

Opera in 20th Century America: Overcoming the Racialization of Sound

Esther Adams
Barnard College

The summer of 2015 will bring a revival of *Voodoo*, a Harlem Renaissance opera by H. Lawrence Freeman, in its first performance since its 1928 premiere. It is being revived by the Harlem Opera Theater at the Miller Theater at Columbia University. The opera was the first opera written by an African-American produced in the United States. Advertised at its premier as “A Negro Jazz Opera” (Poster, 1928, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers), the opera is set on a Louisiana plantation just after the Civil War. It focuses on a love triangle between three former slaves, one of whom turns to voodoo and magic to win the affection of her lover and to be rid of her rival. The opera combines western classical music with passages of period dance music, and includes re-settings of several African-American spirituals, such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” (H. L. Freeman, 1914, *Voodoo* Manuscript, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers). Written, conducted, played, and sung by African-Americans, Freeman’s opera uses elements of Grand Opera-- the fusion of the vital elements of music, drama and dance-- combined with rhythms and melodies of jazz and African-American music-- to challenge what I want to suggest is the constructed racialization of sound. Examining the preserved papers of H. Lawrence Freeman, I will explore and undermine the racialized properties of the history of sound and music, using Eric Lott’s *Love & Theft*, a historical and theoretical study of blackface minstrelsy in America, as a jumping off point. Shawn Marie-Garrett’s article, “Return of the Repressed” will guide me through my analysis of H. L. Freeman and his African-American contemporaries, who de-racialized sound by asking the questions what is black? What is white?

Harry Lawrence Freeman was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1869. The son of free landowners, his mother possessed a beautiful voice, and her son exhibited musical ability from a young age. After being inspired by a performance of a Wagner opera, Freeman realized early on that in order to get his works produced he would have to take matters into his own hands, and make musical

opportunities for himself. He founded a number of Grand Opera companies, the first of which was the Freeman Grand Opera Company in Denver, Colorado. Freeman returned to Cleveland in 1893 to receive a formal musical education from Johann Beck, the conductor of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, from whom Freeman earned the title, “the colored Wagner.” For a ten-year period, Freeman went where the work was, and composed a number of popular songs, including some songs for Ernest Hogan’s Rufus Rastus Company, which put on blackface minstrel comedies (Biography, 2008, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers).

Earning recognition in Cleveland and Chicago, Freeman and his family moved to New York City in 1908. Even here, Freeman noted the lack of opportunities for African-American artists, so he founded the Friends’ Amusement Guild in their Harlem brownstone, which produced theatre, opera, and concerts. Continuing to work in musical comedy while also working on operatic compositions, Freeman became interested in a fusion of the two, which he called “Jazz Opera.” Continuing to create opportunities, he founded the Negro Choral Society, the Negro Grand Opera Company, and the Freeman School of Music. Freeman continued to gain recognition, eventually performing excerpts of his compositions at Carnegie Hall and the Chicago World’s Fair. Freeman’s son, working as his manager, sought to get his father’s works produced in ‘mainstream’ and ‘legitimate,’ or in other words, white venues, such as the Metropolitan Opera, rather than historically black venues, but this was never achieved. However, H. L. Freeman continued to work for the benefit of black artists, founding the Aframerican Opera Foundation in the late 1940s, a group he hoped would promote black composers and singers, and offer opera in a more accessible setting. Unfortunately, this project, along with the publication of his monograph, *The Negro in Classical Music and Opera*, was cut short by Freeman’s death in 1954 (Biography, 2008, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers).

The H. Lawrence Freeman Papers are held in the archives at Columbia University. The collection contains material related to American opera and the artistic performance of African-Americans from around 1890-1950. The collection holds a range of papers, from personal letters to manuscripts and libretti, from production photos to budgets for shows, but what I was most interested in

were the advertising materials and newspaper clippings preserved, which exhibited examples of the language used during the late 19th century into the early 20th century by white critics and audience members to construct, mediate, and justify the racialization of sound. As evident in Freeman's unpublished monograph and copies of programs from concerts by African-American operatic singers, Freeman and his contemporaries used the creative agency of opera to undermine the racialized theories of sound and music that persisted in the late 19th century into the 20th century, largely as a result of minstrelsy.

The field of "vernacular" music studies, under which minstrelsy falls, is ripe with scholarship, especially concerning the intersection of race and music, as seen in Eric Lott's book *Love & Theft*. Lott's book, however, is not about African-Americans, or African-American music; it is about white performers, and white audiences, who have constructed a black 'folk' culture, which African-Americans, most specifically African-American artists, have been made to bear, repressing not only their history but also their artistic and creative agency. Therefore, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, I am going to turn to the 'high-cultured,' supposedly 'white' field of opera, in order to examine the role that African-Americans have played-- a topic largely unknown and unstudied. Due in large part to its association with high art, opera is thought to require conscious artistic decisions. "Vernacular" art, by contrast, is frequently dismissed insofar as it connotes spontaneous, naturally occurring musical expressions. This idea of spontaneity can be romantic in its idealized form, as it connotes genuine, authentic expression. With relation to minstrelsy, which both appropriates and constructs African-American 'folk' melodies in order to adhere to and further construct racial stereotypes, the idea of 'folk' is incredibly dangerous. The risk with 'folk' arts is the tendency to look at them as natural products, thus leading to a biological essentialism that itself corroborates gendered, classed, and raced hierarchies. While minstrelsy gave many black performers jobs, and provided acceptable circumstances for such artists to enter the public sphere, it was nonetheless an economic industry that marketed "blackness" as the commodity, constructed by and for the white population. Black performers often had to subscribe to self-commodification. Minstrelsy may be the

national American art form, but it is a white art form, dressed up under the guise of a black 'folk' culture and supported by the so-called naturalness of the stereotypes that it performs and perpetuates. Fortunately, there is nothing natural about opera. It is not authentic; in fact it is loudly inauthentic, with white, male, European composers and librettists culturally appropriating African and Asian cultures, with men playing women, and women playing men. It makes no attempt to realistically portray reality. As a result, anybody, regardless of race, is accorded the creative agency to compose and sing the operatic repertoire. And, while African-Americans may not have been unconditionally accepted on the stage of historically white venues from the get-go, opera provided a wide-open arena in which black artists and musicians like Freeman could take the lead and create their own musical opportunities in one of the only genres and art forms that accorded black artists agency.

Lott claims that popular art forms are a "crucial place of contestation, with moments of resistance to the dominant culture as well as moments of supersession" (Lott 2013, 18). While I do not refute this, I would like to advance Lott's argument by shifting the focus from minstrelsy and Lott's theoretical deconstruction of its racial ideologies, to the "high art" of Grand Opera, where, I argue, African-Americans were not resigned to the options of either resisting or superseding the dominant white cultural construct, but could instead pragmatically undermine racial ideologies of sound, by mediating a relationship between music racialized as 'white,' (opera) and music racialized as 'black' (jazz and spirituals). Lott is correct in writing that "blackface minstrelsy's century-long commercial regulation of black culture practices stalled the development of African-American public arts and generated an enduring narrative of racist ideology, a historical process by which an entire people has been made the bearer of another people's 'folk' culture" (Lott 2013, 17). Nonetheless, by limiting his scope to popular culture, he skips over a whole population of artists who both re-appropriated 'black' culture, and created an entirely new fused culture through the artistic model of opera. The operatic model is traditionally recognized to hold all aspects of its creation- the music, staging, costumes, dancing- in equal importance, equating the western musical tradition with that of the African-American spiritual and jazz traditions.

This is not to deny the challenges and hurdles that black musicians and artists have had to overcome, not least of which was the persistent effects of minstrelsy, which was often considered “colored opera”(Lott 2013, 15). An anonymous contributor to Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* is thus quoted in *Love & Theft*: “Absurd as may seem negro minstrelsy to the refined musician, it is nevertheless beyond doubt that it expresses the peculiar characteristics of the negro as truly as the great masters of Italy represent their more spiritual and profound nationality”(Lott 2013, 16). This quote equates minstrelsy and opera, but at the same time reifies the racial associations with each art form. Minstrelsy is associated with the “negro,” or more specifically, the “peculiar characteristics of the negro,” while opera, as a ‘white’ art form, is associated with the high, “spiritual and profound” culture of Europe. This quote is ridiculous to begin with, but only becomes more ridiculous as black musicians prove their capabilities not simply to perform, but to star in both minstrel shows and opera.

There is no doubt that African-Americans were presented with challenges in breaking into the predominantly European, ‘white,’ and high class art form. Their achievements constantly had to be justified, but in doing so, many critics were supportive in their appraisals, using the ‘universality of art’ and the lack of racial distinctions, to justify and make a case for the black artists. Such reviews appeared on poster advertisements for Freeman’s concerts.

‘Art makes no distinctions,’ and art such as yours should command the respect and admiration of broad-minded musicians. –
Wilson G. Smith, Music Critic

As ‘art is universal,’ the undersigned hopes that all persons interested in the development of home talent will not fail to cooperate in making this work a success by giving it a fair and impartial hearing. –
Johann Beck, Conductor of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra

To appreciate its [Freeman’s composition] merit it must be noticed that so capable a judge as Professor Beck puts it on a program with Beethoven’s immortal Fifth Symphony

and Mendelssohn’s Concerto for the violin.
–Cleveland Press, 1900

The Harman Gold Medal Award was presented to H. Lawrence Freeman in 1930 for being the first gentleman of color to compose and produce a grand work of originality. I have examined them thoroughly.”- Unknown

Madame Selika and Signor Velosko were the only representatives of the Selika opera Company here last night. They are artists of very high ability. If Anton Dvorak were to hear them, he would not despair of his genius of American music located in colored people, for the work of these two artists is as finished as the work of any of the best concert singers. – Wooster Daily Telegram

The singers and composers were always specifically marked as ‘colored’ or ‘black’ in programs, posters, and reviews. Just as H. L. Freeman was a “Colored Wagner,” one of the most famous African-American sopranos of the day was known as “The Black Patti” after the famous Italian prima donna Adelina Patti. Americans initially refused to see African-American artists as more than spectacle, which wasn’t helped by the fact that audiences were conditioned with specific expectations of black performers. These expectations came from their familiarity with minstrel shows, not to mention that black opera companies that often performed on the same stages as minstrel companies. Indeed, many of the African-American performers performed in both types of companies, as performance opportunities were rare. As we see from the excerpts from reviews above, black artists needed to be validated, approved and legitimated by white artists and critics.

The question remains: how did African-American artists manage to break into such a predominantly ‘white’ field, especially when very few African-Americans were finding success in other performing arts fields, such as Broadway and Hollywood? How did H. L. Freeman cross what Lott terms the beginning of the “Great Divide”- the division, by the 1840’s, between minstrelsy and lower million amusements, and the opera and ‘legitimate’ theater (Lott 2013, 67)? Opera was a relatively young import into the United States,

arriving only about 100 years before Freeman's opera *Voodoo* had its premiere. Perhaps the audience for the imported Italian opera was still too preoccupied with looking to Europe for legitimization to notice the emergence of Freeman's creation of American Grand Opera. Ironically, as they looked to Europe, working-class Americans were in the process of constructing a "national culture owing to 'Ethiopia,' not Europe" (Lott 2013, 103). In the process the highbrow audience found only legitimization for the black artists in American producing and achieving the same level of music as the imported European artists. While blacks were excelling in opera based on the 'white,' European model, whites were busy constructing their national culture from the 'blackness' of minstrelsy, which Walt Whitman called the "native grand opera in America," made up of banjos and what he called the "nigger dialect" (Lott 2013, 103). This is all merely speculative, though, as there was in fact very little mention of the imported Italian opera in the archives. The archival material only focused on African-American opera, an appropriation in its own right, I suppose. But, as opera was not originally an American art form, but a welcome import, the roles of both the characters and the performers were still fuzzy, and therefore still malleable.

Shawn Marie-Garrett propels Lott's theoretical argument forward by examining different questions of minstrelsy and race that still continue to plague art, specifically theater, today. Quoting Lott, Garrett writes that, in order to move the discussion forward, "one must attempt 'to investigate the ways in which racist entertainment was once fun, and still is to much of the Caucasian population of the United States' (Lott as quoted in Garrett 2002, 36)- to 'fess up and face up to the giddy pleasure actors and audiences of all kinds experience in the performance of stereotypes'" (Garrett 2002, 36). Garrett says there are three types of art being made today. The first is a resurrection of stereotypes "in order to be parodied, satirized, or exorcised." In the second, "the artist is interested in celebrating some idea or aspect of 'blackness' or in 'salvaging icons.'" The third and hardest type to interpret, however, due to the lack of a clear point of view is a practice of art making which is "more interested in the way whites and blacks play their own 'race' as well as that of the other, in life as well as on the stage, and in the consequence of these habits. This kind of work does not say black is

beautiful, stereotypes are cruel and shameful, and whites are to blame. Instead, it asks, what is black? What is white? What is between them? What would one be without the other?" (Garrett 2002, 40). African-Americans, led by H.L. Freeman, in the operatic art form asked these questions, and forced the (primarily) white audience to ask these questions as well. What is black and white, when the sound that both emit is the same and of equal quality?

Just as H. L. Freeman's operas combined western classical music techniques with elements of jazz and spirituals, recital programs of well-known 20th Century African-American singers also combined classical art song with African-American spirituals. Copies of programs contained in the H.L. Freeman Papers presented composers ranging from Handel and Brahms to arrangements of spirituals by Freeman himself, as well as spirituals. But, as I am concerned with the creative agency, I have to ask about the artist's intentions for combining composers of both musical traditions. Was it to fulfill audience expectations by performing "blackness" through the spirituals? Or were the spirituals for the sake of the artist and those African-Americans in the audience, a celebration of their past and history? Or, was it to exhibit their mastery of both musical forms, to show a black singer singing songs both traditionally raced as 'white,' and as 'black,' debunking the myth and construction of racialized sound and music?

Their programs were clearly thought out, and consciously curated, especially as many groups of African-American singers, most notably The Jubilee Singers and the Hampton Jubilee Singers, were variously celebrated or degraded based on the repertoire they performed. Included in the H.L. Freeman Papers was a copy of an unpublished book from the early 20th century with an unknown author, *Cultivated Traditions of Black Musicians: Studies in 19th Century Afro-American Musicians*. This manuscript gives two quotes concerning the repertoire choices and reception of the two groups of Jubilee Singers. "The Jubilee singers sang, more or less in the style of whites, having four-part harmonies sung on European musical models. This was not their own choosing, however, at least not totally. Their songs were arranged for them- in a manner which 'respectable' people would accept it." Contrastingly, "the singing of the Hampton Jubilee Singers was criticized for allowing

barbarous elements to remain in their songs...a larger contingent of blacks than hitherto written about considered their singing a white man's conception of a black musical art" (Performance Documentation, 1978, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers). These quotes clearly show how the style of music was racialized through interpretation. But if African-American singers could sing convincingly in both 'black' and 'white' styles, is this not sufficient evidence to support Lott's conclusion that "'Blackness,' then, is not innate but produced, a cultural construction" (Lott 2013, 37), and, conversely, 'whiteness,' too, a cultural construction?

There are no racialized properties of sound. After hearing the African-American tenor, Roland Hayes, Freeman wrote in his unpublished monograph, "The author would like to be present at the Metropolitan Opera House during a regular scheduled performance of this same opera [Verdi opera], with Roland Hayes singing this self-same aria from behind a screen-wholly invisible. It would be vastly interesting to note the affect upon this fashionable and fastidious audience when the screen was removed" (Freeman, unpublished, H. Lawrence Freeman Papers). However, while there are no racialized properties of sound, there are racialized properties of the history of sound, as exhibited with the different reactions from white audience members to 'white' musical styles and 'black' musical styles. These differing styles, however, at least in the United States have both been defined by the dominant white culture, forcing the blacks to commit to one of the two equally bad options. Through opera, though, African-American artists saw an opportunity to take creative agency in order to create their own musical opportunities. Opera enabled them to create a musical style that fused both the 'white' and the 'black' musical styles. While this sound has yet to be heard on such stages as the Metropolitan Opera, the achievements of Freeman and his contemporaries helped propel many African-American artists since onto such stages.

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