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Rectifying a Historical Wrong: A Critical Examination of the Economic and Racial Politics of American Opera

A Thesis in Theatre Arts

By

Kara Dobias

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Abstract

This thesis examines the recent actions that the American opera industry has been taking towards greater racial equity and systemic change. The Metropolitan Opera is used as a case study for understanding the interplay between economics and race in the operations of American opera institutions. A historic overview of the development of American music reveals how race-based musical hierarchies informed perceptions of opera as a Eurocentric art form. At the same time, minstrelsy as popular culture worked to delegitimize African American composers as "serious" musicians. Both of these factors help point to why the contributions of African American composers have been historically overlooked in the narrative of American opera. In addressing how the opera industry may become more inclusive, this thesis proposes the reclaiming of works by African American composers Scott Joplin and William Grant Still. The benefits of this reclamation are highlighted through an examination of the music, subject matter, production history and critical reception of the operas *Treemonisha* and *Troubled Island.* Also considered is the importance of/need for either the staging of existing works by contemporary African American composers, or the commissioning of new works. Offered as examples of contemporary composers are Anthony Davis and Terence Blanchard. For their 2020-2021 season the Metropolitan Opera will be staging Blanchard's new work, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones.* It will be the first opera by an African American composer to be staged at the Met. In marking this historic occasion, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* offers room to consider what benefits the production can offer in moving

the industry towards a more equitable future, as well as the challenges it might face with how the industry stands.

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Subject Position

Before proceeding with this thesis, I want to acknowledge my positionality as a white woman engaging with the topic of race in opera. I have done my best to approach my research not with the intention of speaking for any community, but in solidarity, recognizing where and how I have entered this discussion and the responsibility that comes with that. I have also come to this topic as an opera student hoping to lend my voice to the evident systemic changes needed within the industry. To quote Naomi André from her book, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*, "Through the subjects of the operas, the participants onstage, the composers, the librettists, behind the scenes, and the publics in the audience, opera has become a vehicle for representing new identities and narratives."[1] The idea of the arts holding social responsibility is one that I put my full support behind and why I have entered the dialogue that this paper engages. In their work for racial equity, the Black Opera Alliance has emphasized how this is an open dialogue, one that invites all members of the industry to actively partake for the betterment of us all.[2] For change to happen in American opera, it must be a collective effort.

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[1] André, Naomi. *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. University of Illinois Press, 2018, p. 28. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctv80cb7d. Accessed 27 Dec. 2020.

[2] "First Quarterly Insight Report, BOA and TRG ARTS Webinar." YouTube, uploaded by Black Opera Alliance, 14 Apr. 2021, https://youtu.be/mLvPhgQ-8Jw.

Introduction

At the time of this writing in 2021, the world continues to navigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted by psychologist Alexandre Coimbra Amaral, "the rapid acceleration of our life rhythms (coupled with an acute sense of individualism) has received a global blow these past months. This pandemic has brought about a reign of shadows, demanding that we abolish certain modes of behavior and social organizations."[3] In the United States specifically, this has come as the result of the recognition of "so many of our collective illusions, insecurities, errors, suppressed fears,... and supremist ideations."[3] One way that this recognition has manifested during this time has been through the redressing of our country's past and current acknowledgement and handling of racism.[4] Most recently, the cries for allyship and active participation in anti-racism work have come from both the African American[5] and Asian American[6] communities. Per the findings of a Pew Research Center survey of 9,654 adults "a majority of Asian Americans (58%) and 45% of Black Americans say

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[3] Junker, Yohana Agra. "On Covid-19, U.S. Uprisings, and Black Lives: A Mandate to Regenerate All Our Relations." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2020, p. 120. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/jfemistudreli.36.2.09. Accessed 31 Jan. 2021.

[4] Gerbaudo, Paolo. "The Pandemic Crowd: Protest in the Time of COVID-19." *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2, 2020, pp. 61–76. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26939966. Accessed 31 Jan. 2021.

[5] I acknowledge that the terminology surrounding racial identity is varied, and centers around factors such as personal preference or the history of the very terms themselves. For the purposes of this thesis I have mainly used the term "African American." The use of other terminology reflects the choices of the authors whose work I am quoting.

[6] The term AAPI, an acronym for Asian Americans and Pacific Islander (Americans), may also be considered here.

that it is more common for people to express racist views toward their group since the coronavirus outbreak."[7]

The particular impetus for my research was the open dialogue about racial inequities that began as a result of the Black Lives Matter protests of this past summer 2020. Industries across the United States were responding to demands for racial justice by turning inward to examine their own modes of operation. As an undergraduate theatre arts major dually training in opera, I focused my attention on the conversations happening within the performing arts industry. One of the first documents that I read was "BIPOC[8] Demands for White American Theater," a thirty-one-page social contract compiled on behalf of BIPOC theater artists. "The document addresses the necessary redistribution of power and funding, the prioritizing of anti-racist practices and a de-centering of whiteness, and outlines several measures towards a more equitable, safe industry, including specific action steps for The Broadway League, Actors' Equity, IATSE, SDC, and the Casting Society of America."[9] Reading this document was very helpful in beginning to inform my understanding of how the theatre industry has struggled with

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[7] Ruiz, Neil G., et al. *Many Black, Asian Americans Say They Have Experienced Discrimination Amid Coronavirus*. 17 Dec. 2020, www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/07/01/many-black-and-asian-americans-say-they-have-experienced-discrimination-amid-the-covid-19-outbreak/.

The survey was conducted from June 4-10, 2020, using the Center's American Trends Panel.1

[8] An acronym referring to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color.

[9] Clement, Olivia. "BIPOC Artists Unveil Demands for the White American Theatre." *Playbill*, PLAYBILL INC., 9 July 2020, www.playbill.com/article/bipoc-artists-unveil-demands-for-the-white-american-theatre.

racial equity, and the kinds of changes that are needed. From there, I narrowed my focus to looking at the responses and demands of the opera industry, particularly the voices of African American artists.

In this thesis I will examine what the actions taken by major houses such as the Metropolitan Opera towards greater diversity, equity, and inclusion express about the state of opera in America, now and moving forward. For my research, I examine case studies of three African American composers, past and present, as a means of both reclaiming and celebrating their artistry. The acknowledgement of their work serves as one method in increasing African American representation on the operatic stage and in the narrative of American opera. My research also discusses the importance of/need for either the staging of existing works by contemporary African American composers, or the commissioning of new works. Specifically, I address the Metropolitan Opera's planned performance of Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* for its 2021-2022 season (first premiered at Opera Theatre St. Louis in 2019). It will be the first performance of an opera by an African American composer at the Met. I will assess the benefits and pitfalls of both of these strategies and what they might reveal about race in American opera.

Meeting the Moment

The unique circumstances of this moment in history, have allowed space for a potentially more thorough reexamination of racism in America, both generally and in the context of the opera industry. For example, the closing of all opera houses in mid-March 2020, coupled with the stay-at-home orders of COVID-19, created conditions for the

increase of online participation in the conversations surrounding opera's complex racial history. Perhaps now more than ever, the public is listening, and the scope of social media has allowed the voices of students and professionals alike to openly share both their experiences and grievances.

One account that I personally began to follow is the Instagram "@operaisracist." Run anonymously, the first post states the account's purpose as a space to "share experiences and observations of the opera industry's well-known yet well-hidden practices of racism and discrimination."[10] It should be stated, however, that this is not a passive effort with the intention of merely badmouthing the profession, but a means by which to spur constructive conversation and action. To echo the sentiments of music educator Juliet Hess, "we cannot subvert hegemonic power relations unless we reveal them."[11] Unfortunately, the kinds of stories found on this account are not new conversations for marginalized communities. It therefore stands to question how "well-hidden" the industry's racism has really been. "Informal whisper networks have long existed amongst colleagues who warn each other about hosts of issues like… racist environments… In a community like opera, where reputation and word-of-mouth are everything, the deck is stacked for those with power."[12] However, the publicness that this

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[10] operaisracist. Photo of logo. *Instagram*, 2 June 2020 , https://www.instagram.com/p/CA8rtMyDg2e/

[11] Hess, Juliet. "Performing Tolerance and Curriculum: The Politics of Self-Congratulation, Identity Formation, and Pedagogy in World Music Education." *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2013, p. 83. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/philmusieducrevi.21.1.66. Accessed 27 Dec. 2020.

[12] Ludwig Van. "Feature | No More Whispers: Opera's Reckoning With Racism." *Ludwig van Toronto*, 24 June 2020, www.ludwig-van.com/toronto/2020/06/24/feature-no-more-whispers-operas-reckoning-with-racism.

account provides for the telling of these experiences is a start to challenging harmful structures. If American opera is to progress, the industry leaders must be held accountable.

Industry Leaders: The Power of The Met in American Opera Culture

In truth, the definition of American opera remains vague. "The elements that make it 'American' are so various as to be meaningless… 'American' could indicate the nationality... of the stage director, composer, the choice of an American source as subject matter, or a direct appeal to a particular ethnic community."[13] However, even without a unanimous, or at least, concrete definition, the Metropolitan Opera can be traced as having a strong influence over the formation/ideation of an American opera culture.[14] Because of this legacy, I will be using the Met as my primary example in illustrating the power of opera institutions to enact change within the field.

Though the presence of opera in the United States is recorded as early as the turn of the nineteenth century, efforts toward defining the form outside of its European origins emerged in the following decades.[1] By the middle of the nineteenth-century this

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[13] Midgette, Anne. "The Voice of American Opera." *The Opera Quarterly*, vol. 23 no. 1, 2007, p. 82. *Project MUSE* muse.jhu.edu/article/249404.

[14] Siefert, Marsha. "The Metropolitan Opera in the American Century: Opera Singers, Europe, and Cultural Politics." *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2004, pp. 298-315. *ProQuest.* Web. 27 Dec. 2020

discourse was informed by "a growing bifurcation of 'serious' and 'popular' culture."[15] How opera came to fall within this cultural hierarchy was, in part, linked to the institutional model that financial necessity bid it adopt, and the subsequent audience that this model would cater to. Unlike the state funded opera of Europe, American opera has always needed to find sources of funding outside of the government. "In April 1880 the Metropolitan Opera was incorporated by several wealthy benefactors," and the house opened three years later. To cover production costs, the Met relied on box office sales as well as sources of secondary income. These ranged from an annual fee paid by The Victor Talking Machine Company to sign Met singers for recordings, to the Met renting out its house.[16] These means of income were able to sustain the Met until the stock market crash of 1929, after which point, an institutional shift was needed to recover the house's losses. "The concept that opera could be made profitable was abandoned; to produce a season was now a matter of funding, not investment. In 1932…the producing entity [was reorganized as] ... the Metropolitan Opera Association, a nonprofit corporation."[16]

The significance of this shift is that it effectively linked American opera to "high culture," thus establishing the elitist associations often made at the mention of the art

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[15] Rubin, Joanshelley. "Rethinking the Creation of Cultural Hierarchy in America." *Reception: Texts, Readers, Audiences, History*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2014, pp. 4-8. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/reception.6.1.0004. Accessed 9 Feb. 2021.

[16] Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc. "History of Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc. – FundingUniverse." *Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc.*, St. James Press, 2001, www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/metropolitan-opera-association-inc-history.

form. With this claim, it's important to clarify that non-profit corporations are not inherently exclusive. However, during the nineteenth century "the corporation was a familiar and successful tool by which … elites organized their affairs."[17] The Met's reorganization as a non-profit corporation meant the reliance on a "well integrated social and financial elite" which allowed for governance "by a self-perpetuating board of trustees who, eventually, would delegate most artistic decisions."[17] Included in such decisions were which operas the house would produce, thus informing which composers would be celebrated on the American stage. Through this model opera became removed from the larger populous, and expectations for what a Met season would most likely look like began to take root.

Even before its incorporation, the Met bore the influences of a privileged class. In fact, the impetus for its foundation had been "old money" barring "new money" families from the much coveted admission to the Academy of Music's opera season. "Only the oldest and most prominent families owned seats in the theatre's exclusive boxes."[18] The founding of the Metropolitan Opera presented a means through which the newer generation of America's elites could not only enjoy their specific tastes without hindrance but preserve them through the authority that their funding provided. Their preferences

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[17] DiMaggio, Paul. "Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America." In *Media, Culture, and Society,* vol. 4, 1982, p. 381. http://www.columbia.edu/itc/barnard/arthist/wolff/pdfs/week13_dimaggio.pdf. Accessed 17 Feb. 2021.

[18] Pollard, Justin and Stephanie. "The Opening of New York's Metropolitan Opera House." *History Today,* 10 Oct. 2018, www.historytoday.com/archive/months-past/opening-new-york%E2%80%99s-metropolitan-opera-house.

largely echoed that of the European opera tradition, which relied heavily on the works of Verdi, Puccini, and Bizet.[19] Thus the European opera canon was preserved in the American opera house. "Only in 1940,... was opera as 'high culture' linked physically and finally to its institutional model" upon sale of the Met Opera building to the Metropolitan Opera Association.[14] This was in line with the delineation of separate theatres for "high" and "low" culture which was happening at the time.[15] Not only was opera now being shaped by the governance of an elite class through the non-profit corporation model, but was also being understood within the context of the spaces it was performed in. In his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America,* Lawrence Levine describes the opera house as " [an] example wherein audiences learned to approach the masters and their works with proper respect and proper seriousness, for aesthetic and spiritual elevation rather than mere entertainment."[15] However, had conversations surrounding the "American" sound played out differently at the end of the nineteenth century, this cultural conception could have been different.

An Unrealized American Sound

American musicologist Eileen Southern asserts that "During the last decade of the nineteenth century the United States entered upon a new era in her musical history." Around the same time that the Metropolitan Opera was being established, an "American

[19] Cancellieri, Giulia, and Alex Turrini. "The Phantom of Modern Opera: How Economics and Politics Affect the Programming Strategies of Opera Houses." *International Journal of Arts Management*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2016, pp. 25–36. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44989662. Accessed 16 Nov. 2020.

school of composers was emerging… and promising developments in the area of music education were taking place."[20] One institution that came to be associated with these developments was the National Conservatory of Music of America (originally known as "the American School of Opera"). With the influence of Europe still serving as a strong model, New York music patron, Jeanette Thurber, looked to the French system of government funded conservatory training to found the National Conservatory in 1885.[21] Within the United States however, no such government funding was granted to the Conservatory, dashing Thurber's dreams of state-supported arts education. With the potential for acceptance on scholarship, the Conservatory was inclusive in its admittance of women, African American, Native American, and disabled students (particularly the blind). Such scholarship aided in the entry of Harry T. Burleigh, an African American student, in January 1892.[22] His experience at the Conservatory was integral to the contributions he would go on to make in the efforts to define a nationalistic sound for American music.

Through founding the Conservatory, Thurber had hoped to find a musical sound that America could claim as its own. She wanted the students to be able to separate

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[20] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. pp. 279-280.

[21] André, Naomi. *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. University of Illinois Press, 2018. pp. 91-92. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctv80cb7d. Accessed 27 Dec. 2020.

[22] Snyder, Jean E. *Harry T. Burleigh : From the Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance*. University of Illinois Press, 2016, pp. 66, 69, 76-77, 84, 87, 93, 108-110. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt18j8x96. Accessed 18 Mar. 2021.

themselves from the need to find validation in the schools and opera houses of Europe. How these ambitions came to unfold would ultimately affect how opera would be thought of in America. In pursuit of her dream, "she persuaded the famous Czech composer Antonín Dvořák to serve as the conservatory's director. His own compositions reflected a nationalistic pride that Thurber sought for the Conservatory. Dvořák's three- year tenure… covered much of Burleigh's time there, and their relationship… [helped to] challenge the direction and definition of American music."[22] It was Burleigh who introduced Dvořák to the African American music tradition. At the time it was not uncommon for European and American composers to draw influence from folk melodies and rhythms. "American composers… flavored their compositions with sprinklings of the music of African Americans and Native Americans or with folk themes from European traditions, long before Dvořák's arrival." However, the idea amongst these composers that this source was "the music of America's primitive races" was still strongly thought and expressed.[22] It was this hierarchical way of thinking that informed the development of an acknowledged "American sound".

On May 21, 1893, Dvořák expressed in the *New York Herald* that the music of America must be founded in the African American musical tradition. He said, "this must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States...These beautiful and varied themes are the product of the soil. They are American."[22] In response the National Conservatory added a department "for the instruction in music of colored pupils of merit," the intention being that they would go on to become professors. In her official statement Jeanette Thurber said, "the aptitude of the

colored race for music, vocal and instrumental, has long been recognized, but no definite steps have hitherto been taken to develop it, and it is believed that the decision of the Conservatory to move in this direction will meet with general approval and be productive of prompt and encouraging results."[22] I note this as a rebuttal to the misconception that African American artists were not actively participating in music at the level of the conservatory model at this time. But more on this in the following chapter.

Dvořák's views on the origin of a true "American sound" did not go unchallenged. A specific point of scrutiny by many critics was that he would willingly turn his back on his European musical influences in favor of an "inordinate employment of folk idioms."[22] It is sentiments like these which disclose the larger societal context in which conversations surrounding the development of American music were being had. Despite being three decades removed from the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, American society continued to operate with racial bias. "Though a scientific basis to biological differences rooted in race has been disproved in current scholarship, this was not the case for nineteenth-and early-twentieth-century constructions of race."[23] By maintaining that "human groups and races (were) subject to the same laws of natural selection Charles Darwin perceived in plants and animals," Social Darwinism operated as a way for lawmakers to justify the upholding of racist policies, and backed "the belief in Anglo-Saxon or Aryan cultural and biological

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[23] André, Naomi. *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. University of Illinois Press, 2018. p. 100. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctv80cb7d. Accessed 27 Dec. 2020.

superiority."[24] This theory was also applied (presumably by white power structures) to American music as a means to "determine the status of various styles… the "serious music" of the orchestra and recital hall represent(ed) the apex, popular music styles rang(ed) lower, and the music of "primitive people" [was considered to be] the lowest level."[22]

Such associations no doubt influenced how the work and contributions of African American musicians, singers and composers came to be viewed within America's emerging music culture. In response, Harry T. Burleigh positioned himself "at the forefront of the movement to reclaim African American music and demonstrate its inherent artistic value."[22] Through his relationship with Dvořák, he began this work. The piece most associated with their collaboration (though Burleigh's name is not credited in the score), is Symphony No. 9 in E minor, *From the New World,* popularly known as the *New World Symphony.* The significance of this piece is how it employs the use of African American melodies, particularly that of spirituals. On the influence that the spirituals had in the composition of *New World Symphony* Burleigh remarked, "I [was] never publicly… credited with exerting any influence upon Dr. Dvořák, although it is tacitly believed that there isn't much doubt about it, for I was with him almost constantly, and he loved to hear me sing the old melodies."[22] I mention this piece and its influences because of what it has come to represent in American music. Within *New World Symphony* "The

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[24] Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Social Darwinism". Encyclopedia Britannica, 2 Oct. 2019, https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-Darwinism. Accessed 5 May 2021.

Largo melody, or "Goin' Home" [as it is commonly called], has become so deeply embedded in the American psyche that it has become an icon, a troupe of Americanness used by filmmakers, dramatists, and composers… to symbolize the spirit of America."[22] That this music has been equated with America so heavily throughout our media serves to prove the merit of Dvořák's initial claim; the music of America should be acknowledged as having part of its roots in the African American music tradition. However, for those not familiar with the song's origins, this correlation may not be so evident. As Burleigh already began to recognize in the initial years following the symphony's premiere, "there was a tendency… to ignore the negro elements in the *New World Symphony.*"[22] This claim of Americanism to the exclusion of the African American community reinforced how ideas about race would determine a national music identity.

The American Opera Tradition

While a school of American composers did arise during this period, it was not of the nature for which Dvořák and Burleigh had advocated. Known as the "Boston Classicists" or the "New England Academicians," they were a group of white American composers "trained for the most part in Germany [and composing] under the spell of German Romanticism." Eileen Southern explains that this group was credited with "giving to the native American composer, both in the United States and in Europe, a social and professional prestige that he had not had in the past."[20] As I will discuss in the next chapter, their work and subsequent European training would both directly and indirectly help in "the development of the first school of black composers in the United

States," who despite being generally prohibited from participation in symphony orchestras and opera companies, were actively pursuing conservatory educations (as seen in the case of Burleigh).[20]

To relate this back to the conversation, by industry leaders, surrounding the defining of opera in America, we can see how the dependence on the European model remained strong. The emerging musical hierarchy within American society—a way of categorizing heavily based in America's racial politics—ultimately worked against efforts to establish an "American sound" rooted in music other than that of the traditional European style. The exploitation of this hierarchy by white music industry leaders was intended to keep the worlds of Western European-influenced art music and music based in an African-derived tradition separate from one another—setting an industry standard which centered the former. As I will discuss in the next chapter, this tactic heavily informed the reception of the work of African American composers. With this context, it is interesting to surmise how different the narrative of America's musical history, particularly that of opera, might have been had the music of the African American community been accepted as part of the roots of an American school of composition. Perhaps the opera house would have been poised to help foster an original American canon more inclusive of the composers of the time.

Black Voices in Opera

In October 2020, I attended a virtual opera festival hosted by Black Women in Opera, LLC. Black Women in Opera (B.W.I.O.) is a company operated by Renee Namakau Ombaba, founded with the intention of educating the public on the past and present accomplishments of Black women opera singers. The festival was a day-long event consisting of several different panels on opera education, young artist programs, career planning, and the opera industry as a whole. The keynote speaker was soprano Angel Joy Blue, who spoke in depth about her opera journey and experience in the opera industry as an African American woman. While there was so much that I learned in that space of listening, there are a few key points that helped to inform this thesis with the consideration of a perspective I myself do not possess as a white artist. The first was the emphasis on the importance of representation. Many of the artists throughout the festival discussed how impactful it had been for them to see African American artists performing on opera stages, especially in regard to picturing their own careers within the industry. Some of the referenced artists were Marian Anderson, the contralto who broke the color barrier at the Metropolitan Opera, Leontyne Price, and Jessye Norman. While discussing their careers, the topic of how to define one's success as an opera singer emerged. In this conversation, panelist and countertenor Patrick Dailey expressed the importance of having your own definition of success, rather than depending on recognition from a major opera house. Dailey and other speakers coupled this stance with a critical view of the

actions of said opera houses both in the past and present.[25] In this thesis I use the Metropolitan Opera as my primary example of an American opera house because of the visibility that its positioning in the industry has afforded. However, this isn't to the exclusion of the many other houses that exist in the United States. On the topic of representation, the panelists discussed how larger houses such as the Met are now looking to regional companies for guidance. Specifically mentioned was Pittsburg Festival Opera, whose mission statement expresses the company's focus on "diversity in programming and casting" in the presentation of the "American works, reinterpretations of older works, and new works" they produce.[26] Although the Met is often the first to be thought of when considering American opera, it isn't necessarily representative of the programming or diversity and equity initiatives of smaller opera companies. Changes at the Met could therefore help to amplify this work.

In addition to discussing representation on stage, one of the panels covered educational representation. The main point that I gathered from the panelists was that there is a need for the normalization of a curriculum that dispels the myth of "the other." Or to put it more plainly, a curriculum which teaches a musical history that includes equally the contributions of Black artists. In listing examples of Black composers, one panelist mentioned the classical composer Joseph Boulogne (Chevalier de Saint George).

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[25] "BWIO Fest: Black Community in Opera." YouTube, uploaded by Black Women in Opera TV, 5 Dec. 2020, https://youtu.be/-TpNfEqNF_Y.

[26] Pittsburgh Festival Opera. "About." *Pittsburgh Festival Opera*, 22 Feb. 2021, pittsburghfestivalopera.org/about.

Now recognized as the first well-known classical composer of African ancestry, he is often referenced in academia as the "Black Mozart."[25] From this reference I gathered two things: The first was how in the recognition of his artistry, he is still mentioned in a framing which centers the white European, and second, how I have never heard his name mentioned in my personal opera education--unlike the names of Verdi, Puccini, etc. Both of these realizations led me to reflect on how pervasive the centering of whiteness is in music history and education, and how it has allowed for the creation and longevity of the institutional models being challenged today.

Moving Forward: Changes at the Metropolitan Opera

In the wake of Black Lives Matter "... opera companies posted statements of solidarity, however platitudinous, denouncing racism and promising a more equitable future."[27] On June 1, 2020, the Metropolitan Opera posted the following statement to their Instagram account: "There is no place for racism in the arts. There is no place for racism in New York City. There is no place for racism in this country or the world. The Met stands with those raising their voices in support of justice and equality."[28] An important assertion, to be sure, but what is of greater importance is how the Met has taken action steps to stand by these words. To quote a statement made during the

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[27] Barone, Joshua. "For These Classical Musicians, It's Always Been About Racial Equity." *The New York Times*, 27 Jan. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/01/27/arts/music/classical-music-and-racial-equity.html.

[28] Metopera. Photo of Solidarity Statement. *Instagram*, 1 June 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CA5sMmUHYmI/

B.W.I.O. festival, "representation means nothing without intention and accountability."[25] One way that African American artists have been holding opera companies accountable is through the creation of the Black Opera Alliance (BOA), a coalition made up of over 900 artists/administrators. "The mission of [BOA] is to empower Black classical artists and administrators by exposing systems of racial inequity and under-representation of the African diaspora in all facets of the industry and challenging institutions to implement drastic reform… The Alliance intends to accomplish this mission through activism, utilizing social media, advocacy for Black professionals in opera board rooms, and working with local governments to ensure that Black professionals have an equal opportunity for success in opera." As part of their efforts, they have created the "Pledge for Racial Equity and Systemic Change in Opera." It includes the following eight action items towards the dismantling of racism and its structures in opera:

1. Hire Black Artists who reflect at minimum the racial demographics of our most diverse communities for both outreach and mainstage productions.
2. Require that administrative staff, orchestra members and independent contracts reflect at minimum the racial demographics of our most diverse communities.
3. Program and prioritize works by Black composers on the mainstage, especially those that feature storytelling true to the complexity and broad experience of Black culture.
4. Hire more Black creatives and production personnel at every level of the organization.

5. Require that visual artists undergo training for successfully preparing a Black artist for the stage.
6. Review the organization's hiring practices and administrative policies for inherent racism and or implicit bias.
7. Review the board's recruitment culture and decision-making methodologies for inherent racism and or implicit bias.
8. Include within the company's official code of conduct a commitment to anti-racism and anti-oppression.[29]

As of March 21, 2021 the Metropolitan Opera has signed the pledge with the formal recognition by general manager, Peter Gelb, of "the importance of addressing the issues… (laid) out in [the] pledge, both at the Met and throughout the broader opera community." As of March 2021, about 85% of the industry has responded to the call to sign the pledge and address systemic racism.[2]

Already the Met has begun to work in alignment with the above action items. Most notable are their programming of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* for the 2021-2022 season—to be discussed in a later chapter—and the appointment of the house's first Chief Diversity Officer. The appointee, Marcia Lynn Sells, has a law degree from Columbia and since 2015 has been the Dean of Students at Harvard Law School. At the Met she will work "as part of the senior management team… [to develop] new diversity initiatives and [enhance] existing programs. The Met's Human Resources department will be under

[29] "Sign the Pledge for Racial Equity in Opera." (n.d.). Retrieved March 24, 2021, from https://www.blackoperaalliance.org/pledge.

her direction, and she will have a broad mandate to work across the entire institution from administrative staff to union employees to the Met board of directors."[30] In an interview on her new position and the changes that the Met has been implementing she said, "It's not just that you want to get it right. There are a lot of eyes on you, but it's a huge opportunity to show the way, as well as learn from other organizations that don't have as big a name, are not as well known, and help shine a light on that work and on them."[31] As was done in the B.W.I.O. festival, Sells made a point of recognizing that efforts toward a more equitable future for opera have existed in other companies prior to 2020. However, the preeminence of the Met in the American opera scene affords it a visibility that makes its choices that much more important. What they do or don't do greatly matters, as others are likely to follow their lead.

As cultural historian Marsha Siefert maintains, "Whether through board membership or the pursuit of monies from business and government, no cultural institution that [makes] claim to national reputation (can) be entirely immune from politics."[14] Therefore, the external pressures for change applied by the Black Live Matter Movement gave the Met an impetus to act. That being said, the aforementioned actions and future efforts must be met with some degree of skepticism. In her article for the *Philosophy of Music Education Review,* music educator Juliet Hess defines the "politics

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[30] "The Met Appoints Marcia Sells as its First Chief Diversity Officer." (n.d.). Retrieved February 03, 2021, from https://www.metopera.org/about/press-releases/the-met-appoints-marcia-sells-as-its-first-chief-diversity-officer/.

[31] Barone, Joshua. "The Metropolitan Opera Hires Its First Chief Diversity Officer." *The New York Times*, 25 Jan. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/01/25/arts/music/met-opera-chief-diversity-officer.html.

of self-congratulation"; "... [the] knowing of oneself through the assumption of the inferiority of the Other and the applauding of oneself for being a "culturally tolerant cosmopolitan" white subject. She says this "with reference to the ways we often perform ourselves as 'tolerant' subjects-- literally congratulating ourselves on our tolerance of racial Others."[32] The appointment of Marcia Lynn Sells as Chief Diversity Officer appears an honest step towards the Met becoming a more equitable institution, but one that did not come without the pressures of the current political climate in the United States. The same was the case for the Met's decision to allow African American artists to perform on its stage for the first time in January 1955. In response to pressure from the public, they scheduled the debuts of Marian Anderson and Robert McFerrin.[14] It therefore should be with a critical eye that the Met's actions are assessed. Referring back to the Black Opera Alliance, they have chosen an empirical means by which to assess not just the Met, but all of the American opera houses which have signed on to their pledge. By partnering with TRG Arts, an industry leader in arts analytics, data collection will provide a concrete way to measure progress as well as highlight areas where specific houses may be struggling.[2]

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[32] Hess, Juliet. "Performing Tolerance and Curriculum: The Politics of Self-Congratulation, Identity Formation, and Pedagogy in World Music Education." *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2013, pp. 71-72. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/philmusieducrevi.21.1.66. Accessed 27 Dec. 2020.

Methodology

In this paper I will explore how the racial politics of America informed the development of opera within the country. By laying out this history, I will highlight specific opportunities that had existed for change, and how, through the process of reclamation, these efforts might finally come to be realized. Though there are many factors which play into this discussion, I have decided to focus on the (overlooked) contributions of African American composers, with the Metropolitan Opera as my case study. As a long standing and prominent institution, the history of the Met provides a model for understanding the interplay between economics and race in the operations of American opera. By examining the careers of African American composers past and present, I further critique how these factors have shaped the industry; including their implication in opera's struggle with racial equity. Though it has historically been maintained as such, opera does not have to rely so heavily on the works of the European "masters." The contributions of the African American composers I will discuss in the next chapter exemplify the possibility for expanding the scope of opera's representation. Through looking at their careers, I will assess the benefits and pitfalls of this reclamation. I will then conclude by examining the Met's current plans to mount *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, suggesting the potential of moving towards a more inclusive and representational industry by staging works by contemporary African American composers, as well as the challenges this project might face.

I acknowledge that the terminology surrounding racial identity is varied, and centers around factors such as personal preference or the history of the very terms

themselves. For the purposes of this thesis, I have mainly used the term “African American.” The use of other terminology reflects the choices of the authors whose work I am quoting. In the next two chapters I’d like to note that the inconsistencies in capitalization of the term “Black” also reflect the sources I am quoting. When not quoted, I capitalize the term to recognize the history, identities, and community referenced.

Reclamation: The Power to Define

For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to examine the contributions of African American composers past and present in order to acknowledge and portray a broader picture of American opera. The reclamation of their work/legacies is one suggestion as to how the American opera industry might move towards greater representation. It is also a way that I have chosen to critique the industry's racial politics. I acknowledge here that this tactic of reclamation is not an original thought. In fact, to refer back to the Black Opera Alliance's Pledge for Racial Equity, my focus on composers echoes their third action item: "Program and prioritize works by Black composers."[2] Furthermore, "race vindication (has) long been a major activity of African American scholars, intellectuals, and public figures since the early 19th century."[33] Their work was in reaction to both the racial segregation of American society leading up to the twentieth century, and how Social Darwinism was being used to classify the achievements of African Americans.[23] African American scholars, activists, etc. thus took it upon themselves to reclaim their "power to define." One such example was the publication of *The Journal of Negro History* in 1916 whose objective was to subvert the narrative of "the Negro problem" by "exhibit(ing) the facts of [African American] history, to save and publish the records of the black race to make known by competent articles and by documents what the Negro has thought and felt and become."[33] But the

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[33] V. P. Franklin. "The Power To Define: African American Scholars, Activism, and Social Change, 1916–2015." *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 100, no. 1, 2015, pp. 2, 4, 6. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.100.1.0001. Accessed 27 Mar. 2021.

dissemination of such writings still faced hurdles. There was a belief amongst white publishers that books on "Negro history" would not sell and therefore were not interested in publishing them. As a result Associated Publishers was founded in 1921 "as the publishing company for the scholarly works produced on African American history."[33] I mention this to provide context not only for my proposed approach of reclamation but also to begin to show the factors which explain why the contributions of African American composers have historically been overlooked by white power brokers.

American Music: A Divided History

From the contextualization of *The Journal of Negro History*, two main ideas can be applied to the world of American music: the first is the idea of the delineation of separate spheres for African American and white academics/artists and the second is the necessity for the building of positive stereotypes for African Americans. As I briefly touched on in the preceding chapter, "The history of American music, including operatic works, has not fully taken into account the compositions of African American composers."[34] A major reason for this is because of how racism impacted the development of American music. "Segregation became law after the United States Supreme Court handed down its famous "separate-but-equal" decision in 1896."[35]

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[34] André, Naomi. *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. University of Illinois Press, 2018. p. 99. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctv80cb7d. Accessed 27 Dec. 2020.

[35] Lemons, J. Stanley. "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920." *American Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1977, p. 106. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2712263. Accessed 29 Mar. 2021.

Separate performance venues as well as print media kept the art of white and Black artists largely separate from one another, perpetuating the notion that their artistry was to be thought of in different ways, specifically with the contributions of white artists as the standard.

Separate Spheres: Music Beyond White Commercialism

Historian Eileen Southern argues that "[t]he effect of slavery had been to create distinct and separate communities of blacks within the larger white communities of the nation, and the emancipation of the slaves did nothing to change this situation." As a result, African Americans "developed their own institutions and culture."[36] They were often working in venues separate from those highlighted in a dominant narrative of American music. The Theater Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A.), founded in 1920, "provided shows for theaters in small towns and cities of the South and Midwest that were patronized exclusively by black audiences." T.O.B.A's greatest contribution was that "it provided places where black talent could develop freely at its own pace and in its own direction, unhampered by the demands of commercialism and unconcerned with the standards of white America."[20] These standards were heavily tied to the conversation surrounding "serious music." As I previously established, "serious" music was often that music which was based in the European style. And though spirituals "came to be appreciated" in this category in the period between 1895 and 1920, the emerging music

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[36] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. pp. 311-312.

styles of ragtime, jazz, and the blues were initially not celebrated in the same manner.[37] The separation of African American and white artists also made it easier for the white music industry to present false representations of "Blackness" through popular entertainment.

Representation: The Building of Positive Stereotypes

Historian Stanley Lemons explains that "A fascinating aspect of the period from 1880 to 1920 is that one can find the sharpest sort of contrasting stereotypes of blacks and whites in popular culture....Since the dominant popular culture was created by and for whites, they showed themselves in a flattering fashion, while blacks were usually exaggerated in the worst way."[37] One way that these stereotypes manifested themselves in American culture was through blackface minstrelsy. Used heavily as a means to inform public opinions on race, minstrelsy made a caricature of the African American performer. Emerging first in the form of individual acts in the 1830s, by the 1840s it was performed as an ensemble show and became "the first kind of a national theater or national entertainment" within the United States. Though its "musical structure, the form of the melody and so forth, followed certain European patterns" that would have been distinguishable in the music considered "highbrow," its presentation-- particularly the embodied characters--was much cruder. "When the Virginia Minstrels came along...they

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[37] Lemons, J. Stanley. "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920." *American Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1977, p. 113. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2712263. Accessed 29 Mar. 2021.

develop[ed]" characters such as Mr. Bones and Mr. Tambo. That began the "traditional minstrel set-up, with these two characters being outrageous, ... fidget(ing) all the time... and saying the most insane things...The masks had become more grotesque." Blackface minstrelsy reaffirmed through "the negative characterization of blacks as the total comic fool," the ignorance of mainstream America who knew little of the lives and experiences of African Americans.[38]

Even as Harry T. Burleigh worked with Dvořák in the last decade of the nineteenth century, "pop culture glorified the "good old plantation life," and minstrel songs… demeaned African American culture and character."[39] The caricature associations that minstrelsy brought to the understanding of the African American experience blended into the reception of the work of African American composers: "When [Black] composers began gravitating toward New York in the 1890s, [the prevalence of] minstrelsy [had such influence that]... songwriters who wanted their songs to be successful tried to get minstrel stars[40] to introduce the songs."[41] So there was a push and pull between fitting the mold of popular culture or rejecting it in favor of not yet

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[38] "Blackface Minstrelsy." *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/foster-blackface-minstrelsy/.

[39] Snyder, Jean E. *Harry T. Burleigh: From the Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance*. University of Illinois Press, 2016. p. 112. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctt18j8x96. Accessed 18 Mar. 2021.

[40] While this quote does not specify the race of the minstrel stars that these composers reached out to, it is worth noting that there were African American artists performing on minstrel stages in the 1890s.

[41] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. p. 294.

recognized styles. “Popular culture is an exceptional means for gaining an insight into what masses of people are thinking, feeling, and dreaming. It is neither high or art culture, nor is it folk culture; but it is something in between which is produced by the “entertainment industry” for mass consumption.” Part of the function of popular art is “to verify an experience already known.”[42] Minstrelsy did this by centering whiteness. From its development in the early nineteenth century, it “emerged as a conduit of white assertion and a buffer against black protest.”[43] The form operated with its own racial hierarchy: white, “Black”, Black. The “Blackness” depicted on the minstrel stage was a metaphor that “came to signal a worse-case condition that others who were neither black nor fully empowered could join and deploy to signal their own disaffection.” In other words, not only was the representation of “Black” life onstage already a caricature, but it also purposefully “deflected the actualities of blackness that black people had to endure… [by] appropriat(ing) the politics of black performance for... [the] race-and class-based ends [of the largely white audience].”[44] This appropriation reflected America’s pre-Civil War race relations. When minstrelsy emerged in the early 1830s, there was a

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[42] Lemons, J. Stanley. “Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920.” *American Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 1977, p. 102, 103-104, 107. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2712263. Accessed 29 Mar. 2021.

[43] Jones, Douglas A. “Black Politics but Not Black People: Rethinking the Social and ‘Racial’ History of Early Minstrelsy.” *TDR (1988-)*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2013, p. 27., www.jstor.org/stable/24584792. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.

[44] Jones, Douglas A. “Black Politics but Not Black People: Rethinking the Social and ‘Racial’ History of Early Minstrelsy.” *TDR (1988-)*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2013, pp. 23, 32-33., www.jstor.org/stable/24584792. Accessed 21 Apr. 2021.

heightened fear in white society of the emancipated African American. This fear was based in the belief that the freedom of African Americans threated their own existing liberties and that slavery had fostered years of resentment that would now turn violently in their direction. Thus, the form of minstrelsy acted as a vehicle of power. By fabricating a "Black" experience it was able to present a degrading depiction of African American life while avoiding the creation of a potential platform for African American voices. "...the gestural and linguistic contortions that define early blackface minstrelsy unsettled its physical threats and ideological sense."[44] This is also why actual African American performers were barred from early minstrelsy.

By the late nineteenth century, the minstrel show used its stereotyped characters to reinforce the already popular (but false) scientific belief in the differences of the races, and as a means of diffusing America's racial tensions through comedy. Some of the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the minstrel characters included stupidity, laziness, irresponsibility, dishonesty, and a lack of morals.[42] Though many of the minstrel songs which employed these stereotypes were written by white artists, the end of the nineteenth century saw the participation of African American musicians in the role of both composer and performer. In fact, African American vaudeville star, Ernest Hogan, wrote one of the most famous songs of this genre, "All Coons Look Alike to Me." Musical participation of this kind offers up questions of motivation. Did artists such as Hogan feel the pressures of a prejudiced music industry to conform to commercial demands? Or was this an act of subverting the genre's harmful history? Perhaps the answer is dependent on the

individual. For Hogan specifically, he faced bitter attacks "by most of the black intelligentsia and was sorry he had ever written the thing."[42]

The disapproval which Hogan received speaks to the frustrations many African American composers felt in regard to minstrelsy, as many "sought to elevate black music and the role of blacks in the theater."[45] In addition to propagating harmful stereotypes generally, minstrelsy further pushed the association of African American artists as non-serious musicians. Part of the presumptions made about African American composers were that they "were either not interested in writing "art" music in a tradition outside of the spirituals or that there was a lack of opportunities for their training and nurturing."[34] But as mentioned in the previous chapter, this is not altogether true. Oberlin, the New England Conservatory, and the National Conservatory trained some of the most well-known (and lesser known) African American composers. "Consequently, they knew how to write music in traditional European style and, indeed, often did so, particularly when they wanted the music to sell. But they reserved much of their creative energy for Negro-inspired compositions."[46] It is probably from this latter point that the assumption that African American composers were "not interested in writing 'art music'" stems. However, the exploration of a uniquely African American sound was not a rejection of

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[45] Lemons, J. Stanley. "Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920." American Quarterly, vol. 29, no. 1, 1977, p. 115. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2712263. Accessed 29 Mar. 2021.

[46] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. p. 283.

the European style. Some composers worked with the influence of both styles (Scott Joplin is just one example).

That being said, "not all composers in the United States were writing music in the orthodox European style. Large numbers of musically illiterate black music makers were not aware of its existence, and many blacks who could read music were unconcerned about it."[36] Often the decision to work within the European style was one of necessity in terms of the pre-established hierarchy of American music. As the quote at the beginning of this section mentions, African American composers wrote in this style when they wanted their music to sell, acknowledging that public tastes catered to the work produced by white artists or that written in the tradition of nineteenth century music. This preference carried over into publishing as well. One reason that the works of African American composers are not as well documented is because they were not always published, most likely because they were assumed to not be profitable or simply because they strayed from the European model which America had so firmly adapted. This seems, however, too plain a depiction of the musical interests of the time. Just as Dvořák had advocated for the inclusion of African American music as the basis for a national sound, other composers at the turn of the twentieth century expressed similar interests. In 1901 American composer Arthur Farwell founded the Wa-Wan[47] Press. He stated that it was "seizing upon the wealth of primitive songs in America, upon the new or the serious or daring expression of American composers, ... tracking down songs of the soil still

[47] The name of the press was chosen to honor one of the traditional ceremonies of the Omaha, a Midwestern Native American tribe.

unrecorded."[48] Farwell's use of "primitive" in reference to folk songs demonstrates the coded language that was used in American music discourse to express what was really a belief--by white artists-- in the inferiority of African American composers. Perhaps then it is no surprise that no African American composers were actually represented in the press's catalogue.[46] The interest in the African American music tradition was present, but many times to the exclusion of recognizing the African American composers who wrote it. Therefore, the recognition of the work of African American composers past and present is so important because it moves the appreciation for the music beyond simple aestheticization and towards more honest engagement.

Self-Definition: African American Composers in Opera

Despite the obstacles and misconceptions, **"**the last decade of the nineteenth [century]... [as well as] the first two decades of the twentieth century were… golden years for the black man in the field of entertainment."[49] As vaudeville began to replace minstrelsy as America's new popular entertainment, African American artists found ways to perform more realistic depictions of African American life in the theatre. They particularly saw an opportunity for this in their performances for all African American audiences. "Although the stock character types still flourished in these productions…

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[48] Waters, Edward N. "Book Reviews: "the Wa-Wan Press, 1901-1911", Ed. by Vera Brodsky Lawrence (Book Review)." *Notes - Quarterly Journal of the Music Library Association* 27.4 (1971): 704. *ProQuest.* Web. 9 May 2021.

[49] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. p. 369.

[and there was a continued reliance] on coon songs and the comedic sketches reminiscent of minstrelsy, ... the word play included subversive messages."[50] So while still within the bounds of a pre-established industry, this was a step away from the entertainment models which degraded the African American artist, and a step towards an artistic expression that was self-defining. Indeed, it was during this time that "black music makers developed a distinctive style of entertainment music, fitted to his own personal needs and expressive of his own individuality. It was not intended to be heard or understood by whites."[36] This turn away from white commercialism was a rejection of the exploitation of African American life that forms such as minstrelsy used for the appeasement of white America. "Rag music was one of the earliest manifestations of this distinctive music."[36] The term "ragtime" most likely developed as a way of describing musical meter. "...the term is a contraction for "ragged time," denoting a style of playing piano or banjo where the melody is "broken up" into short, syncopated rhythms while a steady overall beat is either played (piano) or implied (banjo)."[51] The genre of piano ragtime "was a natural outgrowth of dance-music practices among black folk, …using motives reminiscent of fiddle and banjo tunes… The influence of Negro folksong(s) was particularly evident in the chromatic turns of melody and harmony."[36] In his opera *Treemonisha,* African

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[50] Bloomquist, Jennifer. "The Minstrel Legacy: African American English and the Historical Construction of 'Black' Identities in Entertainment." *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 19, no. 4, 2015, p. 414. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44508238. Accessed 22 Apr. 2021.

[51] History of Ragtime. Web.. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200035811/>.

American composer Scott Joplin challenged the "high/low" culture model by combining the soundscapes of ragtime and opera.

Scott Joplin: "High" and "Low" Culture

Scott Joplin (1868-1917) was acknowledged as being the "King of Rag." However, in 1907 he moved from St. Louis to New York City to make contact with publishers and explore the possibilities of staging his opera, *Treemonisha.* What's interesting about his work is that, musically speaking, he received recognition in both the worlds of "high/lowbrow" art; a categorization I laid out in the first chapter of this thesis. In an article for *The American Musician and Art Journal* in 1907 he was praised as follows: "Of the higher class of ragtime Scott Joplin is an apostle and authority. Joplin doesn't like the light music of the day; he is delighted with Beethoven and Bach, and his compositions, though syncopated, smack of the higher cult."[52] This quote is interesting because it seems to imply that his work finds merit through his own personal interest in the compositions of Beethoven and Bach, who would have been categorized as "high art." Syncopation was recognized as one of the "elements indigenous to African American musical genres;"[53] so the choice wording of "though syncopated" seems to insinuate that if not for his associations with the European tradition, his music would

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[52] Berlin, Edward A. "Scott Joplin's Treemonisha Years." *American Music*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1991, p. 263. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3051431. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

[53] Choi, Eunjung, and Laura J. Keith. "Cultural Diversity: Resources for Music Educators in Selected Works of Three Contemporary African-American Classical Composers." *Music Educators Journal*, vol. 103, no. 2, 2016, p. 36. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44678228. Accessed 29 Dec. 2020.

simply be viewed as African American folk music had been in the decades leading up to the twentieth century; that is, of a "primitive" nature. This conclusion can also be supported by how he wrote out his music. Though he played in the syncopated style, he used traditional notation in published versions of his work. "He would hardly have been able to find a publisher at the time for his music had he written it as he played it."[54] This assertion as well as the seemingly coded language of the above review suggest how Joplin's work and accomplishments were closely followed by the expectations of the white music industry.

***Treemonisha*: An American Opera**

Before moving to New York City, Joplin produced a concert version of his first "ragtime opera" called *A Guest of Honor* in St. Louis. Unfortunately, the manuscript to this work has been lost.[55] His second opera, *Treemonisha* occupied much of his time while in New York and was a very personal project. "This opera was an expression of his ideals, of his belief that education was the solution to his race's problems."[56] Though its eventual performances did not seem to go as he had hoped, the coverage that *Treemonisha* received throughout Joplin's work on it informs what it meant to him as an

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[54] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. p. 319.

[55] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. p. 320.

[56] Berlin, Edward A. "Scott Joplin's Treemonisha Years." *American Music*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1991, p. 272. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3051431. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

African American composer, as well as the significance it could have had in American opera had it been privy to the stages of that such as the Met; especially taking into consideration the precedents that the Met was setting for the course of American opera during this time. Columnist Harry Bradford wrote in the *Freeman,* "I heard the overture; it is [as] great as anything written by Mr. Wagner or Gounard [Gounod] or any of the other old masters. It is original Scott Joplin Negro music. Nothing like it [has] ever [been] written in the United States."[57] Despite this praise, Joplin struggled to find a publisher for his work because of their belief that there was little likelihood of financial success. This claim of non-profitability reflects how the music market- particularly as it pertained to opera compositions- was not poised to the work of the African American composer. The music of *Treemonisha* "borrowed all of the elements of European opera and merge(d) them with the unique rhythms of ragtime." By doing so it challenged the predominant perception of opera in America (i.e., its musical basis). It also broke down musical hierarchies by combining that which was considered "serious" versus "primitive" music. However, if it was not the music itself which deterred publishers, perhaps it was the content. *Treemonisha* addresses "the conflicts in African American culture at the end of the [nineteenth] century-- the desire to move into mainstream American society countered by the strange pull of the old African ways and superstitions."[58] It is a work

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[57] Berlin, Edward A. "Scott Joplin's Treemonisha Years." *American Music*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1991, p. 265. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3051431. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

[58] Treemonisha. Web.. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200035812/>.

that uses African American music to express a genuine depiction of African American life by an African American composer. The significance of this can best be understood in relation to how, at the time that Joplin was composing, popular entertainment was still recycling the harmful troupes of minstrelsy. Though the minstrel form itself had lost popularity, the perpetuation of its stereotypes continued to inform the expectations (by the white music industry) for the work of African American artists. However, the harm of these stereotypes extends beyond just the art. Minstrelsy had been successful in reaffirming the ignorance of mainstream American society in regard to racial identity. Its fabricated portrayal of "Blackness" therefore became what many Americans thought African Americans should embody both onstage but also in society. In *Treemonisha* Joplin speaks to this issue of forced identity, reclaiming the power of African American individuals to tell the stories of their communities in their chosen way.

Determined to have his work seen, "[Joplin] published the 230-page piano score at his own expense" on May 19, 1911.[59] A glowing review appeared in the *American Musician and Art Journal* a month later. The writer began by presenting Joplin's work as an example of "the progress of the colored race" and discussing "Joplin's aims of presenting Negro life." They then continued to make the suggestion that "Joplin, more than any other composer, (had) succeeded in creating a purely American opera."[60] This

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[59] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. p. 322.

[60] Berlin, Edward A. "Scott Joplin's Treemonisha Years." *American Music*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1991, p. 269. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3051431. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

article excerpt seems to suggest two slightly opposing ideas. The comment on "the progress of the colored race" begs the question whether Joplin's work was being used as an example because he was working in the "high culture" model of opera. Though *Treemonisha* inherently challenged this model with the use of rag music, its categorization as an opera still would have positioned it differently within the minds of American audiences. "Unaware of the extent to which his piano rags would someday be honored, he probably saw an opera as the way to establish his credentials as a true artist and as a leader of his race."[61] The latter part of the *American Musician and Art Journal* review seems to affirm this motivation. To associate *Treemonisha,* an opera written by an African American composer in the style of African American music as "a purely American opera" speaks to the larger debate on the definition of American music. As of this writing in 2021, the only "American" opera listed by *La Scala Encyclopedia,* a comprehensive reference guide to the worlds' operas, is *Porgy and Bess.*[62] While *Porgy and Bess* has its own complex history in regards to authorship and racial representation,[63] it is interesting to question what the impact could have been had *Treemonisha* instead

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[61] Berlin, Edward A. "Scott Joplin's Treemonisha Years." *American Music*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1991, p. 273. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3051431. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

[62] Siefert, Marsha. "The Metropolitan Opera in the American Century: Opera Singers, Europe, and Cultural Politics." *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, vol. 33, no. 4, 2004, p. 301. *ProQuest.* Web. 27 Dec. 2020

[63] The scholarship surrounding *Porgy and Bess* often presents conflicting opinions on the show's content/conception; a complex conversation deserving of its own space. It is therefore beyond the purview of this particular thesis.

garnered that title; particularly because it is an opera which tells the story of African American characters by an African American composer.

At some point Joplin rewrote *Treemonisha* after having been "advised by musicians of ability" to do so. It's unclear as to who these individuals may have been or when Joplin undertook the editing of his opera, but a meeting between him and Harry Lawrence Freeman-- a Black opera composer and director of several Black musicals-- was recorded as taking place in 1912. Regardless of these details, the editing of the opera means that the published *Treemonisha* is not the piece in its final form.[64] Though there are a few recorded attempts at having his work performed during his lifetime, there exists no reviews of either their success or if they had really come to pass. A single, self-produced performance took place in a hall in Harlem in 1915. There was a full cast but no scenery, lighting or orchestra. Joplin played the entire score on piano.[65] Not until 1972 was it fully staged at Morehouse College in Atlanta, directed by legendary dancer/choreographer Katherine Dunham and conducted by Robert Shaw. Joplin's original published score provided notation for only piano and vocals. For the 1972 Atlanta staging, the opera was orchestrated by African American composer TJ Anderson. Three years later it premiered at the Houston Grand Opera.[58] The history of *Treemonisha* serves as just one of many examples of how it has often taken additional efforts on the

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[64] Berlin, Edward A. "Scott Joplin's Treemonisha Years." *American Music*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1991, p. 270. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3051431. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

[65] Berlin, Edward A. "Scott Joplin's Treemonisha Years." *American Music*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1991, pp. 260–276. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3051431. Accessed 30 Mar. 2021.

part of Black artists to get the operas of Black composers to be recognized by opera institutions.

William Grant Still: Breaking Industry Barriers

The 1920s and 30s were full of paradoxes for African American composers. While they found that the doors of many publishing houses still remained closed to them and some of the leading music organizations were unwilling to perform their music, for the first time in history major symphony orchestras performed works written by African American composers and opera companies used African American singers in leading roles.[66] It was also during these years that "black artists began… to (join) together to protest in their own way against the quality of life for black folk in the United States. Out of this grew a movement that has been called "The Harlem Renaissance" or "The Black Renaissance."[66] Composer William Grant Still (1895-1978) was a leading figure in this movement. To his colleagues he was known as the "Dean of Afro-American" composers, with a musical training that was quite diverse. "He wrote jazz arrangements for blues masters and bandleaders...but also studied composition with George Chadwick, a member of the "Boston Classicists," –who trained and composed under German Romanticism—and ventured into the white modernist scene through his studies with French composer Edgard Varèse. In his career he broke racial barriers by becoming the first African American composer to have a symphony performed by a major U.S. orchestra and the

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[66] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. pp. 413-414.

first to have an opera (*Troubled Island*) produced by a major opera company.[67] However getting *Troubled Island* to the stage of New York City Opera did not come without difficulty.

Troubled Island: A Complex History

On the evening of March 13, 1949 William Grant Still's opera *Troubled Island* premiered at New York City Opera. This was an incredible achievement, especially when paralleled with the experience of Scott Joplin with *Treemonisha* three decades before. *Troubled Island,* originally titled *Drums of Haiti,* portrays the rise of power and inevitable fall of Jean Jacques Dessalines, a leader of the Haitian Revolution and the first ruler of an independent Haiti. It ran for just three performances, as per contract negotiations.[68]

Initially Still had hoped to have his work performed at the Metropolitan Opera Company (as it was known at the time) and submitted the score. It was later returned to him with the following explanation: "In advising you that to our regret, we do not see our way clear to accept this work, we should like to point out that this conclusion should in no way be taken as implying any criticism as to the artistic merit of the work."[68] The fact that Still had submitted *Troubled Island* to the Metropolitan Opera is significant in that it

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[67] *Listening Guide: William Grant Still*, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, 23 July 2018, www.bsomusic.org/stories/listening-guide-william-grant-still/.

[68] Kernodle, Tammy L. "Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies: The History of Still's 'Troubled Island.'" *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1999, pp. 487-489. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/742614. Accessed 8 Mar. 2021.

shows they were aware of his presence in the music industry and the work he was composing. Yet they were in a position to turn him away. The vagueness of their reply also leaves room for speculation as to why exactly they could not accept his work. One consideration is that of casting. At the time that Still submitted his score in the 1940s, The Metropolitan Opera had yet to break the color barrier in their employment of African American singers in principal roles. Knowing the initial stipulations that Still made to New York City Opera to produce *Troubled Island*, this would have presented a conflict. While he agreed to the use of an interracial cast of his own choosing, he requested that African American bass-baritone Lawrence Whisonant (performing under the name Larry Winters at the time), sing the leading role of Dessalines.[68] The reason that Still was okay with an interracial cast of his choosing was because "he recognized that if [music director Laszlo] Halász attempted to use an all-African American cast, he would run into the opera's being typecast, much like *Porgy and Bess.*"[69] Several critics used *Porgy and Bess*, which premiered on Broadway in 1935, as a reference for their reviews of *Troubled Island.* At a time where there were no examples of serious dramas which portrayed African American stories, it would have been the closest thing for comparison. The specification of an all-African American cast for *Porgy and Bess* prompted discussions of racial representation that continue in current scholarship. To quote musicologist Naomi André, "Through the established shadows of minstrelsy, [*Porgy and Bess*] reinforces

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[69] Kernodle, Tammy L. "Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies: The History of Still's 'Troubled Island.'" *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1999, pp. 490- 491. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/742614. Accessed 8 Mar. 2021.

these stereotypes [by presenting] a black community that gambles, kills each other, and succumbs to dangerous drunken and drug-induced behavior." However it also "breaks past [this] to allow black performers and audience members from all backgrounds to feel the power and the pain such assumptions reinforce."[70] In talking about his own work, Still said that he viewed *Troubled Island* not "as a Negro opera but as an American opera."[69] This distinction speaks to how he personally defined American music. On the topic he said, "Just as America was once known as the 'melting pot,' so is American folk music as rich and as interesting as the music of all the national and racial groups that came to these shores… Just as most of these people are now Americans, so can their music be classified as American."[71] With this context, his preference for having *Trouble Island* categorized as an American opera acknowledges the influences of African American music and the contributions of African American artists as an equal part of America's musical history, rather than something to be thought of or kept separate.

Still's desire to have his opera referred to as "American" rather than "Negro" also reflected conversations surrounding "Americanness" and what that meant in opera. At the time of *Troubled Island's* premiere, an additional "hurdle to overcome… [was] the American public's inability to recognize the compositional ability of nationalist

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[70] André, Naomi. *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. University of Illinois Press, 2018. pp 88, 96. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctv80cb7d. Accessed 27 Dec. 2020.

[71] William Grant Still and Verna Arvey, "Our American Musical Resources," in *The William Grant Still Reader: Essays on American Music,* edited by Jon Michael Spencer (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 194.

composers and to associate American musical idioms with greatness." [72]This struggle speaks to how connected opera remained to its European association. For the opera composer, both their race and nationality were factors reflected in the critical reception of their works. Already the premiere of *Troubled Island* was a historic event because of the racial barriers it broke for Still, however critic Ben Levine added in *Daily Worker* that "the production of an opera by a contemporary American musician is nowadays so rare as to be in itself a historic occasion."[72] What then were the expectations for an "American" opera? Referring back to the first school of American composers (the "Boston Classicists") and their European education, one might assume that it would be to follow the European opera tradition. Yet this was not what was expressed in reviews of *Troubled Island.* In *Music News,* a Chicago-based periodical, a critic wrote: "Still's opera despite its many interesting and rewarding moments was disappointing in the end because the composer could not free himself from old operatic patterns. The sincerity and operatic flair of Still was beyond question, and at this stage of his career, in all probability, he would have offered a more finished product had he been able to go through the invaluable school of operatic experience."[73] The comment of his inability to free himself from the old operatic form seems contradictory, as "American composers were expected

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[72] Kernodle, Tammy L. "Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies: The History of Still's 'Troubled Island.'" *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1999, p. 503. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/742614. Accessed 8 Mar. 2021.

[73] Kernodle, Tammy L. "Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies: The History of Still's 'Troubled Island.'" *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1999, p. 495. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/742614. Accessed 8 Mar. 2021.

to create music which reflected the operatic and symphonic traditions established by the great European masters."[72] The *Music News* review is perhaps then indicative of racially informed expectations for his work, which Still himself made note of. In general, he felt that the critics "failed to comprehend [*Troubled Island*]. In a letter to Halász on April 7, 1949 he wrote that it was "possibly because they expected the work to follow the lines of the stereotype which I abhor because of its falseness."[74] Though the letter provides no further context for what this stereotype specifically was, one can infer from the opera's reviews that it was the portrayal of "Blackness" created by minstrelsy. In reference to *Troubled Island's* score, *Times* critic Olin Downes lamented its "many clichés of Broadway and Hollywood" and its lack of "fresh exoticism… by any other style.... than that of conventional Negroid melody and rhythm." Any issuance of praise came only in reference to the third act which he cited as "com[ing] nearer to exotic folksongs and popular rhythms."[75] It seemed that for critics *Troubled Island* did not fit their preconceived ideas of what an opera by an African American composer should be.

Still was in communications with New York City Opera for several years before they confirmed, in May of 1948, that they would be able to finance *Troubled Island.* However, artistic director László Halász, stated that the initial stipulations Still had made for *Troubled Island's* production were no longer accepted. Initially Still had stated that

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[74] Kernodle, Tammy L. "Arias, Communists, and Conspiracies: The History of Still's 'Troubled Island.'" *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 83, no. 4, 1999, p. 497. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/742614. Accessed 8 Mar. 2021.

[75] Downes, Olin "Halasz Presents New Still Opera," *The New York Times,* April 1, 1949, p. 30.

"the opera would be performed exactly as written, with attention given to all details marked in the score, and without cuts." But now Halász "asked [him] to take out the entire ending of Act II, Scene I, where the two traitorous lovers plot to go away to Paris, [stating] that it wouldn't go over with the audience."[69] Though he agreed for the sake of having the work performed, Still was suspicious of this request, adding to rumors of conspiracy by NY critics to "thwart the success of an African American composer.[76] Though this ask could have been the kind of cut any composer-- regardless of race-- encounters when having their work produced, it was not the only change to Still's initial production stipulations. His request for Lawrence Whisonant as the male lead was also not (initially) honored. In the premiere, New York City Opera cast white opera singer Robert Weede in dark make-up to portray the Black Haitian, Dessalines. Whisonant joined the cast for the following two performances.[77] That Still even made the request of Whisonant's casting was noteworthy as he wouldn't have had the same positionality as the Gerswins in requiring the casting of African American performers. Having his request carried out for the second two performances was therefore significant.

Though the history of *Troubled Island* presents an unfavorable critical reception and questionable production choices on the part of New York City Opera, its "Revival bring(s) to the fore a work that celebrates the liberation of a race of people and opened

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[76] At the time, Halász was living in the same building as *Times* critic Olin Downes who was harsh on Still's work. Still suspected that the suggested cut came from a conversation between them.

[77] Zick, William J. *William Grant Still, African American Composer, Arranger & Oboist*, chevalierdesaintgeorges.homestead.com/Still.html.

the doors of opportunity for African American composers."[72] Despite being well-received by audiences, New York City Opera has never fully revived the production. In 2009 a condensed, narrated concert performance was presented at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture to celebrate the 60th-anniversary of its premiere.[78]

Anthony Davis: Looking Back, Looking Forward

"In the introduction to the anthology *The Black Aesthetic,* literary critic Addison Gayle said, "...the black artists of the past worked with the white public in mind" ... However, the younger artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s had "given up the futile practice of speaking to whites, and [had] begun to speak to [their] brothers" and sisters."[79] The challenge of working to the satisfaction of white industry leaders is reflected in the production history of Joplin and Still's operas. Though their operas told the stories of Black communities, considerations of the audience still catered to white tastes (i.e., publishers surmising that *Treemonisha* would not be profitable). The reception of their works was also influenced by general views surrounding the place (or lack thereof) that American composers held in the creation of operatic works. However, by the latter half of the twentieth century, the work of contemporary African American

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[78] "Presentation & Performance Troubled Island: 60th Anniversary Celebration." *The New York Public Library*, 2009, www.nypl.org/events/programs/2009/03/31/presentation-performance-troubled-island-60th-anniversary-celebration.

[79] V. P. Franklin. "The Power To Define: African American Scholars, Activism, and Social Change, 1916–2015." *The Journal of African American History*, vol. 100, no. 1, 2015, p. 19. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.100.1.0001. Accessed 27 Mar. 2021.

composers such as Anthony Davis emerged to challenge such limited views of the work of African American artists, "honoring Black history while creating a musical fusion that includes elements from many traditions."[80]

The 1980s were a particularly redefining period for American opera. Declines in funding for the commissioning of new works and the continued reliance on the standard European canon had created concern for the future of American opera. In response, two initiatives were started by funding organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts, risk-taking impresarios, and philanthropic administrators: OPERA America's[81] "Opera for the 80s and Beyond" (OFTEAB) and the Brooklyn Academy of Music's (BAM) Next Wave Festival.[82] OFTEAB was a proposal drawn up by Rockefeller Foundation arts director Howard Klein to help "reduce the financial and artistic risks involved in commissioning and producing new projects." Its intention was to incentivize opera companies, through "exploration fellowships and pre-commissioning grants," to include in their missions the development of new works. The goal was that this would

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[80] Zwiebach, Michael. "Composer Anthony Davis Imagines His Freedom." *San Francisco Classical Voice*, 6 Feb. 2021, www.sfcv.org/articles/feature/composer-anthony-davis-imagines-his-freedom.

[81] Founded in 1970, OPERA America is a service organization which promotes the creation and performance of opera in the United States. Many of the professional opera companies within the United States are members of the organization, including the Metropolitan Opera.

[82] Sasha, Metcalf. "Funding 'Opera for the 80s and Beyond': The Role of Impresarios in Creating a New American Repertoire." *American Music*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2017, pp. 7-8. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/americanmusic.35.1.0007. Accessed 29 Dec. 2020.

help introduce opera companies to new artists and ways of performing opera, thus expanding perceptions of the form.[83]

However, the future of opera in America was not only reliant on institutional support. The success and longevity of new works also rested in audience engagement. At the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), then president and chief executive officer, Harvey Lichtenstein pushed for the presentation of artists and works that were not being featured in the standard Manhattan venues such as Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall. He recognized that doing so would grab the attention of a more diverse audience. His strategy was proven effective, as "by the mid-1970s the BAM audience had grown 600 percent over the previous decade."[83] The institution's previously mentioned "New Wave Festival" was a natural outgrowth of Lichtenstein's programming of experimental or new works. Although BAM itself is not an opera company, Lichtenstein promoted new operatic works by hosting events "that facilitated discourse about the current and future state of American opera." In December 1983 BAM presented "New Directions in Opera," a concert of music-theater[84] excerpts. One of the featured excerpts was from the opera *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* by Anthony Davis. What's interesting to note is how arts professionals such as Lichtenstein saw the solution to revitalizing American opera in the embracing of music-theater artists whose background was rooted in the world of

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[83] Sasha, Metcalf. "Funding 'Opera for the 80s and Beyond': The Role of Impresarios in Creating a New American Repertoire." *American Music*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2017, pp. 10-13. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/americanmusic.35.1.0007. Accessed 29 Dec. 2020.

[84] A genre which emerged in the 1960s to describe a modern form for the combination of music and drama, going beyond the conventions of traditional opera. It is typically performed by a small number of people.

experimental theatre. The composer who garnered the most attention for broadening perceptions of opera during this period was Philip Glass. Lichtenstein made note of "the highly visual component of the staging [of Glass's work] and how [his] synthesis of popular and high art attracted younger audiences."[83] But the solution to reimagining American opera did not have to rest in the spectacle of the avant-garde. Though it was shown only in excerpts at the time, Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* demonstrated an opera form which moved beyond the idioms that had come to define American opera. Within the construction of a traditional opera, *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* employs the use of swing, scat, modal jazz, and rap, to immerse the audience in the soundscape of Malcolm X's life.[80] Although Davis had been represented in BAM's "New Directions in Opera" concert, he did not receive the same degree of interest in his work as Glass. Outside of events such as this concert, Lichtenstein personally promoted the work of Glass to such individuals as Anthony Bliss, then general manager of the Metropolitan Opera. This eventually led to the American premiere of Glass's opera *Einstein at the Beach* in 1976 on one of the house's off nights.[83] I note this all to point out that while Glass's contributions to a shifting narrative for American opera were deserving in their own right, he was not the only composer to contribute, and the avant-garde was not the only way to engage with new audiences. Davis's work invites new opera audiences by broadening the narratives and music presented on the opera stage. As noted by composer/musician George Lewis, "[it explores] what it means --and could mean--to be American, helping to foster a creolized, cosmopolitan new music."[80]

In his career Anthony Davis has embodied the reclamation of the representation of Black life in America and the push for an expanded soundscape for American opera. *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* premiered in full at the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia on October 9, 1985. The following year it was revised for a production at New York City Opera. "It was a sensation… in its official premiere but never returned[85], apparently because the company [New York City Opera] was worried that its regulars had stayed away from the premiere."[80] This reference to regulars, perhaps the company's subscribers, shows the obligation of opera houses to their audience and what that means for the repeated performance of a new operatic work. "A typical Davis composition… will have some jazz-like improvisation in it, not to mention stylistic fluidity." For an audience whose perception of opera is only that of the European canon, Davis's work extends the possibilities of the form, rejecting European "master narratives."[80] As long as audiences remain fixed in their expectations for opera, houses must be willing to take the "risk" to introduce new works which help extend the definition of the form.

In considering the Met's staging of Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* for their 2021-2022 season, it will be interesting to see how audiences respond and if the Met will feature the opera going forward. Like Davis, Blanchard's compositions are influenced by different styles (he termed his first opera, *Champion,* an "opera in jazz")[86].

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[85] Only an abridged version returned to the company in 2010.

[86] Tommasini, Anthony. "Review: The Wrenching 'Fire Shut Up in My Bones' Becomes an Opera." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 16 June 2019. Web. 09 May 2021.

New York City Opera's loyalties to its "regulars" points to an example of the kind of hurdles contemporary African American composers face; particularly when their compositions seek to move opera beyond a Eurocentric definition. Even for Davis whose opera *The Central Park Five* was recently recognized with the 2020 Pulitzer Prize in Music,[86] there are still opera hierarchies to overcome.

Conclusion: Opera as a Living Form

The function of minstrelsy had been to uphold America's racial power structures by falsely informing/affirming white perceptions of the experiences of African Americans. African American composers therefore contended with the shadow of this form; rejecting it through reclaiming their power to self-define the narrative of African American life and musical contributions. While the music of the African American community was known to the white music industry, it was usually engaged with (if at all) through work by white artists rather than the African American musicians who originated it. For example, "White America first became aware of the new style [ragtime] through the syncopated rhythms employed in dance music and minstrel songs. For years rag music was the exclusive possession of black communities; suddenly it was… catapulted into the national spotlight, and adopted by white society."[87] This appropriation speaks to

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[87] Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History.* 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971. p. 313.

the erasure of African American musicians and composers from the larger narrative of American music, and why the reclamation of African American composers past and present is so important. Not only is it a matter of representation, but visibility as well. Credit must be given where it is due in order to honor the history, identities and culture surrounding the music's origins. "...organizations should reject the uncritical valorization of white composers of the past who appropriated Black or Indigenous musical styles — Dvořák, for example, or George Gershwin — as if programming their work comes at no cost to composers of color, past and present."[88] While Dvořák and Gershwin had consulted with individuals from the communities they musically drew inspiration from, they could never claim ownership of that music and could only ever possess an outside perspective on it. It is that distinction which this quote points to. The work of these composers, though reflective of the music of Black communities, should not be treated as a substitute for work composed by African American composers. Reclaiming the works of Joplin, Still, and Davis amplifies the stories of Black communities by African American artists using the soundscape of African American music.

The reclamation of works by African American composers also disrupts the dominant narrative of a white, Eurocentric opera history. It breaks down the "othering" effect that the industry perpetuated for African American artists, instead showing that the hierarchy keeping the opera model and African American music in separate spheres was

[88] Shadle, D. (2021, March 17). Let's make the future that the 'new world' symphony predicted. Retrieved April 02, 2021, from https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/17/arts/music/dvorak-new-world-symphony.html.

a fabrication. It did not function on artistic merit, rather on the ignorance and prejudices of a racialized American society. Including the work of African American composers as a repeated presence in the programming of major opera houses, would acknowledge their equal value with those in the existing canon. In regard to the canon, the act of reclaiming these works also challenges the representation of American composers. In 1923, then general manager of the Met, Giulio Gatti-Casazza wrote: "the American composer is not alone in his failure to produce good operas. Operas are composed in Europe that are better put together, more practicably written, if you like, than here: but when it comes to real ideas, to music- conditions are slowly improving."[89] Joplin's *Treemonisha* and Still's *Troubled Island* serve as two historic examples of American operas, and Davis continues to expand the soundscape of American opera through his work.

As seen in the work of all three of these composers, and the modes of their revivals (pertinent to Joplin and Still), African American artists have not only critiqued the lack of their representation in the opera industry but have worked to uplift the operas of African American composers. Serving as an example, the fully staged 1972 production of *Treemonisha* was only able to happen after composer TJ Anderson orchestrated Joplin's piano score, demonstrating the extra work that has needed to happen to preserve these operas. By reclaiming such works in either concert series or full stage productions, opera companies have the chance to amplify them and their place in the narrative of

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[89] Downes, Olin. "America Enters Grand Opera: The Metropolitan List This Year Includes Thirty-Eight Native Singers And One Composer -Gatti-Casazza Talks Of Their Opportunity And Of The Problems That Confront Them America Enters Grand Opera." *New York Times (1923-Current file),* Nov 22 1925, p. 2. *ProQuest.* Web. 16 Feb. 2021.

American opera, while also recognizing where and how they failed to do so in the past. It should not only be the responsibility of African American artists to uplift operas by African American composers.

Though often framed as being static because of its reliance on a centuries-old canon, opera is a living art form; one that must continue to evolve alongside the society it reflects. Therefore, using reclamation as a strategy for creating a more equitable industry, can only be a starting point. The staging of contemporary works and the commissioning of new works is a way to engage audiences in stories that reflect a modern view of ourselves and our world. For their 2020-2021 season the Metropolitan Opera will exemplify this engagement with contemporary operas by staging Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones.*

Opera Programming

As discussed in chapter one, the programming of many opera houses worldwide relies heavily on the repeated performance of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European operas (i.e., the works of Verdi, Puccini, Bizet). "The increased reliance on audience tastes and box office revenues have led to the standardization of operatic programming."[90] For the Metropolitan Opera in particular, ticket sales cover 40% of their operating budget with another stable source of income provided through their subscriber base.[91] They therefore have an economic responsibility to meet consumer demands. However, as an arts institution they also have a social obligation to program works which reflect the community that they serve. Here is where the question of equity arises. To quote a leadership council member of Black Opera Alliance (BOA), "How one engages with equity has to do with how one represents one's community on stages, on one's leadership staff, administrative staff, boards, [etc.]"[2] The programming of *Fire Shut up in My Bones* for the 2021-2022 season, begins to address action item three of BOA's "Pledge for Racial Equity and Systemic Change in Opera": "program and prioritize works by Black composers on the mainstage, especially those that feature storytelling true to the complexity and broad experience of Black culture."[2] Programming *Fire Shut*

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[90] Cancellieri, Giulia, and Alex Turrini. "The Phantom of Modern Opera: How Economics and Politics Affect the Programming Strategies of Opera Houses." *International Journal of Arts Management*, vol. 18, no. 3, 2016, p. 27. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/44989662. Accessed 16 Nov. 2020.

[91] "Metropolitan Opera Association, Inc. History." *International Directory of Company Histories*, Vol. 40. St. James Press, 2001

Up in My Bones begins to challenge the preservation of seasons centered around the European canon.

Fire Shut Up in My Bones

Co-commissioned by Opera Theater of St. Louis and Jazz St. Louis, *Fire Shut Up in My Bone* received its world premiere on June 15, 2019. "*Fire Shut Up in My Bones* is the title of a new memoir by New York Times columnist Charles Blow, and it is both the subject and the title of the new opera by Terence Blanchard, his second operatic venture." In addition to opera, Terence Blanchard is a Grammy-winning jazz musician and film score composer. With such backgrounds, his "continuing intention in *Fire* was to fuse the disparate worlds of jazz, blues, classical orchestral music, and opera not only to give voice to the many contributions blacks have made to American culture but also to do it with black voices."[92] With this statement Blanchard directly addresses the hierarchy of American music, echoing the importance of the reclaiming of works by African American composers as a way of moving beyond it. In their third action item, BOA uses the language of commissioning works that "feature...the complexity and broad experiences of Black culture." The importance of this item rests in how the acknowledgment of such nuance in the portrayal of African American characters onstage further rejects and calls attention to the shadows of the minstrel form which have informed incorrect perception of the stories of African American communities and their

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[92] Huxhold, John. "Blanchard: Fire Shut Up in My Bones (World Premiere): The Record Connoisseur's Magazine." *American Record Guide* Sep 2019: 25-6. *ProQuest.* Web. 4 Jan. 2021.

artistry. In its contents *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* tackles ideas of sexual identity and masculinity as centered around a defining moment in the main character Charles' life.[93] What's more is that it is an entirely African American cast (Baritone Will Liverman, Sopranos Angel Blue, and Latonia Moore) and is being co-directed as well as choreographed by Camille A. Brown. She will make history as the first African American director to create a mainstage production at the Met.

Because of these factors, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* takes representation on the operatic stage one step further by portraying a story written from the perspective of African American artists, creatively executed by a mostly Black creative team, bringing with it the power of self-definition. At the same time, it's worth noting that Brown's co-director is James Robinson, a white American stage director and artistic director at Opera Theater of St. Louis (OTSL). Robinson joins this production of *Fire* with the experience of having directed the premiere at OTSL as well as Blanchard's other opera *Champion* in 2013. He has had an extensive career, directing both in the United States and internationally, and has worked on directing new productions for many houses. Before the Met's closing in March 2020, he had directed their production of *Porgy and Bess*, which had not appeared on the Met stage in nearly thirty years.[94] For these reasons, it arguably makes sense that the Met would again hire him for this production. Yet the Met

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[93] "Get to Know: Terence Blanchard's Fire Shut Up in My Bones." *Get to Know: Terence Blanchard's Fire Shut Up in My Bones | Lyric Opera of Chicago*, www.lyricopera.org/lyric-lately/get-to-know-terence-blanchards-fire-shut-up-in-my-bones/.

[94] "About James Robinson, Artistic Director." *Opera Theatre of Saint Louis*, opera-stl.org/james-robinson.

carries a responsibility in how they execute *Fire Shut Up in My Bones.* Using the language of action item four of BOA's racial equity pledge, this production allows the Met to "Hire more Black creatives and production personnel at every level of the organization."[29] While having Brown as the production's co-director is a step in this direction, the Met still has the opportunity to place the direction of a mainstage opera solely in the hands of an African American director.

Staging *Fire* and the Accountability of the Metropolitan Opera

By producing *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, the Metropolitan Opera is not only acting in line with BOA's Pledge for Racial Equity, but also helping to set a precedent for the future staging of works by African American composers. In addition to Blanchard there are many other African American composers whose work deserves the attention of the Met. Recent Pulitzer Prize winner Anthony Davis is just one example. This should be noted to be weary of *Fire* becoming the only example of work by an African American composer that the Met programs; specifically, because Blanchard's work is not and should not be thought of as representative of the breadth of work by African American artists.

While *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* will mark the first opera composed by an African American composer featured on the Met's mainstage, it's important to note how this historic occasion did not have to come so late. Thinking back to Still's submission of *Troubled Island's* score to the Met in the 1940s, the company has long had the opportunity to broaden the representation of their featured composers. The production

should therefore be celebrated with this awareness in mind. Though *Fire Shut Up in My Bones,* and the representation/opportunities it provides for African American artists is a turning point for the Met in their efforts for equity, it is just the beginning.

In addition to addressing their programming, the Met also has the responsibility to acknowledge and correct their toxic work environments of the past. To quote action item eight of BOA's pledge: "Include within the company's official code of conduct a commitment to anti-racism and anti-oppression."[2] Though the steps that the Met are taking to become a more equitable institution should be recognized, so must past mistakes. Recalling the stories shared by the Instagram @operaisracist, one anonymous performer stated:

> ...when I sang for [redacted] at the Met...he focused on how I would do best singing *Porgy & Bess* and [how] there is a nice circle for my type of people in Europe and the U.S. doing tours. I could make a handsome living doing that. This is the Met. When I tried to express interest in more than *Porgy & Bess*, he laughed and said, 'know your place.[95]

Being that this quote is anonymous, there is no way to know when this comment was made to this performer; however, such instances cannot be allowed to persist.

In April 2021 three of the leadership council members of BOA held their First Quarterly Insight Report webinar in conjunction with TRG Arts. These members—Dr. Darrell Acon, Pamela Jones, and Garrett McQueen—emphasized that BOA wishes to

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[95] operaisracist. Photo of quote. *Instagram*, 18 June 2020 , https://www.instagram.com/p/CA8rtMyDg2e/

foster an open dialogue that will help to build and maintain relationships with the American opera companies. The Alliance's pledge is an invitation into the necessary conversations about what progress towards racial equity can be. As stated by Pamela Jones, it isn't to be thought of as a to-do list; "The country is changing and the stories...people...the composers...the conductors and all of the support staff that people want to see involved in opera-- that pool needs to expand, and [BOA] can help [in that]."[2] While the Met has signed on to the pledge, it's important to ensure that they continue to make decisions such as that of staging *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, so that it is not an isolated event, but a step towards a more equitable opera industry. As evidenced by its history, opera is not immune to the politics of its environment. Therefore, it is critical to be wary of the Met's actions being only a short term response to our current political climate, instead of part of a larger continuing effort. Also worthy of consideration is the economic incentive. For the past several years the Met has struggled with declining attendance. Programming *Fire* has the potential to invite new audiences who may now see parts of themselves represented onstage. Not to compare the shows, but as a reference for audience engagement, when the Met staged *Porgy and Bess* during its 2019-2020 season, the production sold out. Though it is uncommon for big repertory companies to add performances, a scheduling conflict that season allowed for the Met to add three shows, meeting audience demands.[96]

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[96] Cooper, Michael. "'Porgy and Bess,' a Hit for the Met Opera, Gets an Encore." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 5 Dec. 2019, www.nytimes.com/2019/12/05/arts/music/porgy-bess-met-opera.html.

The Met's relationship with their audience is an important consideration in discussions of equity, and one factor which will inform the success of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* in helping to assist institutional change. Of particular note are their donors and subscribers, whose support is crucial in helping to finance the Met's annual operating budget. Because of this financial dependency, how these individuals feel about Blanchard's work has the potential to impact the opera's future staging, regardless of the general audience's reception. The 1986 premiere of Anthony Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* at New York City Opera and the company's subsequent concerns over how "its regulars had stayed away from the premiere,"[80] serves as just one example of how the preferences of donors/subscribers carry weight. One of the challenges that the Met must confront is decentering-- what has historically been reflected in their programming as-- preferences for a Eurocentric approach to opera. One way to do this is by also considering factors of accessibility. Going forward the Met may reflect on issues such as ticket pricing and viewing capabilities, acknowledging how these factors may have affected who has been able to partake in their seasons.

In chapter one, I made note of how regional opera companies had already been making strides towards greater inclusivity before the Met's recent efforts. Using Opera Theatre of St. Louis (OTSL) as an example, it was only after their premiere of *Fire Shut Up and My Bones* that the Met programmed Blanchard's work. Going forward the Met has the opportunity to take the same initiative as OTSL in premiering works by contemporary African American composers as well as go one step further in commissioning new works. With the Met's production of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* yet

to happen at the time of this thesis, I'll refer to the words of Andrew Jorgense, general director of OTSL. While recognizing the benefits that the premiere of *Fire Shut Up in my Bones* had in bringing a greater breadth of artists and stories to their stage, he said, "[we] have, even now, so much privilege and so many resources at our company that we have to-- and we can-- take steps to do more… This is not the time to rest on our laurels. It is a time to recognize how much more work there is for us to do. I'm really excited about the opportunities to foster a genuinely more inclusive and diverse culture on stage and off stage at every level."[97] In 2020 OTSL announced two new initiatives: the Clayco Future Leaders Fellowship and the Voice Fund: A Pathway for Empathy, Dialogue, and Change. The fellowship "will cultivate future leaders in arts administration who come from historically underrepresented backgrounds." The Voice Fund promises to invest in the community "by supporting projects that create dialogue with the diverse voices and concerns of our [St. Louis] region."[98] These initiatives demonstrate that in order to create an opera industry that reflects the communities it serves, companies must engage more meaningfully with their audiences and do the work to bring in new voices.

In staging their own production of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones,* the Met must also be proactive in their efforts toward creating a more equitable future for opera; recognizing that it will take time to restructure the exclusionary practices which built the

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[97] Vaughn, Kenya. "'I Believe That Opera Can Be for Everybody'." *Ksdk.com*. The St. Louis American, 27 Oct. 2020. Web. 09 May 2021.

[98] Le, Anh. "OTSL Announces Two New Initiatives for Equity." *Opera Theatre of Saint Louis*. Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, 28 Sept. 2020. Web.

industry. However, by using their voice to amplify the efforts of regional companies, equity can (and must) become an industry standard rather than an exception.

Changing the Narrative: A Better Future for American Opera

With the action steps of entities such as Black Opera Alliance, and the responses that their pledge has received, the future of American opera has much promise. However, the potential for change rests in both industry leaders and artists coming together as a collective to ensure that discussions of racial equity in the industry are ongoing. Part of this dialogue should also be the acknowledgement that this is not a new conversation and should not be treated as such. Opportunities for change have long existed but have been prevented by the economic and racial hierarchies that the industry model has relied on. An equitable future for opera can only exist through the dismantling and reevaluation of these hierarchies.

As I have outlined in this thesis, uplifting the work of African American composers past and present is one means that the opera industry can take towards a more inclusive depiction of American opera. It is also a means by which to center African American stories from the perspective of Black artists. The Metropolitan Opera's decision to stage *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* is very crucial in this way because it recognizes that this kind of representation has been lacking and offers a precedent for future seasons. However, in order for the Met to be intentional in their work for industry equity, they must realize that their programming of Blanchard's work cannot be an isolated event. To respond to a question posed by musicologist Juliet Hess, "Can any

[one] person be expected to stand in, imaginatively, as representing everything there is to know about her or his people- as if people identified as Other should or could be reducible to the unified, static, and knowable?"[99] The ways in which opera has been defined musically and culturally have perpetuated this "othering" effect, particularly in reference to the work of African American artists. Subverting this mode of thinking lies in recognizing that the stories, history, and music of the African American community brought forth by Black artists are and always have be part of the narrative of American opera.

[99] Hess, Juliet. "Performing Tolerance and Curriculum: The Politics of Self-Congratulation, Identity Formation, and Pedagogy in World Music Education." *Philosophy of Music Education Review*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2013, pp. 77-78. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/philmusieducrevi.21.1.66. Accessed 27 Dec. 2020.

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Appendix

Visual references for a few of the key historic figures, concepts, and institutions discussed within this thesis.

Figure 1. Interior of the original Metropolitan Opera House (39th Street) in New York City.[100]

[100] "Metropolitan Opera House, a concert by pianist Josef Hofmann, circa 28 Nov. 1937." Commons.wikipedia.org 16 Feb. 2012, upload. Accessed 8 May 2021. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e5/Metropolitan_Opera_House%2C_a_concert_by_pianist_Josef_Hofmann_-_NARA_541890_-_Edit.jpg

Figure 2. Jeanette Thurber, founder of the National Conservatory.[101]

[101] "Jeanette Thurber (1850-1946) as a Young Woman, circa 1870." Photograph from the Onteora Club Archives, Courtesy of E. Davis Gaillard, Librarian, Commons.wikipedia.org 26 Apr. 2008, upload. Accessed 9 May 2021. https://www.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3c/Jeannette_Thurber_as_a_young_woman.jpg

Figure 3. Harry T. Burleigh, composer and student of the National Conservatory.[102]

[102] "Harry T. Burleigh, March 1917." Photograph by Mishkin Studios- Portraits Collection, Commons.wikipedia.org 13 Aug. 2020, upload. Accessed 8 May 2021. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/ff/Harry_T_Burleigh%2C_March_1917_%28PORTRAITS_293%29.jpg

Figure 4. Antonín Dvořák, Czech composer, director of the National Conservatory.[103]

[103] "Dvořák 1882." Commons.wikipedia.org 29 Feb. 2016, upload. Accessed 8 May 2021. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a0/Dvorak_1882.jpg

Figure 5. The National Conservatory of Music of America at 47-49 West 25th Street.[104]

[104] "The National Conservatory of Music of America building, 1905." Commons.wikipedia.org 16 Oct. 2013, upload. Accessed 8, May 2021. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cf/The_National_Conservatory_of_Music_of_America_building.jpg

Figure 6. A blackface minstrel performer circa 1890.[105]

[105] "Blackface minstrel John White with Banjo, 1890." Photograph from Bedford of Haverstraw, New York, Commons.wikipedia.org 10 Sept. 2015, upload. Accessed 8 May 2021. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5a/Blackface_minstrel_John_White_with_Banjo_c1890.png

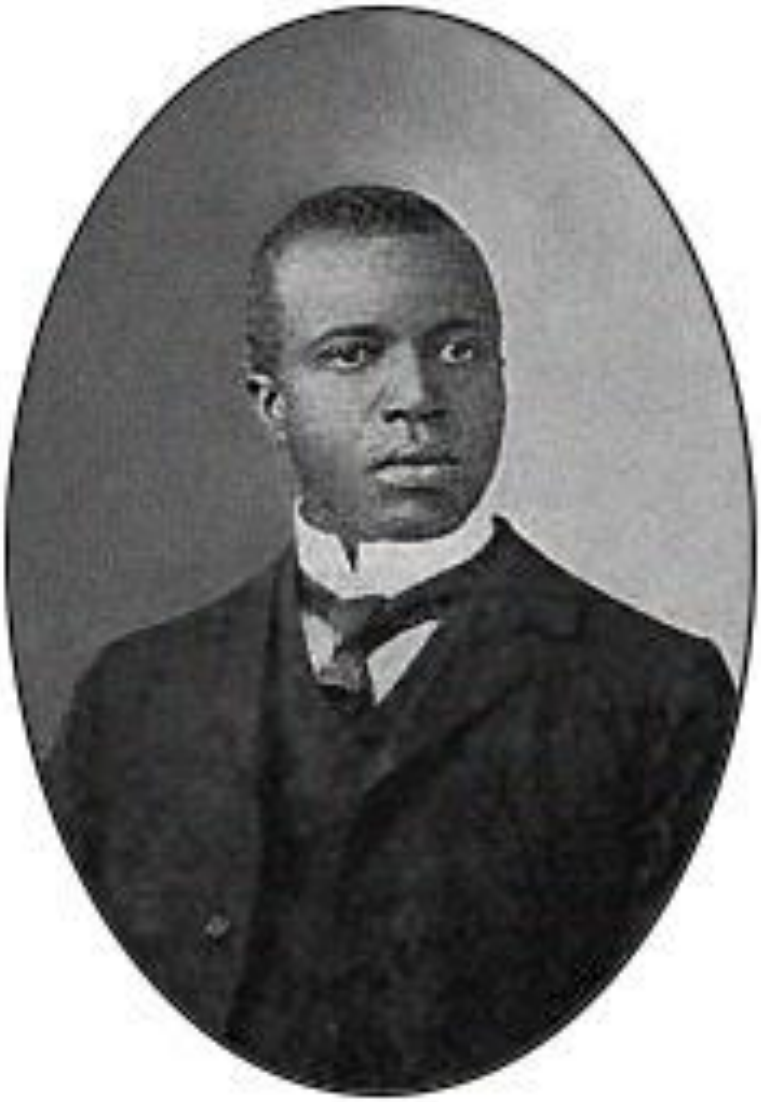

Figure 7. Portrait of Scott Joplin. First published in St. Louis Globe-Democrat newspaper, June 7, 1903.[106]

[106] "Scott Joplin, 1903." Commons.wikipedia.org 6 Apr. 2020, upload. Accessed 8 May 2021. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/ca/Scott_Joplin_19072.jpg

Figure 8. William Grant Still, known as the "Dean of African American Classical Composers."[107]

[107] "William Grant Still." Photograph by Carl Van Vechten, Commons.wikipedia.org 23 January 2016, upload. Accessed 8 May 2021. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/William_Grant_Still_by_Carl_Van_Vechten.jpg