African Musical AESTHETICS

by Willie Strong

African-American Music & CRITICS 1865-1945

THE INFLUENCE OF AFRICAN MUSIC on the evolving African-American musical aesthetic is a topic that has engaged African-American music critics since the publication of James Monroe Trotter's *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, the first study of African-American music written by an African-American writer.[1] While discussions of African civilization were common in African-American intellectual circles before the Civil War, most of these dialogues focused on Africa as a socio-political—or occasionally religious—subject, or on the feasibility of returning African-American slaves to their native continent. After the Civil War, African-American critics began to focus their energies on descriptions of African-American cultures and their relationships to Africa, and, during the next several decades, musical discourses controlled by African-American writers began to emerge. As early critics sought to reclaim the history of the African-American musical culture that began to evolve during the antebellum era, it is inevitable that they would eventually turn to the music of Africa in their quest to ferret out evolutionary strands.

An examination of discussions of African music by African-American music critics from the years between the Civil War and World War II provides an opportunity to examine how perceptions of African music were forged by the changing social currents of this epoch. During these decades, African-American music critics were primarily interested in positioning the spiritual, particularly the concertized versions inaugurated by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, as the most exemplary genre of African-American music. The concert spiritual fulfilled two essential criteria: 1) it was a genre that originated in the plantation culture of the antebellum era, serving as a reminder of historical struggles in the New World, and 2) in concertized

versions, it was music that could be performed on-stage alongside concert works from the European tradition. African-American critics from this time were most interested in supporting a new tradition of concert music (eventually leading to large-scale compositions) based on African-American folk idioms, but an often neglected subtext is the role that African musical traditions played in shaping their views of this evolving practice.

As part of a larger framework, African-American music critics were also interested in the role that African music might play in forging a broader concept of cultural identity. Their views of Africa and African music were largely influenced by American social currents (particularly race relations) at any given historical moment. In the years immediately after the Civil War, when optimistic attitude towards assimilation prevailed, African-American critics took a cautious approach towards championing African aesthetics. Towards the turn of the nineteenth century, as it became obvious that Reconstruction would fail as a social experiment, African-American intellectuals began to turn towards Africa as a source of cultural materials and racial pride; they began to seek alternative musical tributaries to those of the Western tradition. By the 1920s, in light of both the populist movements led by Marcus Garvey and the intellectual movement of the Harlem Renaissance, African cultural values began to become known to almost all socio-economic levels of African-American society, and African-American critics began to unilaterally acknowledge the influence of African musical traditions on African-American musical cultures.

Although African-American music critics began to write about African music only after the Civil War had ended, white American critics had already begun to explore this topic. These critics were already concerned with issues that would become common subjects in the writings of the African-American critics, namely the identification of genres of music that could be convincingly described as "American" and the establishment of a concert music tradition based on American folk idioms. Even at this early date, a few white critics (notably contributors to Dwight's *Journal of Music*) saw nationalist implications in the African-American folk idioms cultivated on the plantation which might offer a solution to both dilemmas. This interest in folk music led William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison to compile *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), perhaps the first collection of African-American folksongs published in the United States. The authors make strong case for African influences on African-American music:

The greater number of the songs which have come into our possession seem to be the natural and original production of a race of remarkable musical capacity and very teachable, which has long been enough associated with the more cultivated race to have become familiar with the mode and spirit of European concert music—often, nevertheless, retaining a direct tinge of their native Africa.[2]

Several concepts emerge from this quotation that would have significant bearing on later African-American critics: the idea of African-American musicians as "natural" performers, the idea of African-American music as an original New World creation, comparisons of African-American music with the European concert tradition, and the influence of African musical traditions on African-American musical genres.

The first African-American author to address these issues in the years immediately following the Civil Wars was James Monroe Trotter (1842-1892). His 1878 study, *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, is largely a study of African-American concert music, with the exception of one chapter on the Fisk Jubilee Singers. In keeping with the rather optimistic outlook regarding assimilation during this period, Trotter avoids any direct discussion of African musical influences on the musical culture of African Americans; and there is little discussion of African-American folk music as well. He does mention the ancient musical culture of Egypt, but his opinion of these instruments is less than favorable; he describes them as "mostly of very rude construction: performance upon them would not now, probably, be tolerated even in circles of the least musical culture."[3] Trotter does mention African musical cultures, alongside a broad narrative of European history, and his advocacy of concert music based on African-American musical tradition, and this mention provides an initial foundation for the subsequent generation of African-American music critics.

At the time Trotter's volume was published, there were no significant composers of concert music from the United States who had employed African or African-American-influenced themes in their compositions. The first significant composer of African descent to explore the nationalist implications of African music was the Afro-English composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912).[4] Only three years old at the time Trotter published his volume, the young Coleridge-Taylor was steeped in the tradition of European composers and had little interest in African or African-American folk songs until he heard a performance of the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1899. After hearing the Fisk Singers, he be-

came intensely interested in the folk music of African-descended peoples, which resulted in works such as *African Suite* (1898) and *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies Transcribed for Piano* (1905).

In the *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies*, Coleridge-Taylor selected seven African melodies (in addition to seventeen melodies from the Americas) as the basis for his solo piano arrangements. In the foreword to this collection, Coleridge-Taylor describes what he perceives as the differences between African-American and African melodies:

There is a great distinction between the African Negro and the American Negro Melodies. The African would seem to be more martial and free in characters, whereas the American are more personal and tender, though notable exceptions to this rule can be found on either side.[5]

In the wake of the interest in African-American music history, its relationship to Africa, and the growing interest in African-American folk music, several collections of African-American folk songs, collected by African-American editors, appeared during the years between the beginning of the twentieth century and World War II. The collectors often directly addressed African musical cultures and asserted this heritage as a crucial component of an African-American musical aesthetic. These collectors were often composers and critics as well, and viewed their collections of African-American folk songs as both a memoir of the plantation experience and a beacon to the future—materials that might interest African-American composers ..

Coleridge-Taylor seems hesitant to engage the particulars of musical aesthetics, and even notes contradictions within the guidelines presented in his preface. He goes on to observe that African music is more satisfactory to cultivated ears than the music of India, China, or Japan, and he found African music particularly appealing because "no alterations had to be made before treating the melodies."

As a composer of African descent, Coleridge-Taylor's arrangements soon became models for African-American music critics. His three visits to America in 1904, 1906 and 1910, along with the earlier residence and advocacy of Czech composer Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904) at the National Conservatory of Music in New York from 1892-5, helped validate these folk idioms for both Euro-American and African-American music critics. Coleridge-Taylor's presence also provided counterpoint to the declining tenor of race relations within the United States, and Coleridge-Taylor himself became absorbed in the nationalist agendas of African-American writers from a number of disciplines.

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As both composer and music critic, Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943) was interested in religious folk music throughout his entire career. In the collection *Religious Folksongs of the Negro as Performed at Hampton Institute* (1927), Dett notes that the transplanting of slaves from Africa to America undoubtedly enhanced the spiritual dimension which would eventually be expressed in music:

That the Negro as a race had, and still has, an outlook on life which is quite his own, and that his songs express moods born of his own peculiar experience and which are quite original with him, may strike many as new. But how otherwise, shall one explain the strong, unwavering note of hope of final recompense, and the assurance of the perfectness of another life to come, unless one is willing to admit that the slave brought with him from Africa a religious inheritance which, far from being... in any way, was strengthened by his American experience?[6]

Dett cites *Slave Songs of the United States* as a source that first puts forth the idea of an "African tinge," with which he seems to agree but does not enthusiastically endorse.

Author, composer, and music critic

James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938) takes a close look at African musical origins in *The Book of Negro Spirituals, Vol. 1* (1925).[7] Edited with his brother John Rosamund, Johnson recognized the revisionist movement taking place at this time with respect to African musical culture, and he is eager to situate music's role in this process. He sees these studies as taking place most directly with respect to Africa painting and sculpture and laments that very little is "yet known about African music."[8]

For Johnson, the basic elements that distinguish African music from European music are quite simple: he believes that European music is constructed around melody, whereas the key component of African music is rhythm.[9] Of the spirituals in the United States, Johnson writes:

Now, the Negro in America had his native musical endowment to begin with; and the Spirituals possess the fundamental characteristics of African music. They have a striking rhythmic quality, and show a marked similarity to African songs in form and intervallic structure. But the Spirituals, upon the base of the primitive rhythms, go a step in advance of African music through a higher melodic and an added harmonic development.[10]

Johnson and the critics in the generations that followed Trotter began to construct a historical lineage that began with African music, proceeded to the African-American folk spiritual, and culminated in the concert spirituals. Although Johnson observed what he believed to be African musical elements in the spiritual, he is aware that the concert spiritual may be equally indebted to European musical traditions.

The last collection of folk songs in this group is John Wesley Work III's *American Negro Songs* (1940).[11] Of the aforementioned collectors of African-American folksongs, it is Work III (1901-67) who best balances ideological and aesthetic concerns, and his comments reveal that he is aware of the most recent research from European, Euro-American, and African American scholars. Published at the beginning of World War II, it is a volume that is a culmination of views on African aesthetics until this point.

Work begins by acknowledging that substantial evidence of African musical influences in African-American music is scant before the 1840s, but since music played such a critical role in African musical life it would be unthinkable that this entire cultural reservoir would be abdicated once the slave reached the shores of the United States.[12] Of the critics mentioned thus far, Work is also the one that takes the most care to point out the regional differences in African music (East, West, and South), but he also observes that conditions experienced by the slaves upon reaching America necessitated a cultural homogeneity, which became the foundation of African American songs: "Complete separation of the Africans from their native land, as well as separation from individuals of the same tribe, and their sudden introduction into an alien culture, brought about an inevitable entry point for African culture in America."[13]

In contrast to previous authors, Work attempts to give equal attention to both sacred and secular genres. Religious music is not the primary focus of his article, as with Dett and Johnson. Writing in the late 1940s, Work's writings reflect the separation from the concert spiritual ideal that permeated African-American concert music during these decades and the beginning of critical discourses that acknowledge the primacy of secular folk genres, such as blues and worksongs, that would become the foundation for jazz and popular music later in the century.

As for musical issues, Work sees three African techniques that have retained their role in African-American musical life: call-and-response, African rhythms, and scales.[14] Of call-and-response, Work notes that the phrases may be of varying lengths and on some occasions the response and the call may be the same. He admits that his is a controversial issue: can such imitation be specifically attributed to African/African-American musical innovations or is imitation a characteristic of music in general? For Work, this goes directly to the differentiation between "imitation" and "reassembling." The recognition that a new system of musical analysis might be required for the study of African and African-American rhythmic schemes is by this time no new issue, and other than acknowledging the complexity of the issue, Work provides no new solutions. As for scales, Work con-

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cedes that Africans discarded scales which he describes as "purely melodic in concept" upon reaching the Americas; he sees the presence of European scales as the "incorporation of free material for a distinctive use."[15]

The recurring theme of Work's writing is that attempting to sort out African musical elements from New World influences is of limited value. He concedes that there is a strong possibility (and most likely inevitability) that the Africans brought traditions of music-making from their native continent. For the scholar of such music, accuracy should be a paramount objective:

Locke provides a thorough discussion of African art in his book Negro Art: Past and Present, also published in 1936. He immediately establishes that Africa is the source of African-American artistic tradition and problematizes descriptions of this art as primitive. He also describes instances where African art has influenced European traditions, especially in ancient times. He sees African art as belonging to two categories, "ritualistic art" and "craft art," which he sees more basic than the Western views of fine art.

The folk song of the American Negro has not experienced the long unhindered growth common to the great body of folk songs of other people. The Negro slave from Africa was introduced into a wholly alien culture and was constantly modifying and being modified by it. In this new environment it is indeed remarkable that the Negro folk song, in such a comparatively short period of development, could retain its unique racial character and become so prolific.[16]

These collections of folk songs, with their discussions of African music, would provide a foundation for discourses of music that took place during the Harlem Renaissance. The intellectuals of the Renaissance championed both folk music and the concert idioms based on folk music, often using African musical aesthetics as a means of validating the nationalist implications of each genre. The two principal musical studies from this period, *The Negro and His Music* by Alain Locke and *Negro Musicians and Their Music* by Maud Cuney-Hare, both published in 1936, provide substantive discussions of the aforementioned genres.[17] Although both studies were written after the pinnacle of the Renaissance, they provide an accurate assessment of critical views of African music and its subsequent influence on African-American musical genres, at this time.

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Locke makes a similar case for the study of African music in *The Negro and his Music*. For contemporary African-American performers, Locke declares that some familiarity with African music is essential:

The Negro musician of the future must study African music, and perhaps African culture generally....Then, too, nearer home are those rich fields of West Indian native music—and a flourishing school of Afro-Cuban and Brazilian composers fully aware of the possibilities of a new Negro music.[20]

Locke saves his most comprehensive evaluation of the significance of African music for the chapter entitled "Futures." While continuing his idea that the mastery of rhythm is an essential step in any legitimate African-American expression, he seeks to contradict previous studies by debunking the myth that African music and dances are always freely improvised. He also believes that the study of African music should be subjected to more regimented modes of inquiry. Of the pervasive influence of African music, Locke writes:

The more we trace back to sources, the more evidence we discover of the wide and distant influence of the gulf-stream of African musical influence. It has followed the dispersion of the African wherever he has gone. The nearer to the source, the deeper and more torrid the idiom.[21]

Locke's discussions in this chapter also evaluate the significance of African musical idioms as possible influences on the future of jazz and concert music. For him, the identification of past tributaries is not only desirable but essential to the continuing proliferation of African-American musical idioms.

Cuney-Hare's approach to African music as presented in *Negro Musicians and Their Music* is again

rooted in the transition from folk song to concert music. In the chapter entitled "African Influences in America," she begins by briefly acknowledging that African-American folk music is a by-product of the assimilation of African music with New World musical influences.[22] But her discussion soon veers off into the direction of African-American music as the basis of a national style of folk music, and she traces the roles of the Fisk Singers, Antonin Dvorak and the African-American composer/arranger of spirituals Harry T. Burleigh in the process.

Like Locke, Cuney-Hare also advocates a more systematic approach to the study of African musics, in keeping with the Harlem Renaissance proclivity for analyzing the cultures of African-descended peoples here in the United States. She provides detailed histories of African instruments, including drums such as the tom-tom and the guiro. She also includes comprehensive reports of African musical students in the United States and performances of African music during this time.[23]

Like the previous authors, Cuney-Hare makes a case for the historical primacy of African music:

Negro music traced to its source, carries us to the continent of Africa and into the early history of that far off land. We may even journey to one of the chief sections said to hoard the music of the past—that of Egypt, for it was the ceremonial music of that land as well as that of Palestine and Greece, which was the foundation of at least one phase of modern musical art. While a continuous recorded history that would so greatly aid in giving knowledge of African art as well as its peculiar type of civilization is not yet complete, we do know that, in spite of the obscurity of the prehistoric period, there existed a great people, as their architectural monuments alone have proved to us.[24]

This statement situates African-American music in this historical lineage of the great musical cultures of the world, and provides a foundation for argument that the world's musical cultures—including that of Western Europe—have origins in the ancient musical cultures of Africa.

The early generations of African-American critics, from Trotter to Cuney-Hare, immediately recognized that African musical cultures provided a crucial, if not always easily definable, role in the proliferation of African-American musical genres. These critics recognized that finding a specific language to describe this musical process was secondary to acknowledging the African musical environment that remained with the slaves as they invented new musical cultures in the United States. Their writings provided early assurance that the music of Africa would be examined as a historical wellspring by future composers and critics of African-American music. **GR**

NOTES

1 James Monroe Trotter, *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (1878; New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968).

2 William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, Lucy McKim Garrison, eds., *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867; reprint: New York: Peter Smith, 1951): viii.

3 Trotter, 25.

4 See also Paul Richards, "Africa in the Music of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, *Africa*, 57 (1987): 568.

5 Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, foreword to *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies Transcribed for Piano* (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1905). The foreword is dated December 17, 1904.

6 Robert Nathaniel Dett, Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute (1927): xiii.

7 James Weldon Johnson, "The Book of Negro Spirituals", Vol. 1 (1925).

8 Johnson, 17.

9 Johnson, 18.

10 Johnson, 19.

11 John Wesley Work III, American Negro Songs (1940).

12 Work, 1.

13 Work, 2.

14 Work: 4, 7-8.

15 Work, 8.

16 Work, 1.

17 Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music*; Maud Cuney-Hare, *Negro Musicians and Their Music.*

18 Alain Locke, *Negro Art: Past and Present:* (Washington, DC: The Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1936); reprint (NY: The Arno Press, 1969).

19 Locke, Negro Art, 96.

20 Locke, Music, 131.

21 Locke, Music, 138.

22 Cuney-Hare, 34-60.

23 See in particular the chapter entitled "Africa in Song," 17-33.

24 Cuney-Hare, 2.