

Paul Robeson and Classical Music

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Paul Robeson's career as a musician mirrored his refusal to disavow his political radicalism and support of international revolution. Unlike the other great African-American singer of his day possessed a flawless classical technique, Marian Anderson (1897?-1993), Robeson refused to sing opera or German, French, and Italian art songs—the core of the classical repertoire: “I do not understand the psychology or philosophy of the Frenchman, German, or Italian. Their history has nothing in common with the history of my slave ancestors. So I will not sing their music or the songs of their ancestors.”¹ Compared to great opera singers Lawrence Tibbett, Enrico Caruso, and Feodor Chaliapin—all of whom sang popular and folk songs—Robeson nevertheless refused to accept a role in *Aida* and become “one of the hundred mediocre singers” who ventured into the classical realm.²

Part of the reason Robeson shunned the world of opera was that he described his voice as “embarrassingly delicate,” and incapable of projecting in large houses.³ The *London Times* confirmed this assessment in 1936, noting that he did “not easily sustain a song even of the caliber of Gretchaninoff's “A Player.”⁴ But Robeson would no more perform elite music than he would espouse elite ideas, and opted instead for performing the songs of the oppressed to audiences all over the world in both their own and the original languages. Introducing a collection of “Songs of the Red Army and Navy,” he wrote:

In many lands the arts, and especially music, have been cut off from the general life of the nation. They have become the source of enjoyment for a comparative few — a so-called elite — who feel that culture should be somewhat unapproachable except to their own understanding — and at times completely non-understanding — selves.

Noting that thanks to the New Deal America had begun a “cultural sharing” of “the great creations of mind and spirit” through government-sponsored art and music, he regretted that during the 1940s this promising trend was cut off by “those forces that even today refuse to make the slightest sacrifice for the advancement of the good life — that do not really want an enlightened and sensitive citizenry.”⁵

Early in his career, Robeson felt a “responsibility to his people, who rightfully resented the traditional stereotyped portrayals of Negroes on stage and screen.” He therefore resolved that “if the Hollywood and Broadway producers did not choose to offer me worthy roles to play, then I would choose

not to accept any other kind of offer.”⁶ Similarly, he devoted the first five years of his concert career exclusively to singing African American songs, and then expanded his programs to include the songs of other oppressed groups.⁷ The songs of the Russian and “Jewish people, with whom I have been especially close”⁸ were particularly dear to him. Notable among these performances are his bi-lingual renditions of “The Song of the Volga Boatmen,” in which the boatmen’s chant merges imperceptibly into both the Russian and English verses, and the defiant “Song of the Warsaw Ghetto” in both English and Yiddish: “It was a people midst the crashing fires of hell, That sang this song and fought courageous till they fell.” To the traditional Hebrew prayer of the oppressed, “Good Day to Thee O Lord God,” he adds the Germans to the Romans, Persians, and Babylonians as tyrants from whom the Jews cry to be relieved.

Similarly, Robeson would regularly perform the popular Jerome Kern/Oscar Hammerstein show tune “Ol’ Man River,” which many have mistaken for a spiritual. But he continued to sing it apart from the musical *Showboat*—whose plot deals with prejudice against a “white” performer who is discovered to be part black—only because it eloquently expressed the plight of African Americans. Robeson also changed the words to ennoble those who suffered and struggled, thereby provoking a quarrel with lyricist Hammerstein who told Robeson to write his own songs rather than change his. Robeson altered the final line from “I’m tired of living and scared of dying” to “I must keep fighting until I’m dying.” Two other changes substituted “There’s an old man called the Mississippi” for “Niggers [later darkies] all working on the Mississippi” to open the song, and “you show a little spunk [for you get a little drunk] and you land in jail.”⁹ Robeson transforms the frightened Joe who accepts his plight and drinks to relieve his anguish into a militant waiting to explode.

On the other hand, Robeson rejected most classical music for reasons of principle. As he wrote in the *London Daily Herald* on January 5, 1935: “With the Renaissance reason and intellect were placed above intuition and feeling. The result has been a race which conquered Nature and now rules the world. But the art of that race has paid the price. As science has advanced, the art standards of the West have steadily declined. Intellectual art grows tenuous, sterile.”¹⁰ One of the few operatic pieces Robeson performed, perhaps only once, was Orfeo’s invocation—a song of despair mourning his Eurydice—from the opera of that name by Jacopo Peri, one of the first operas written at the turn of the seventeenth century before tonality had triumphed.¹¹ Robeson preferred anonymous songs, “the creation of ‘a mass of people . . . derived from social communication’ among ‘the oppressed’: ‘I have sung my songs all over the world. . . . I found that where the forces have been the same, whether people weave, build, pick cotton, or dig in the mines, they understand each other in the common language of work, suffering, and protest.’”¹²

Nevertheless, Robeson did, on occasion, sing classical music, and with great beauty. Furthermore, he brought to whatever he sang—spirituals, protest songs, or folk ballads—the most subtle expression and perfectly refined classical singing technique. That is, he never resorted to the whispers, shouts, grunts, and sobs that even classical artists use to milk their audiences for cheap sentimental thrills. For instance, in “Joe Hill,” he emphasizes the word “strike” to great effect by not breaking the line but merely raising the volume. In “Were You There When They Crucified My Lord” he colors his voice to create a sense of nearly unendurable sorrow without the slightest distortion or loss of tone when singing very softly. Furthermore, Robeson always resisted the temptation to end songs on loud high notes: “I have never tried to sing A-flat while the audience held onto the edge of its collective seat to see if I could make it.”¹³ The British critic W. H. Breare expressed it best:¹⁴

Paul Robeson . . . has an extraordinary voice, but he knows how to use it so that the tones and phrases pour forth without effort—naturally, [in] the full sense of the term. His tone is always lyrical, it flows like a deep river which has not a ripple on its surface. . . . One hears almost incessantly in others a beautiful tone spoilt by a sudden harsh element introduced therein by some fault of vocal production. It is Robeson’s knowledge of the office of the breath which enables him to achieve the emotional shades or effect which is as real as life . . .

Robeson claimed that “I care nothing—less than nothing—about what the lords of the land, the Big White Folks, think of me and my ideas.”¹⁵ Yet by performing the people’s music using a superb classical technique he was in effect reaching out to the elite, demonstrating that folk songs and spirituals could be as beautiful as Schubert or Mozart. Nothing gave Robeson more pleasure than to discover a classical composer such as Stravinsky “borrowing from Negro melodies,” which he found much more fruitful than “Negro musicians . . . labouring with Beethoven and Brahms.”¹⁶ He praised modern classical composers Moussorgsky, Bartok, Janacek, Vaughn Williams, Duke Ellington [note the inclusion!], George Gershwin, and others” for incorporating the “old Pentatonic modal folk music . . . just as Bach based much of his music on the ancient modal folk chorales.”¹⁷ In the same manner, Robeson noted that African culture “deeply influenced the great artists of our time—a Picasso, a Modigliano, a Brancusi, an Epstein.”¹⁸ He also took great pleasure in noting that among those people he saw in the Soviet Union, thanks to the government’s cultural education program, “art was closely wedded to life.” “Eager and enthusiastic audiences” heard “Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Moussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Prokofieff, Shostakovitch, [and] Gershwin” as “their daily bread and wine.”¹⁹

While Robeson's insistence that the pentatonic (five-note, piano black key) scale lay at the root of all folk music is dubious,²⁰ what cannot be questioned is his belief that the highest pinnacle classical music could achieve only approached "the mainstream of world music" by incorporating folk melodies.²¹ Just as he claimed that "the character of a nation is determined not by the upper classes, but by the common people, and that the common people of all nations are truly brothers in the great family of mankind,"²² the quality of classical music improved as it approached the purity of folksong.

Hence, when Robeson did perform classical music, he presented it as folksong. He sang it either in the common language of his audience or alternated verses in the original language with a translation his auditors would understand. He thereby sought to demonstrate the consonance of people's music and struggles throughout the world. Furthermore, all the classical music he sang was about struggling against oppression or a plea for universal harmony and brotherhood. He offered Smetana's "Zvornost" or "Freedom" in both Czech and English. Robeson sang Bach's "Christ Lay in the Bonds of Death," which begins sorrowfully but then proclaims the resurrection. Robeson commenced his piano-voice version of Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from the Ninth Symphony, retitled as the "Song of Peace," with the words "Brothers, sing your country's anthem, Shout your land's undying fame," which at first glance has a tinge of the jingoism he abhorred. But the glory of this nation, which could be any or all nations, is the achievement of peace and fraternity: "None shall push aside another, none shall let another fall; March beside me, O! my brother, All for one and one for all."²³ Robeson hints at what a marvelous Sarastro he would have made in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* with his recording of "O Isis and Osiris." With these words, the benevolent ruler of a realm devoted to universal brotherhood blesses a young couple about to embark on their struggle against the forces of evil. He also performed Beethoven's "Creator's Hymn"—the song "Die Ehre Gottes aus der Natur"—in which all nature proclaims the glory of the creator.²⁴

Robeson sang Mendelssohn's "Lord God of Abraham" from the oratorio *Elijah* on various occasions as yet another prayer for deliverance from oppression.²⁵ In the film *The Proud Valley*, he did so as a miner performing as soloist with a choral society. Unlike the films of contemporary singers Josef Schmidt, John McCormack, and Beniamino Gigli—who respectively mixed their operatic repertoires with German, Irish, and Italian folk and popular songs—Robeson did not star in films that were basically excuses to film a recital. An actor before he was a singer, Robeson and his art became, in film as in life, an integral part of the struggle being portrayed.

A composer dear to Robeson's heart was Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1881). Even here, however, he only seems to have performed carefully chosen selections: the songs "Saul," "The Song of the Orphan," "After the Battle," and "The

Photo by Eslanda Robeson/Courtesy of Paul Robeson, Jr.



Singing to troops of the International Brigade, front lines of Madrid during Spanish Civil War, 1937.

Song of the Flea,” and Boris’s “Clock” and “Death” scenes from *Boris Goudunov*. Based on a poem of Byron, “Saul” urges the Israelites to conquer or die; the poor orphan is near death as he begs in vain for food from a “dear, kind, good gentleman”; Death roams the battlefield among the corpses as the only victor; courtiers are forbidden by a capricious monarch to scratch themselves lest they injure his pet flea, a satire on the absurdities of upper-class etiquette and obsequiousness. “The Death of Boris” is the touching good-bye of a tragic ruler to his people in troubled times. In the opera’s “Clock Scene”—which Robeson performed at his 1958 return to Carnegie Hall—the troubled monarch who sought to save his people but was undone by conspiracies all around him becomes a symbol of Robeson’s own persecution.²⁶

The classical composer Robeson discussed most favorably was the Czech Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904), who lived in the United States and incorporated Negro folk melodies into some of his compositions. Robeson recorded, in English, “Songs My Mother Taught Me,” and “Going Home,” the spiritual-inspired folk tune that is the germ of the second movement of the “New World Symphony” No. 9. The classical song he discussed most in depth was Dvorak’s “By the Waters of Babylon,” which he recorded in Czech. In this “searing outcry of an enslaved people against their oppressors . . . from ancient Judea these words of the 137th Psalm had crossed the vast reaches of time and distance to stir the hearts of the Negro slaves in our own Southland.” African-American

abolitionist Frederick Douglass compared the American South to Babylon in describing the evils of slavery and predicting ultimate deliverance. "Half a century later the gifted Dvorak came to our country, studied the melodies and lyrics of Negro song, and drew upon its richness for his own creations—and so, in this way, the words of this very song must have traveled back across the ocean with him; and I am told the song was especially popular among the Czech people during their years of suffering under the terror of nazi occupation." ²⁷

Perhaps the culmination of Robeson's effort to use music to unify the peoples of the world was his performance of "The Song of the Rivers." Unable to leave the United States in the fifties because his radicalism appeared sufficiently close to Communism—he was friends with leading Communists and praised Communist countries although he never belonged to the party—Robeson was obliged to make the recording for this film with music by Dmitri Shostakovitch and words by Bertold Brecht from his brother's Harlem residence. Honoring the people who worked on the Mississippi, Ganges, Yang-tse, Volga, Amazon, and Nile Rivers, Robeson sang the words in several languages.²⁸

Robeson was not alone in his musical ideas. He was a friend of British composer Ralph Vaughan-Williams (1872-1959),²⁹ whose four lectures at Cornell University in 1954, published under the title *The Making of Music*, also argued the need for modern classical music to incorporate folk tunes to regenerate itself. Vaughan-Williams maintained that what was most appealing in the great composers derived from their ability to develop folk material beautifully: "It never occurs to . . . people that Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert came from the humbler classes and were doubtless imbued from childhood with the popular music of their country . . . we can claim Mozart and Beethoven as nationalists as much as Dvorak and Grieg."³⁰ Among Americans, Vaughan-Williams praised Aaron Copland—"the tradition of the white spiritual unconsciously affects his music"³¹—Gershwin, and "the beautiful melodies of Stephen Foster." These composers towered over "those American composers who wrote symphonic poems, for which they were not emotionally ready, [and] are forgotten, while the work of those who attempted less but achieved more has become the foundation on which a great art can rise."³²

In a related vein, critic Henry Pleasants has argued that "serious music is a dead art. . . . What we know as modern music is the noise made by deluded speculators picking through the slagpile." Pleasants too finds African-American music, especially jazz and blues, a solution to the woes of moribund classicism: "It is . . . possible to see the history of American popular music in the twentieth century as a successful effort by practicing musicians to fight free of the obstacles to spontaneous musical invention represented by formal composition. . . . The jazz accomplishment is simply defined. It has taken music away from the composers and given it back to the musicians and their public."³³

Unlike Pleasants, Robeson had mixed feelings about blues and jazz. He never performed jazz, although he did record “St. Louis Blues” in 1934 and in 1941 teamed up with Count Basie and lyricist Richard Wright to produce a blues tribute to boxer Joe Louis. Classical critic Irving Kolodin praised Robeson’s contribution as “majestic” and the song itself as “a high credit to everyone involved.”³⁴ Robeson noted that he heard the blues in the songs “of my father’s people from the plantations of North Carolina,” as sung in the form of hymns by African-American congregations.³⁵ But he found spirituals and folk songs preferable to blues because the latter “express[ed] the emotional state of the individual,” frequently a lament for a lost love, instead of the collective strivings of a people as in folk, work, or protest songs. After completing a successful program of Polish, Russian, and Rumanian songs in the Soviet Union, Robeson refused the crowd’s demand for “St. Louis Blues.”³⁶

Courtesy of Llewellyn Ransom/Paul Robeson, Jr.



Harlem, 1950s.

Similarly, Robeson praised jazz musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker: "I . . . have been both stimulated by their imaginative creations and a little astounded by their incredible technique and musicianship."³⁷ Others he considered "memorable" were Count Basie, Chick Webb, Ella Fitzgerald, and the "incomparable" Duke Ellington and Modern Jazz Quartet—whom he compared to Shakespeare and the Elizabethans. Thelonious Monk "floored" him.³⁸ He grouped jazz with the songs of Stephen Foster as a "brilliant instance" of "the immense influence which Negro folk music has had on the development of the musical culture of the peoples of the USA." But while he admired the virtuosity of jazz musicians, Robeson could be critical of what he considered their spiritual failure. He claimed that "commercial jazz has prostituted and ruthlessly perverted many splendid models of Negro folk music and has corrupted and debased many talented Negro musicians in order to satisfy the desires of a capitalist society."³⁹

Perhaps this judgment provides a clue as to why Robeson the musician, apart from his political radicalism, is less honored today than he ought to be. Folk music was important in the 1930s and 1960s when communal protest movements searched for anthems which could be remembered and sung by masses of people. But as American society has become more conservative, individualistic, and integrated if not less exploitative and covertly racist, jazz and blues and those who perform them have become the foundation of the nation's musical culture, a small minority of classical aficionados excepted. Like Joe Hill, Paul Robeson still lives—through his art, although his CDs are hardly best sellers. But as he would be the first to point out, music signifies the circumstances and aspirations of a community. That the age-old music he championed is not America's music as the millennium approaches is not a criticism of him, but of us. Perhaps we need to recover Paul Robeson's dream that a society can be more than a mishmash of fundamentalist fanaticism, security-obsessed selfishness, pecuniary corruption, and a war against the poor rather than a war against poverty to appreciate his art in its full glory.

Abbreviations

RG — *A Paul Robeson Research Guide, A Selective Annotated Bibliography*, Lenwood G. Davis, compiler (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).

MD — Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).

PRS — *Paul Robeson Speaks, 1918-1974*, Philip S. Foner, editor (Larchmont, NY: Brunner/Mazel, 1978).

HIS — Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand* (New York: Othello Associates, 1958).

PRCM — The Paul Robeson Collection Microfilm (Bethesda, Mary.: University Publications of America, 1972), copies of material at the Schomburg Branch of the New York Public Library, with a guide by David H. Werning).

Notes

1. Paul Robeson, interview in *New York World-Telegram*, August 30, 1933, in PRS, 85.
2. For Tibbett, *New York Daily News*, October 21, 1935; Caruso, *New York News*, April 25, 1925; Chaliapin, *New York Evening Post*, May 5, 1925, in RG, 361, 329.
3. M. Danishewsky, *Picture Goer Weekly*, London, Oct. 26, 1935, 28 in RG, 361.
4. *London Times*, January 20, 1936, in RG, 361.
5. Paul Robeson, "Introduction to Songs of the Red Army and Navy," (1941?), PRCM, reel 2, #365-367.
6. HIS, 59.
7. HIS, 57.
8. HIS, 12.
9. MD, 369, 604; *New York Age*, June 18, 1949, in RG, 482.
10. Paul Robeson, interview in *London Daily Herald*, January 5, 1935, in PRS, 92.
11. Concert program, Jefferson City, Missouri, January 23, 1947, PRCM, reel 2, #645. Since there is no complete collection of Robeson concert programs, it is impossible to rule out that he sang other classical works. However, that with few exceptions such as this the same composers and songs keep reappearing. This suggests strongly he limited himself to these pieces, many of which he recorded — see discography RG 771-779.
12. Paul Robeson, interview with Julia Dorn, summer 1939, PRS, 130-131.
13. Notes to Monitor record album MPS 580.
14. W. H. Breare, "Paul Robeson's Technique," *The British Musician and Musical News*, vol. 9, #7, July, 1933, 158-158, in RG, 358.
15. HIS, 12.
16. Paul Robeson, interview in *London Daily Herald*, January 5, 1935, PRS, 92.
17. Spellings are Robeson's in his "Some Aspects of Afro-American Music," December 1956, in PRS, 439.
18. Paul Robeson, "The Negro Artist Looks Ahead," November 5, 1951, in PRS, 300.
19. Paul Robeson, "Introduction to Songs of the Red Army and Navy," [1941], PRCM, reel 2, #365-367.
20. MD, 438.
21. Paul Robeson, "Some Aspects of Afro-American Music," PRS, 439.
22. HIS, 56.
23. Words printed on occasion of first English performance on March 11, 1956 at Manchester, program in PRCM reel 2, #733.
24. Concert programs, New Orleans, October 23, 1942, and New York, October 9, 1952, PRCM, reel 2 #s 600, 708.
25. Concert programs, New Orleans, October 23, 1942, and Jefferson City, Missouri, January 23, 1947, PRCM, reel 2, #s 600, 645.
26. See discography RG 771-779; Concert programs for New Orleans, October 23, 1942, Roxbury, Massachusetts, November 4, 1952, New York, February 6, 1955 (at which he also sang the Schubert "Lullaby"), PRCM reel 2, #s 600, 675, 718.
27. Paul Robeson, "Bonds of Brotherhood," *Jewish Life*, November 1954, PRS, 392-393.
28. HIS, 69.
29. PRS, 406, 435, 449.
30. Ralph Vaughan-Williams, *The Making of Music* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press), 1954, 50-51.
31. *Ibid.*, 25.
32. *Ibid.*, 59.
33. Henry Pleasants, *The Agony of Modern Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 3, 175-176; see also his *Serious Music and All that Jazz* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969).
34. Discography, RG, 775; *New York Sun*, Nov. 28, 1941, in RG, 466.
35. Paul Robeson, "The Related Sounds of Music," September 1957, in PRS, 443.
36. Harrison E. Salisbury, *Americans in Russia* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1985), 194-195, in RG 257.
37. Paul Robeson, in *People's Voice*, November 29, 1947, 14, in RG, 44.
38. Paul Robeson, "Thoughts on Music," in *Paul Robeson: Tributes and Selected Writings*, ed. Roberta Dent et al. (New York: Paul Robeson Archives, 1976), 72-73, in RG 115.
39. Paul Robeson, "Songs of My People," July, 1949, originally published in Russian, in PRS, 213, 217.