID-19, most performance schedules that had been announced for the 2020-21 season have been jettisoned, and the drastically reduced programs that have emerged in their place contain a noticeable uptick in Black names. When the virus hit, we were in the midst of the so-called Beethoven Year—a gratuitously excessive celebration of the two-hundred-and-fiftieth birthday of a composer who hardly needs any extra publicity. It remains to be seen whether this modest shift toward Black composers will endure beyond the chaotic year 2020.

In the same vein, mainstream organizations are giving more attention to a Black classical repertory: the elegantly virtuosic eighteenth-century scores of Joseph Bologne; the folkloric symphonies of Price, Still, and Dawson; the African-inflected operas of Harry Lawrence Freeman and Shirley Graham Du Bois. Yet such activity goes only so far in challenging an obsessive worship of the past. These works remain largely within the boundaries of the Western European tradition: if Schenker could have overcome his biases, he would have had an easy time analyzing Price's music according to his method. Furthermore, this programming leaves intact the assumption that musical greatness resides in a bygone golden age. White Europeans remain in the majority, with Beethoven retaining pride of place in the lightly renovated, diversified pantheon.

Classical music can overcome the shadows of its past only if it commits itself more strongly to the present. Black composers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have staged a much more radical confrontation with the white European inheritance. A pivotal figure is Julius Eastman, who died in near-total obscurity, in 1990, but has found cult fame in recent years. Eastman's improvisatory structures, his subversive political themes, and his openness about his homosexuality give him a revolutionary aspect, yet he also had a nostalgic flair

for the grand Romantic manner; his 1979 piece “Gay Guerrilla,” for two pianos, makes overpowering use of the Lutheran hymn “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.”

With a vibrant roster of younger talents moving to the fore—Tyshawn Sorey, Jessie Montgomery, Nathalie Joachim, Courtney Bryan, Tomeka Reid, and Matana Roberts, among others—the perennial solitude of the Black composer seems less marked than before. Still, Black faces remain rare in the rank and file of orchestras, in administrative offices, and, most conspicuously, in audiences. Price once described how strange it was to see an all-white crowd vigorously applauding her Black-influenced music. That experience remains all too common.

A deeper reckoning would require wholesale changes in how orchestras canvass talent, conservatories recruit students, institutions hire executives, and marketers approach audiences. A Black singer like Morris Robinson should not have to live in a world where—as he recently reported at an online panel discussion—he has never worked with a Black conductor, stage director, or chief executive at an American opera house. At the same time, institutions must recognize that the Black-white divide is not the only line of tension in the social fabric. Asian musicians have often complained that blanket descriptions of classical music as an all-white field efface their existence. They are well represented in the ranks of orchestras, but they have little voice in the upper echelons, and routinely encounter the racism of disdain.

At bottom, the entire music-education system rests upon the Schenkerian assumption that the Western tonality, with its major-minor harmony and its equal-tempered scale, is the master language. Vast tracts of the world’s music, from West African talking drums to Indonesian gamelan, fall outside that system, and African-American traditions have played in its interstices. This is a reality that the music department at Harvard, once stiflingly conservative, has recognized. The jazz-based artist Vijay Iyer now leads a cross-disciplinary graduate program that cultivates the rich terrain between composition and improvisation. The Harvard musicologist Anne Shreffler has said of the new undergraduate music curriculum,

“We relied on students showing up on our doorstep having had piano lessons since the age of six.” Given the systemic inequality into which many people of color are born, this “class-based implicit requirement,” as Shreffler calls it, becomes a covert form of racial exclusion.

The sacralized canon will evolve as the musical world evolves around it.

Because of the peculiarly invasive nature of sound, old scores always seem to be happening to us anew. A painting gazes at us unchanging from its frame; a book speaks to us in its fixed language. But when modern people play a Beethoven quartet it, too, becomes modern, even if certain of its listeners wish to go backward in time. The act of performance has enormous transformative potential—an aspect that musicologists, so accustomed to analyzing notation on a page, have yet to address in full. Naomi André, in her 2018 book, Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement, evokes the dimensions of meaning that opened up when Leontyne Price sang the title role of “Aida” in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. Of the passage “*O patria . . . quanto mi costi!*”—“Oh, my country . . . how much you have cost me!”—André writes, “The drama onstage and the reality offstage crash together. . . . This voice comes out of a body that lived through the end of Jim Crow and segregation.” The music of a white European had become part of Black experience—become, to a degree, Black itself.

Jean-Jacques Nattiez, the musicologist and semiotician, has described two dominant ways in which we construct musical meaning: the “poietic,” which reads a score in light of its creator’s intentions, methods, and cultural context; and the “esthesis,” which takes into account the perceptions of an audience. We live in a determinedly poietic age: we give great stress to what artists do and say, particularly when they stray from contemporary moral norms. That project of demystification is often useful, given the rampant idealization and idolatry of prior eras. But listeners need not be captive to the surface meaning of the scores, or to the biographies of their creators, or to the histories that accompany them. We can

yoke the music to our own ends, as W. E. B. Du Bois did when he improbably reinvented Wagner as a model for a mythic Black art.

The poietic and the esthetic should have equal weight when we pick up the pieces of the past. On the one hand, we can be aware that Handel invested in the business of slavery; on the other, we can see a measure of justice when Morris Robinson sings his music in concert. We can be conscious of the racism of Mozart's portrayal of Monostatos in "The Magic Flute," or of the misogyny of "Così Fan Tutte," yet contemporary stagings can put Mozart's stereotypes in a radical new light. There is no need to reach a final verdict—to judge each artist innocent or guilty. Living with history means living with history's complexities, contradictions, and failings.

The ultimate mistake is to look to music—or to any art form—as a zone of moral improvement, a refuge of sweetness and light. Attempts to cleanse the canon of disreputable figures end up replicating the great-man theory in a negative register, with arch-villains taking the place of geniuses. Because all art is the product of our grandiose, predatory species, it reveals the worst in our natures as well as the best. Like every beautiful thing we have created, music can become a weapon of division and destruction. The philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, in a characteristically pitiless mood, wrote, "Every work of art is an uncommitted crime." ♦

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