WHY IS AMERICAN CLASSICAL MUSIC SO WHITE?

Tom Huizenga

Antonin Dvorak predicted that American classical music would draw from African American traditions. A new article wonders why American classical music has remained so white.

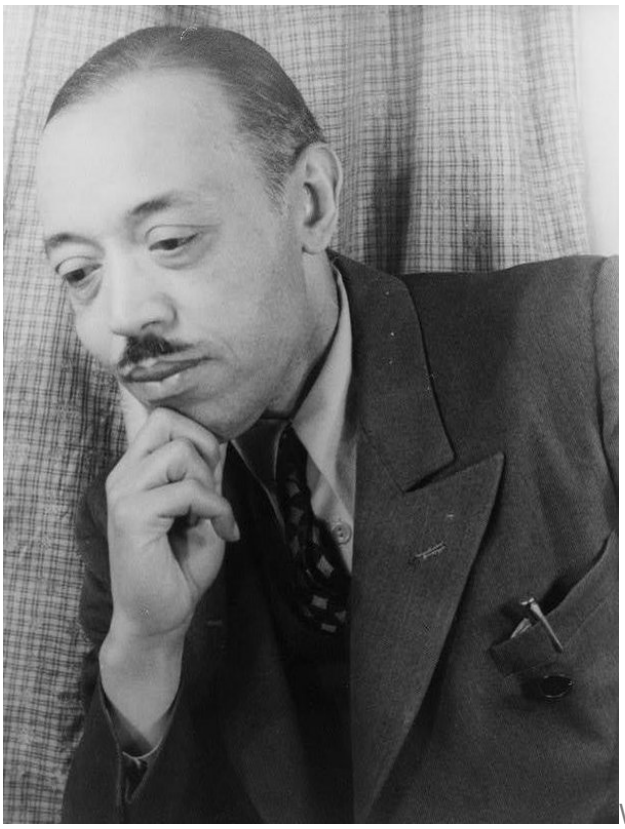
When the first enslaved Africans landed on American shores in 1619, their musical traditions landed with them. Four centuries later, the primacy of African American music is indisputable, not only in this country but in much of the world. How that music has evolved, blending with or giving rise to other traditions — from African songs and dances to field hollers and spirituals, from ragtime and blues to jazz, R&B and hip-hop — is a topic of endless discussion.

More difficult to decode is the relationship African American music has had — or should have had — with America's classical music tradition. Today, it's not uncommon for Kanye West or Kendrick Lamar to perform alongside a symphony orchestra, yet African Americans generally aren't performing in those orchestras themselves. Less than 2% of musicians in American orchestras are African American, according to a 2014 study by the League of American Orchestras. Only 4.3% of conductors are black, and composers remain predominantly white as well.

All of these ratios are skewed, of course, by decades of institutional racial bias. Still, it's fair to wonder why the *sound* of American classical music, especially as it developed in the early 20th century, remained so European, drawing heavily from the harmonic language of Johannes Brahms and Richard Wagner. Had the vernacular of slave songs, spirituals and jazz taken root in our classical music, we would have a different landscape today — and a classical sound that is uniquely American.

Joseph Horowitz says it almost happened. In his article "New World Prophecy," published last week in the autumn edition of *The American Scholar*, the cultural historian argues that the seeds of a truly American sound were sown but never watered, as American composers in the late 19th century largely resisted the influence of African American music. Horowitz, who has written numerous books about the history of music in America, pays special attention to George Gershwin — one white composer who did embrace black music — and a handful of African American composers who found genuine success in the 1930s, only to see it quickly fade. William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony*, premiered by the Philadelphia Orchestra with superstar conductor Leopold Stokowski, is held up in particular as a neglected American treasure.

Horowitz joined me to talk about what he sees as a long series of missed opportunities, from Antonín Dvořák's insistence in the 1890s that the "Negro melodies" were the future of American music, to the acclaimed but undervalued work of African American composers like Florence Price and William Grant Still. That trove of melody-rich, expressive black music could have taken root in America's classical music, Horowitz maintains, but it didn't — and as a result, our classical music has remained overwhelmingly white and increasingly marginalized.

 William Grant Still's *Afro-American Symphony* was premiered in 1931 by the Rochester Philharmonic.

 Nathaniel Dett's oratorio *The Ordering of Moses* was premiered by the Cincinnati Symphony in 1937 on national radio. But midway through, the broadcast was stopped.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Tom Huizenga: Looming over your article about the trajectory of American classical music is a foreigner, the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák. The story starts in the early 1890s, when he was hired by a wealthy American philanthropist, Jeanette Thurber, to lead a music school in New York. His goal was to help American composers shake off the European influences and discover their own truly American voice. How did Dvořák attempt to do that?

Joseph Horowitz: He did the most obvious and essential thing for him — because he was a cultural nationalist — which was to ask: "Where is your folk music?" And that's a conundrum for America, because we're a melting pot. But Dvořák happened to hear two kinds of music that just galvanized him. He heard what we call African American spirituals, probably for the first time. His assistant Harry Burleigh was black and sang those spirituals. And he heard what he called "Negro melodies," which included minstrel songs from other sources. He was immediately, more or less, satisfied that he'd struck gold. At the same time, like so many Europeans of his generation, he was fascinated by [American] Indians, because there were no Indians in Bohemia — so he made it his business to investigate Indian music, especially in the summer he spent in Iowa. He was consumed by these new methodologies: using Indian music, using African American music, to help foster an American classical music style.

Then Dvořák made a radical prediction. In 1893, he told *The New York Herald*: "The future of this country must be founded upon what are called the Negro melodies. This must be the real foundation of any serious and original school of composition to be developed in the United States." In other words, he was telling white composers that their future was bound to the very people they enslaved and killed. How was that prediction received?

It was instantly influential and instantly controversial. And it's amazing to use this as a mirror on the American experience in the 1890s, because in Boston Dvořák is scientifically categorized as a barbarian — read the reviews. It reflects the racial thinking in Boston, based on a hierarchy of races with the Anglo Saxons at the top. Slavs, including Dvořák, were at a lower rung; of course, they were higher up than Native Americans or African Americans. [Whereas] New York thought Dvořák was an inspirational prophet, because New York was a city of immigrants.