THE NEGRO’S CONTRIBUTION TO THE MUSIC OF AMERICA: THE LARGER OPPORTUNITY OF THE COLORED MAN OF TODAY: BY NATAILIE CURTIS

Note: A recognition of the negro’s part in the music of America finds appropriate emphasis at this time when the fiftieth anniversary of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation points to the progress made by the colored race industrially, economically and spiritually since the days of slavery.

Our children dance, our people sing, even our soldiers march to “rag-time,” which is fast becoming a national “Pied Piper” to whose rhythm the whole country moves. This bizarre and fascinating music with its hide-and-seek of accent has not only swept over the United States, but it has also captured Europe, where it is rightly known as “American Music,” and is taken quite seriously as typical of this country. In New York, where the commercial and mechanical instinct pervades all things, popular songs are regularly manufactured on stereotyped “rag-time” pattern and turned out on Broadway till the type is becoming so conventionalized that the refrain of a “best-seller” of a few years back might aptly now be changed to “All tunes sound alike to me.” Yet rag-time at its best has originality which at once attracts, and a rhythmic impulse that compels response. I remember when the great Russian conductor Saigonoff heard it for the first time. The band at the hotel where he was staying had been playing serious music in his honor, when something more popular was requested by one of the other guests. With the first bars of “rag-time” the musician, who had paid scant attention before, began to listen curiously, then attentively, then enthusiastically. He rushed to the leader of the band. “But what is this? It is wonderful! So original, so interesting.” The leader smilingly explained that it was the “real American music.” “I shall score it for orchestra and play it in St. Petersburg!” declared the Russian, with real appreciation behind the humor of the suggestion.

Whence comes this music that now fairly runs in our veins? Though the origin of “rag-time” is a matter of discussion, no one can deny the influence of Negro musical characteristics upon our popular songs of the day. Of course the syncopation which is the predominant feature of “rag-time” is to be found occasionally in all music. It occurs in Scotch and Irish folk-song, it is very prominent in Hungarian melodies, and it is an absolutely essential element in the songs of our North American Indians of many tribes. It is frequently found in the music of primitive people who associate song with bodily movement and rely upon variety of rhythm for diversity of musical effect.
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Any one who has studied Negro music in its different phases—dance-songs, cake-walks, laboring songs as well as the religious melodies—will certainly find ground for the assertion that what we specifically call “rag-time” (the popular American song that is played, whistled, sung and danced to in the theater, in our homes and on the street) received its first impulse from Negro songs. A remarkable volume entitled “The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man” contains an interesting account of the beginnings of “rag-time” by an author who evidently has intimate knowledge of the facts. He says that “rag-time” originated “in the questionable resorts about Memphis and St. Louis by Negro piano-players who knew no more of the theory of music than they did of the theory of the universe;” that this music made its way to Chicago and thence to New York, springing into immediate popularity, the crude improvisations of the Negro players and singers having been “taken down by white men, the words slightly altered and published under the names of the arrangers” (who reaped the financial profit).

It has been said that “rag-time” first appeared in our music-halls about the time of the Chicago World’s Fair and it is possible that the reiterated syncopation of the Oriental drum-beat which went echoing forth all over the country with the polyglot songs and rhythms of the “Midway Plaisance” may have had some slight share in the evolution of our popular music. But some authoritative colored men have traced the origin of the first “rag-time” melodies directly to the common working-songs and boisterous merrymaking of their own people; and in spite of white imitators and Broadway manufacturers of popular songs, no one can invent such attractive “rag-time” as that written by colored men (who are only just beginning to be adequately paid for their own ideas); also ignorant colored people sing and play this kind of music naturally and instinctively in a way peculiar to themselves, and difficult, at first, to the average American. All this would help to prove the Negro’s influence, at least, on the music of this country.

Doubtless the Negroes in the South heard the tom-tom and the sharply accented rhythms of Indian song from the surrounding tribes with whom they mixed to some extent prior to the removal of the Southern Indians to Indian Territory. Also the slaves heard constantly the music of their masters,—the hymns and ballads of the whites. But the voice of the African sounds through these two different influences, shaping a folk-song of its own that is distinctly the product of the Negro in America. The enslaved race which is now part of our body politic, presenting one of the most difficult problems
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of adjustment that our country has to meet, has sung itself unconsciously into the very life of our nation.

Very different indeed from modern "rag-time" both musically and spiritually are the old folk-melodies of the plantation; yet many of these have also the rhythmic feature of syncopation—the short note falling on the even beat of the musical bar. The religious slave-songs or "spirituals" have been made familiar to Northerners through the singing of the students of Hampton and Fiske Institutes, two of the great Negro schools of the South which have held meetings all through the North in the interest of their educational campaign. These and other schools have printed small collections of the plantation melodies, chiefly religious songs,—a noble work, for the slave songs are fast being lost to the memory of the present generation.

White musicians here and there have turned to these beautiful Negro folk-tunes for themes and inspiration. Though we took from the Negro greedily (and still applaud him as an "entertainer" in vaudeville and cabaret) yet few of us ever gave to the colored man any serious consideration of his talent or stopped to think that the music which white composers found worthy to be valued as a contribution to a future national "school" and whose themes they purposed to "develop" might be "developed" by Negro musicians if encouraged to study. Though the Negroes had already made some organized effort at self-education musically (as in a conservatory of music founded about nine years ago in Washington by a colored woman, Mrs. Gibbs Marshall), it is only two years ago that a group of earnest people in New York, interested in the uplift of the Negro and also in music, conceived the idea of establishing a Music School Settlement for Colored People. This institution had the two-fold aim of preserving and developing the beautiful old Negro music in its purity, and of founding a social center in the heart of the colored district where the educational appeal through music would take the children from the streets in the daytime and provide wholesome and instructive recreation for adults in the evening. The purpose of the school was chiefly sociological, but music was the avenue through which it was believed that the colored people could best be reached.

As might have been foreseen, the enormous Negro population in New York at once endorsed this effort, the churches and the people at large contributing to the embryo school and quickly enrolling both children and grown people as pupils. The school has been in actual existence little over a year, yet already it has a building of its own at Two Hundred and Fifty-Seven West One Hundred and Thirty-fourth Street in the "Black Belt" of Harlem, with an orchestra.
and chorus, and classes in nearly all important branches of music. Of course no one entertains the mad dream of turning all the pupils of the school into professional musicians, for it is only the exceptional few in any race who are sufficiently gifted to warrant devoting themselves exclusively to art; and pity it would be indeed, to divert Negroes, of all people, from more practical work at the present stage of their economic development. Yet music, as a factor in the life of communities and in the home, is an undoubted influence for education, refinement and uplift, and to the Negroes, who are a distinctly gregarious people, it is, as it always has been, a natural and wholesome element of social intercourse. But there are already Negroes in New York who actually do sing and play for a living, and it is precisely these that the school may help to lift out of the demoralizing environment of all-night restaurants and cheap theatrical shows into a world of better effort.

Though the actual work done by the young institution is productive of much good, it is the influence of the school which is most potent both as a settlement, and also in creating a better understanding between whites and blacks. As a rule, it used to make no difference how gifted a colored man might be, or how well he might play an instrument; the Negro could hardly hope to be taken seriously and to find a place among white musicians: vaudeville and “entertaining” were the only fields in music easily open to him. A very few men in different parts of the country have forged their way to the front, with a heroism worthy of all admiration. But most Negro musicians have been obliged to stay with the clog-dance and the comic-song; the color-line was a barrier in music as in the trades and professions.

But, through the efforts of the School, New York was given a real awakening last May, when the city learned to see what the Negroes had themselves accomplished in music utterly without the aid, instruction, or even the knowledge of white citizens. Few white people had ever heard of the orchestra of the “Clef Club,” a band of a hundred and twenty-five members organized a few years ago by the colored people themselves at whose head now stands James Reese Europe, a man with a strong sense of organization and discipline and with pronounced musical ability. For the benefit of the Settlement School this orchestra and several other colored musicians volunteered their services at a great concert of Negro music given on May second in Carnegie Hall. I mention the date because this concert really formed an epoch in the musical life of the Negro and also in the development of Negro music. Hardly a day passes that the influence of that concert is not felt in some phase of Negro life in this city, for
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our eyes were then opened as never before, not only to the Negroes’ ability, but to the importance of the step that the School had taken in appealing to the higher nature of the colored people through their own talent and in helping them to turn that talent to the good of our whole country. For music is certainly one of the distinct contributions that the Negro has to offer to our American life.

It was an astonishing sight, that Negro orchestra (a sort of American “Balalaika”) that filled the entire stage with banjos, mandolins, guitars, a few violins, violas, celli, double basses, here and there a wind instrument, some drums, eloquent in syncopation, and the sonorous background of ten upright pianos corresponding in efficiency to the cymbalo of the Hungarian band. Europe uplifted his baton and the orchestra began (with an accuracy of “attack” that many a greater band might envy) a stirring march composed by the leader. It was the “Pied Piper” again, for as one looked through the audience, one saw heads swaying and feet tapping in time to the incisive rhythm, and when the march neared the end, and the whole band burst out singing as well as playing, the novelty of this climax—a novelty to the whites, at least—brought a very storm of tumultuous applause. After that, the audience settled back with a broad smile of enjoyment.

MOST of these Clef Club men play by ear; two-thirds of them could not read a note when they first joined the organization. They have “picked up” the ability to play an instrument, and, like the Hungarians and the gypsies, when they have caught the melody, they are quick to catch by ear their own orchestral parts also, or even to fill in and improvise the harmonies,—but always subject to the criticism and leadership of the conductor who corrects and drills his musicians carefully at rehearsals. These Negro players who sing also, think nothing of playing a bass part and singing tenor at the same time or of playing alto and singing bass! Yet these are men with only odd hours for practise,—many of them being waiters, porters, elevator-boys, barbers, employees or tradesmen of different kinds. Even as the Negroes in the South sing naturally in four part harmonies at their work in field or factory, so too these Negroes in the North almost equally untrained musically, play and sing by virtue of sheer natural ability.

The program on May second was made up entirely of the modern work of Negro musicians, most of the composers taking part in the performance. There were in the audience many of New York’s best white musicians and also contributors to our Philharmonic and Symphony Orchestras; and the musical editors of the New York papers
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had come in order to give this enterprise serious consideration. Never before had the Negroes had such an opportunity.

An example of what the educated Negro can achieve is furnished by the career of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, a British-African mulatto who lived and worked in England and whose recent death in the thirty-eighth year of his age is mourned abroad as a loss to the English musical world; for Coleridge-Taylor was not only a composer of eminence but was a professor of composition at Trinity College, and conductor of the Handel Society, a prominent English choral organization. In an obituary notice the London Telegraph describes Coleridge-Taylor as “one of the foremost of English composers of the present day . . . undoubtedly the first person of Negro birth to achieve fame as a creative musician.” His greatest work, a choral trilogy called “Hiawatha” is said to have “brought a new ‘note’ into English music.” Coleridge-Taylor studied at the Royal College of Music in Kensington, and at eighteen years won a scholarship in composition; three years later a symphony by him was produced at St. James Hall under Sir Charles Stanford's direction, and a work for clarinet and strings was performed in Berlin by the Joachim quartet.

He never visited West Africa, his father’s native country, yet he had a strong belief in the musical instinct of his people, and a keen interest in Negro songs. He composed some African Dances, an African Suite for the piano and an orchestral Rhapsody on Negro themes, written for the Norfolk Festival in Connecticut in nineteen hundred and ten. But though he had talent, Coleridge-Taylor had not the background of cataclysmic human experience of the Negro in this country, an experience which has charged the folk-song of the American Negro (even as oppression, pain and struggle have colored the folk-song of the people of Russia) with a wealth of pathos, longing and aspiration. No American Negro can be placed in the same class with Coleridge-Taylor as regards scholarly musicianship, yet the Negro in this country has a message that the British-African could not give—a message that sings the struggle of a race from darkness into light.

THE present impetus toward an appreciation of our own Negro folk-music was undoubtedly given by the sojourn of Dvorak in New York, and by the emphatic words of the great Bohemian who wrote that the “so-called plantation songs are indeed the most striking and appealing melodies that have yet been heard on this side of the water.”

Those who knew Dvorak in this country link the recollection of him with the thought of Henry T. Burleigh, one of our foremost
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Negro musicians. Burleigh was educated at the National Conservatory in New York, and was still a student when Dvorak came to America to take charge of that institution. The talented young Negro greatly interested the Bohemian composer, and it was partly through contact with Burleigh that Dvorak became familiar with Negro songs, incorporating their rhythmic and melodic characteristics in compositions of his own which he hoped would point a path to the future development of a national American music. The “Symphony from the New World,” and the so-called “Negro” string-quartet which were written to this end, are filled with suggestions of the composer’s study and appreciation of Negro melodies and of the association of the great master with the young colored student.

A pioneer for the Negro’s right to enter the field of serious art, Burleigh has worked for years in New York, never sinking his high standard, never doing anything that would compromise his dignity as a musician, never allowing himself to be beaten back by prejudice. Quietly, unassumingly but firmly he has maintained his hard-earned place among professional musicians. For many years he has been baritone at St. George’s Episcopal Church on Stuyvesant Square and is now also a member of the choir at the Temple Emanu-El on Fifth Avenue.

Though Burleigh has made two small collections: “Plantation Melodies, Old and New,” and “Negro Minstrel Songs,” and has also written songs of his own, he is best known as a singer, and particularly as an exponent of the old slave songs. Realizing the beauty of these melodies Burleigh has always placed them on his programs, striving to make white people and black appreciate this folk-music of America; for the Negroes of today, especially those in the North, have turned from the songs that remind them of their former subjugation and of the present race ostracism, and Burleigh rightly feels that in losing the old plantation melodies the colored people are throwing away their best musical asset. It is indeed doubtful if any Negro music of the future can ever equal in simple beauty and depth of feeling that of the past.

Another important figure among our colored musicians is Will Marion Cook, chiefly known as the clever composer of light opera music and vaudeville sketches; for none of the publishers would take the better things that Cook had written. It was at the concert mentioned above, that some of Cook’s manuscript compositions were first heard by white people, and then a new place was won for the composer.

In listening to these better works of Cook, one involuntarily recalls Shakespeare’s words: “This above all, to thine own self be
true.” It is truth to his race that stamps Cook as another of the pioneers in the artistic efforts of the Negro, lifting his work beyond an expression of musical talent alone, and making it prophetic of a larger development of the Negro people in music.

**While** the song of the American Negro has been from the beginning the simple expression of a naturally musical folk, it was to the illiterate laborer of the plantation the one great outlet for his thoughts and feelings. In his music the Negro poured out his sufferings and his aspiration, his patient submission to the bondage of this world and his vivid hope for the world to come. His song was also his recreation and his joy; it lightened his toil, inspired his dances, accompanied his games, enriched the story-teller’s narrative, and embodied all the sports and pastime of a childlike people. This music, so full of pathos, religious devotion and emotional power on the one hand, and on the other, so overflowing with humor and irresistible spirit, is the heritage of the Negro composer of today.

And Cook has had the imagination to see and to feel this. His music is the conscious response to that same unconscious musical impulse through which the very soul of his race found voice, and he is justly proud of the upward struggle of the freedman. Though his compositions so far, are little more than an indication of the larger work that he might do, he is already seeking to interpret the character of his people in music, and to carry the untaught musical language of the Negro into the realm of art. And everything that he writes is true in melody, rhythm and form to the racial utterance, so that his music, even in its most external aspect, is distinctive and characteristic. A love of strong, rich harmony, a keen dramatic sense, and a restraint that avoids excess are all qualities that help to round out and balance a highly-gifted nature.

The music of Cook and also some of that by J. Rosamond Johnson is indeed the Negro’s own musical speech set to verses, some of which have the quaint mixture of crude poetry and humor characteristic of the tales of Uncle Remus. A “Negro Lullaby” by Johnson has caught in music the tender crooning of the colored “Mammy”; “Southland,” an unpublished manuscript by the same composer, has for its opening theme that sublime old Negro chant “Go down, Moses,” whose somber cry seems to have been wrung from the very soul of an oppressed people. In singing of the bondage of the children of Israel in Egypt the Negro felt his own, and the call:—

“Tell ole Pharaoh
    Let my people go!”

has a pathos that voices the Negro’s own hope for deliverance.
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"Exhortation," a song by Cook for baritone solo and chorus is a complete genre picture showing a darky Deacon of the old time in the South, surrounded by his flock who make devout response to his words. The "exhortation" by the preacher was in old days a regular part of the camp-meeting service, and Cook has caught with vivid humor the improvisational eloquence of the Negro preacher whose dramatic appeal always stirred his listeners to such fervor of repentance and conversion. In the "Rain-Song," also by Cook, which is picturesquely colored by humorous childlike superstition, we hear an echo of the spirit of Negro folk-lore.

"When de frog's done changed his yaller vest,
An' in his brown suit now he is dressed,
Mo' rain, an' still mo' rain!
When you notice de air it stan's stock still,
An' de blackbird's voice it gits so awful shrill
Dat am de time fo' rain!"

And here again, the dramatic instinct which is so strong in the Negro (as in most primitive people, and in all children too, before it is crushed out by education) gives to this delightfully original choral composition a vigorous freshness which sweeps to a brilliant climax and quite carries an audience off its feet. When the Negroes sing the "Rain-Song," the few gestures of the soloists, who rise up, one by one from different parts of the orchestra and sing each a verse, give such a touch of delicious reality to the supposed contrasting signs of rain and of clear weather, that at the conclusion the listener feels quite sure with "Mr. Simmons" that "dere aint a-gwine ter be no rain today!"

"Exhortation" and the "Rain-Song" are certainly the best things that Cook has done, so far (and these lay unpublished for years), but "Swing Along," a cake-walk, though in a more obviously popular vein, is irresistible, and "Lover's Lane" has a swaying lilt, a crooning refrain and an unexpected loveliness of harmony that haunt the listener for days.

ALTHOUGH both Cook and Johnson have received good musical education (Cook studied at the Hochschule in Berlin, and had violin lessons from Joachim), they have endeavored in their better work to hold fast to the traditions of Negro music in this country influenced by the enthusiasm of Dvorak and by the example of Burleigh. Through translating into their own form of art the life of their people, these colored musicians have undoubtedly made a picturesque and truthful contribution to our musical literature.

Not only did the concert of last spring introduce our Negro composers to the music-lovers of this city, but it also proved that some of
the music was worthy of a place on the programs of white musicians. It was the Schola Cantorum of New York which took the initial step of performing in concert (with its own well-trained chorus) three dialect songs by Cook and Johnson. On the recital programs of great singers such dialect songs have already figured, but usually as arranged or composed by white people. The Schola program was devoted to works by living composers of America, and Kurt Schindler, conductor of the chorus, felt that, since these Negro compositions reached the standard of musicianship, they should certainly take their place with the works of other American composers, as they reflect a phase of life distinctly characteristic of America,—the life of the Southern plantation.

An unexpected force for better understanding between whites and blacks has been liberated in this conscious admission of the Negro into our musical life. Music has always sprung from people who labor out-of-doors,—simple people who sing as they work and pray and dance. Whether the Negroes, any of them will develop into great artists is not the present question; what we hope is that the Negro of today shall carry into his free industrial life in ennobling form the same love of song that upheld him spiritually in the days of bondage and made slavery bearable. For us, the fact is here, that the untaught Negro has already unconsciously given to this country the elements of a type of music that the people love, while the Negro with a little education now gives us the promise of a development of that type. The folk-song of the Negro has something to give to art,—something that is original and convincing because it speaks directly from the heart. Like all music born of the need of song in a people, it appeals to the listener with that elemental truth of feeling in which race has no part and humanity is one.

If anything can bring harmony from the present clashing of the two races during this difficult period of problem and adjustment, it might well be the peace-giver—music!

As this article goes to press another concert of Negro music is announced to take place in Carnegie Hall on Lincoln’s Birthday, when a great chorus will sing in commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation the beautiful old slave song whose burden runs:

“Oh freedom, oh freedom over me!
And before I’ll be a slave
I’ll be buried in my grave
I’ll go home to my Lord
And be free.”