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Review of Kira Thurman, *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the
Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms*

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KIRA THURMAN, *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 368 pp. ISBN 978 1 501 75984 0. \$32.95

For the current production of the Bayreuth Festival's *Tannhäuser*, director Tobias Kratzer invented two additional, non-singing companions for Venus, the anarchic and amorous adversary to Princess Elisabeth, who stands for established social norms and ethics. A person of short stature and the drag artist of colour Le Gateau Chocolat made up 'Team Venus' which, on stage, visibly embodied Richard Wagner's early motto: 'Free in wanting, free in action, free in enjoyment'. While the production as a whole had a largely positive response, Le Gateau Chocolat was the only character to be booed by the audience after the premiere, which prompted the queer artist to comment on this incident on social media. In an open letter beginning 'Dear Bayreuth', he wrote that the audience's behaviour 'says a lot about who you (still) are' and, by invoking soprano Grace Bumbry, the first Black woman to sing at Bayreuth, who took the role of Venus in the same opera in 1961, he proudly inscribed himself into a historical process that, in his own words, 'oughtn't be a provocation'.¹

It obviously was, and has been for the last 150 years. This, in a nutshell, is one of the core findings of Kira Thurman's timely account of Black musicians' performances in the German lands (Austria is also considered) from the Wilhelmine era to the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, plus several excursions into more recent times. Thurman uses these performances as a heuristic lens because they 'caused a listening public to work out the ties between music, race, and nation' (p. 3). Adopting a *longue durée* perspective to study the contexts in which Black musicians performed in the lands of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, along with the reactions to them, allows her to grasp continuity and change in the meanings of such performances, in the discourses they produced, and, ultimately, in German constructions of 'Germanness', 'Whiteness', and 'Blackness'. Apart from this research agenda, it is the explicit purpose of the book to give Black classical

¹ See Le Gateau Chocolat's statement at [<https://www.facebook.com/130391560883/posts/10158742287640884/>], accessed 30 Aug. 2022.

musicians present in German musical life between 1870 and 1960 a voice and to write them into German history. In doing so, *Singing like Germans* not only makes a very welcome contribution to music history, but also adds to the growing field of Black German studies.

The book is divided into three chronological parts, each of which has three chapters. Part one sets out the transatlantic network of musical connections between Black America and the German Empire (chapter one) and details Black migration to Germany in the second chapter. Chapter three introduces the 'sonic color line' that emerged in the last third of the nineteenth century in Central Europe. Skipping the First World War, the second part covers both the Weimar Republic (chapter four) and the Nazi regime including the Second World War (chapter six), separated by a case study on the performance and reception of (German) lieder by outstanding singers Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson (chapter five). The third part, covering the period from 1945 to 1961, examines the involvement of African Americans in US musical denazification measures in chapter seven, sheds light on Black opera singers in West Germany with a special focus on Bumbry's Bayreuth debut in chapter eight, and finally discusses Black musicians' appearances in the 'promised land' of the German Democratic Republic in chapter nine.

Thurman's account is cleverly set out and her overall argument well made. The initial question addressed is how and why Black Americans became interested in German classical music. The answer has much to do with the emergence of Black institutions of higher learning such as Fisk University, Howard University, and many others that were founded during the Reconstruction era. For these Black universities and their students, the alleged universalism of German music was as attractive as its strong connection with middle-class values. To perform Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms was seen as a means of climbing the social ladder and crossing the colour line. Unlike White Americans, White German musicians migrating to the United States were ready to support such ambitions. In some cases, they were even involved in the foundation of mixed-race but White-majority conservatoires such as Oberlin College, which became the most important music education institution for African Americans. Overall, studying German music let Black Americans dream of a better future in Central Europe, beyond

the rules of Jim Crow and White supremacist America. Many of those who realized their dream experienced it as part of their 'self-liberation' (p. 54), as Thurman puts it.

Indeed, one crucial takeaway for readers is that Black performers repeatedly reported experiencing a better life in Europe. Europe was not devoid of racial discrimination, but they were considerably better off than they would have been in the USA. Thurman's testimony that musicians feared nothing more than encountering White Americans speaks volumes about the fundamental differences in race relations on either side of the Atlantic in the decades before and after 1900. Even when W. E. B. Du Bois attended the Bayreuth Festival in 1936, he complained about a wealthy White American sitting in front of him but remained silent about the Nazi crowd.

One does not have to follow all of Thurman's interpretations to appreciate that a great strength of the study lies in how she carves out the many layers of race perceptions that shaped musical encounters in the German lands, from well-intentioned but essentializing racial description to racial prejudice, hidden cultural racism, and overt biological racism. Many tropes which established themselves in German musical discourse in the decades before 1900 are meticulously traced to the 1960s and beyond. To name but a few: to German and Austrian music critics, Black voices sounded 'melancholic', 'natural', 'animalistic', and 'dark'. In opera, Black female singers, no matter how excellent their voices, were only to be hired, if at all, for 'exotic' roles in 'exotic' operas such as *Aida*, *Porgy and Bess*, and so on. There was a great desire among music critics to synchronize sight and sound as well as racial prejudice and character – hence the oft-heard opinion that Black musicians were best suited to performing their 'own' music, such as spirituals, but should leave German classical music alone. Finally, superstars such as Anderson and Hayes were often 'Whitened' in order to keep intact the allegedly eternal axiom that German music was 'White' music and 'Germanness' was 'Whiteness'.

Despite these continuities, Thurman at the same time crafts an instructive narrative of change. Dominant reactions to Black musicians in Germany switched from 'exoticizing' their performances in imperial Germany and experiencing them as 'threatening' during the 1920s to outright and sometimes even riotous repudiation under Nazi

rule. By contrast, after 1945, African American singers and conductors were employed by the American military to implement its denazification and re-education measures, which, as Thurman rightly points out, was ironic given that the military was itself a highly racist institution. Likewise, for the American government, Black musicians became a means of cultural diplomacy in the imminent Cold War, as exemplified by the funding of an American production of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in West Germany in the early 1950s. Finally, after the war, audiences in both the Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic embraced the performances of Black musicians as never before. The former put Black musicians in the service of distancing the nation from the Nazi past, repressing any memories of a highly racialized state and society, while the latter celebrated the musicians as an expression of their official policy of anti-fascism, anti-imperialism, and anti-racist solidarity.

This narrative, however, highlights the perceptions and political uses of Black performances by White people, while it largely keeps silent about developments among African American musicians themselves. Of course, this is partially due to a lack of sources. Nonetheless, I would have liked more information about the changing numbers of Black classical musicians touring and living in the German lands. The only figure Thurman gives is an estimate of 3,000 Black people living in the Weimar Republic, which would imply no more than 60 to 100 Black musicians living in Germany during the period, touring musicians excluded. Such considerations would not only have added another explanatory layer to the persistent practice of 'exoticizing' Black classical musicians; it would also have sharpened even more the specific profile of this group as a tiny Black elite who managed to cross the Atlantic, often, as Thurman shows, with the help of White patrons. Their exclusivity is mentioned here and there, for example, when they avoided meeting Black popular musicians, apparently perfectly internalizing the ideological message of classical music as a gateway to the German bourgeois world. However, Thurman's espousal of the notion of classical music as a part of bourgeois culture that was strictly separate from the lower-class world of popular music, rather than reflecting on the often contradictory entanglement of race and class, feels to some extent like a missed opportunity.

In addition, it might have been rewarding to delve more systematically into Black musicians' own views about the complex triangular relationship between race, nation, and music. Juxtaposing Roland Hayes's conviction that his Blackness mattered as much onstage as off with Marian Anderson's largely unpolitical approach towards her artistry suffices to illustrate the broad spectrum of possible attitudes. Thurman reports these and other statements, but stops short of linking them to the larger issue that Du Bois famously called the 'problem of the color line'.² How to address and solve this problem was always contested among African American intellectuals. Given that Du Bois and Booker T. Washington – prominent opponents in this debate – make several appearances in the book (Washington somewhat ironically in the role of a patron-father funding his piano-playing daughter Portia), it would have made for an even more compelling account if Black musicians' varying ideas about race and music had been contextualized and historicized by connecting them to wider debates in African American thought on racial recognition, equality, and harmony.

Finally, not everyone may agree with Thurman's basic methodological assumption that published music criticism reflects the perceptions and attitudes of audiences. She is often quick to generalize from a concert review to 'the audience' or even 'the Germans'. Taking the history of music criticism – including its professional development – into account might have resolved this problem to some extent. Another solution might have been to read these reviews more systematically for depictions of audiences' reactions.³ Nonetheless, the thick description of recurrent tropes about Black musicians increases the plausibility of her generalizations.

These points of criticism notwithstanding, Thurman's book has already become the benchmark for any further research on Black

² W. E. B. Du Bois, 'To the Nations of the World (1900)', in Adom Getachew and Jennifer Pitts (eds.), *W. E. B. Du Bois: International Thought* (Cambridge, 2022), 18–21, at 18. Online at [<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108869140.002>].

³ See Hansjakob Ziemer, 'Konzerthörer unter Beobachtung: Skizze für eine Geschichte journalistischer Hörertypologien zwischen 1870 und 1940', in Netzwerk 'Hör-Wissen im Wandel' (ed.), *Wissensgeschichte des Hörens in der Moderne* (Berlin, 2017), 183–206.

musicians—classical or otherwise—in the German lands in modern history, not least because of a whole slew of additional insights and observations that are worth following up. For one thing, the significance of Black musicians for Germans working through their Nazi pasts in early West Germany goes beyond the world of music and adds a particularly interesting dimension to recent discussions in Germany about how to achieve a more multidirectional public memory without losing sight of the Holocaust. Ultimately, Le Gateau Chocolat's recent experience at Bayreuth sadly illustrates the continuing relevance of Thurman's account—a must-read for anybody interested in German history and classical music.

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