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Black Music Research and Musicology: Some Problems and Solutions Considered.

Introduction

This presentation focuses primarily on the role of black music research in the United States. A short introduction leads directly into a substantial discussion of the history of black music research. Then follows a brief discussion relating to a variety of other issues. For the purpose of discussion, this paper makes an artificial division between two classes of repertoire, namely vernacular (utilitarian) music and cultivated (aesthetic) music. By way of explanation, it would be helpful to regard vernacular (informal) music as all music appreciated for its utilitarian value and cultivated (formal) music as music valued for its edification (i. e. aesthetic or spiritual) impact.¹

Two disclaimers are in order. First, one is not arguing in favor of either the Western European Classical Tradition (WECT) or black music scholarship, but rather for an expanded understanding of both traditions. Second, since many Americanists argue that the singularly important contribution of American music is the contribution of vernacular (informal) genres, research issues in popular culture must be taken seriously.

Leo Treitler, commenting on the uniformity of American musicology of thirty years ago, wrote, "*Clearly there is not now a single historiography for the WECT that is agreed upon by the [...] AMS.*"² *The historiographic paradigm that one could describe some thirty years ago appeared under close analysis of its logic to be quite circular, producing histories with premises that assumed conclusions and conclusions that repeatedly reaffirmed premises.*"

The basis, then, should have been a different premise, Treitler continued, "*And rather than being driven by the force of logic and evidence [...] it appeared rather to model cultural self-images that are immanent in the very idea of a WECT-narration of Europe, of Western culture, of European music. It is history functioning as myth, providing criteria for the representation of music.*"³

Treitler rightly identified a major flaw in an American music scholarship that needed to allow greater growth built on different premises, not cultural self-images based exclusively on Western Europe. Those premises should have been logic and evidence, according to Treitler. At the same time, one has to acknowledge that the wave of cultural studies criticism (during the last thirty years) gave a large impetus to

¹ See H. Wiley Hitchcock: *Music in the United States*, Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1988, p. 54.

² AMS = American Musicological Society.

³ Leo Treitler: *Toward a Desegregated Music Historiography*, in: *Black Music Research Journal* 16 (1996) 1, p. 3.

a new American scholarship that has not been fully embraced in one's search of black music scholarship.

Historical Background of Black Music Scholarship

When Eileen Southern, the expert on the Buxheimer Orgelbuch and currently emerita of Harvard University, wrote her book *The Music of Black Americans* (1971), she brought the painstaking academic rigor of her German Renaissance scholarship to a body of music by an Africa-derived people in the New World. The methodological precision of her German positivist scholarship brought to light the details and facts hidden in archival documents of, let's say, J.W. Postlewaite (1827-1889), a man of slave lineage who had his early compositions published before Emancipation (1865). She brought together in one book the myriad of slave performers who were the unknown fiddlers, singers and instrumentalists of choice at the balls of the day. Southern's meticulous research uncovered archival documentation on national and international concert performers such as Sisieretta Jones (1869-1933) or Thomas Bethune (1849-1909). This book presented primary biographical and bibliographical source material of both historical as well as contemporary black musicians. In this manner, she established the modern scholarly significance of black musicians in the United States.

Southern had used her tools as a musicologist to uncover the neglected scholarly legacy of a musical people that had largely defined the characteristics of what was American about music that had become known the world over as American music. She was not the only writer on this topic, but she was the first modern musicologist to apply her scholarly rigor to the task.

During the 19th century James Monroe Trotter's book, *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (1881) commanded attention for its journalistic insight. Note, for instance, his observation of a performance by the Fisk Jubilee singers performing spirituals:

*"The songs [...] possessed in themselves a peculiar power, a plaintive, emotional beauty, and other characteristics which seemed entirely independent of artistic embellishment. These characteristics were, with a refreshing originality, naturalness, and soulfulness of voice and method, fully developed by the singers, who sang with all their might, yet with most pleasing sweetness of tone."*⁴

Yet, the performing group of refined concert singers, emerging from the slave era, had exhibited the "other murmurings of the black gospel sound" as Floyd called it.⁵ It is the cultural embeddedness of black American musical creativity, blending European elements with those from Africa, that Southern did not explore comprehensively. The frequent use of European-derived structural and harmonic elements, yet with an African-derived content, emerged especially in social dances. The ragtime, for instance, with social dance predecessors such as quadrilles, cotillions, waltzes and

⁴ Trotter 1878, p. 259 quoted in Samuel A. Floyd, Jr.: *The Power of Black Music*, Oxford 1995, p. 61.

⁵ Floyd, p. 64.

polkas, was a manifestation of European harmonic and formal structure as well as black musical rhythmic and melodic elements (such as call and response, for instance).⁶

More recently, scholars such as Samuel Floyd, Marsha Reisser (now Heizer) and Sterling Stuckey, have shown that the African heritage in black music in the USA is deeper and richer than hitherto considered. Floyd has shown that the ring shout, a counterclockwise African-derived dance still practiced in isolated Sea Island communities of coastal Georgia and South Carolina is the prime antecedent of black creative output in the USA.⁷ Quoting Stuckey, Floyd points to the significance of the ring shout and goes on to catalogue the characteristics of black (vernacular) performance practice.

*"The ring shout was the main context in which the [transplanted] Africans recognized values common to them (Stuckey 16) – that is, values of ancestor worship and contact [...] of communication and teaching through storytelling and trickster expressions and various other symbolic devices [...]. In this way, the ring helped preserve the elements that we have come to know as the characterizing and foundational elements of African-American music: calls, cries, and hollers; call-and-response devices; additive rhythms and polyrhythms; heterophony, pendular thirds, blue notes, bent notes, and elisions; hums, moans, grunts, vocables, and other rhythmic-oral declamations, interjections, and punctuations; off-beat melodic phrasings and parallel intervals and chords; constant repetitions of rhythmic and melodic figures and phrases (from which riffs and vamps would be derived); timbral distortions of various kinds; musical individuality within collectivity; game rivalry; hand clapping, foot patting, and approximations thereof, apart-playing; and the metronomic pulse that underlies all African-American music."*⁸

Any combination of one or more of these characteristics could be found in black American performance practice and composition. The importance of the ring shout as the primary source from which black musical practice descends, gives rise to the emergence of music styles and genres of diverse kinds. Floyd puts it this way:

*"From the ring [shout] emerged the shuffling, angular, off-beat, additive, repetitive, intensive, unflagging rhythms of shout and jubilee spirituals, ragtime, and R&B; the less vigorous but equally insistent and characteristic rhythms of 'sorrow songs' and blues; and all the musical genres derived from these and other early forms. All were shaped and defined by black dance, within and without the ring."*⁹

Depending on the findings of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (1988), Floyd concludes that the vernacular tradition informs the formal [cultivated] tradition.¹⁰ This vernacular tradition

⁶ Ragtime, the term, though commonly thought to derive from the concept of "jagged rhythms" is most certainly derived from the dancers' practice of flaunting rags/handkerchiefs – see Floyd 1995, p. 55, 70.

⁷ See Rosenbaum and Buis *Shout Because You're Free!* 1998.

⁸ Floyd, p. 6.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

is strongly influenced by the primal importance of the Yoruba trickster god Esu-Elegbara and its black American manifestation of the Signifying Monkey. Floyd argues for the African-American musical characteristics, largely found in vernacular music in terms of musical signification. He says,

*"African-American music can be examined through the same vernacular tradition, with the rhetorical tropes of verbal provenance replaced with those of its own genesis. In this way, the calls, cries, hollers, riffs, licks, overlapping antiphony, and various rhythmic, melodic, and other musical practices of the ring – since they are used as tropes in musical performances and compositions – can serve as Signifyin(g) figures.... We come to see that jazz improvisations are toasts – metaphoric renditions of the troping and Signifyin(g) strategies of African-American oral toasts... Musical Signifyin(g) is the rhetorical use of preexisting material as a means of demonstrating respect for or poking fun at a musical style, process, or practice through parody, pastiche, implication, indirection, humor, tone play or word play, the illusion of speech or narration, or other troping mechanisms."*¹¹

It is clear that the organic existence between the vernacular and cultivated traditions, styles and genres, afford many written works their unmistakable African-American character. In this manner, the internal use of the above-mentioned elements present in Wynton Marsalis' Pulitzer Prize-winning work *Blood on the Fields* (1997) and Anthony Davis' opera *Amistad* (1997) mark them as works with an African-American imprint. Additionally, in both these works, the plots tie them to black history of the USA. The first composition concerns the slave plantation experience. However, the second, based on the episodes surrounding the slave revolt on board of the ship the *Amistad* goes further and pivots the entire opera around the narrative and effectual power of the trickster-god character. This character, in one sense, plays the role of the narrator reminiscent of the Evangelist in the Passion settings, and in another sense serves as counselor in the destiny of the slaves. These contemporary manifestations of both peculiarly African-derived subject matter, literary critical interpretations and musical characteristics show an ethnically-based production of art music that invigorates the concert life in the United States.

I need to underscore one significant piece of information, returning to Southern's work *The Music of Black Americans*. Unlike traditional musicological histories that treat either art music or vernacular music exclusively, Southern's book treats both cultivated and vernacular types with the same scholarly rigor. Herein lies the key to understanding black music research: black vernacular and cultivated performance, the written score and the CD or LP are primary source material of scholarship. A second key element – already discussed above – is the necessity of the vernacular tradition informing the cultivated tradition; historically, both the dance hall and the church informed the black concert hall tradition.

Though music scholarship has traditionally placed higher value upon the research of concert music, one often wonders if such academic segregation is a tacit admission of an academic unwillingness to bring scholarly rigor to a large body of musical crea-

¹¹ Ibid., p. 8.

tivity. This body of musical creativity emerged from the world's most prominent African diasporic people. If one were to isolate black concert music, university music students in the United States are generally ignorant of the contributions by African-descended musicians of art music throughout history the world over. A few composers of art music who were of African descent include the following: (1) Vicente Lusitano, a sixteenth-century composer and theoretician who was a Portuguese-speaking official at the Vatican; (2) Chevalier de Saint-Georges (c. 1739-1799), and J. J. O. Chevalier de Meude-Monpas, both contemporaries of Mozart; (3) Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912), the Afro-Saxon composer of the late nineteenth century; (4) Clarence Cameron White (1880-1960), the early twentieth-century black composer from Boston; (5) William Grant Still (1895-1978), versatile twentieth-century composer of symphonies, operas, other orchestral works, chamber music, and film scores. A plethora of twentieth-century composers in the United States, Africa, and its diasporic communities exist, as can be verified in the award-winning *International Dictionary of Black Composers* (2 volumes) edited by Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., published by Fitzroy Dearborn in Chicago (1999). The value in presenting Western concert music with its composers of African descent as part of the formal narrative history is the obligation of an enlightened society, not to say scholarship, at the end of the twentieth century. Despite the national prize-winning accomplishments of many African-American composers today, Paul Griffiths, writing in the *New York Times* recently (*Where Are America's Young Composers?* February 28, 1999) failed to mention of any black composers (two recent Pulitzer-prize winners being among them) in a discussion on American music of the twentieth century. Such an oversight might well be a case of genuine ignorance or it might have been a bona fide omission.

When one argues for an inclusive writing of concert music history, with the presence of black composers, one produces three significant by-products. First, one acknowledges the universalizing of Western art music during four centuries of worldwide dissemination between African and European diaspora. Second, one broadens the scholarly sweep of historiographic control, resulting in the democratic dissemination of repertoire. Third, and probably the most significant by-product of an inclusive view of Western music history, is the resultant liberation of the concert music from its perceived stranglehold on the geographical locus of the history of concert music.

It is not surprising that the tension between cultivated and vernacular music, resolved by Floyd as described above, concerned black writers on music since the last century in the United States. Trotter, author of *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (1871), focused on music history beginning with the Greeks and ending with the music of black Americans. "Trotter, an educated black man," says Guthrie Ramsey, Jr., "believed that putting the race's best foot forward meant proving that they could master the Western art music tradition."¹² Contemporaneously, sympathetic white scholars of abolitionist stock published *Slave Songs of the United States* (1867) in order to [find] abolitionist currency in the power of the vernacular spirituals, "to quote

¹² Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.: *Cosmopolitan or Provincial?: Ideology in Early Black Music Historiography, 1867-1940*, in: *Black Music Research Journal* 16/1 (Spring 1996), p. 20.

Ramsey again."¹³ Although the short-lived journal *The Negro Music Journal* (1902-1903) was modeled after *Dwight's Journal of Music*, the former journal aimed at reaching a black readership whom he wanted to become "cultured ... with only the purest and best in music."¹⁴ Already, in the early years (1919) of *The Musical Quarterly* (founded in 1915 with Oscar Sonneck, Music Librarian of Congress, as its first editor) carried several articles on black music, but it was Maud Cuney-Hare's book *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (1936) that addressed black music in the context of the Harlem Renaissance (1917-35). Leaning heavily on Trotter's work, she starts with Africa and speculates whether the relevance of the ceremonial music of Egypt, Palestine and Greece was "the foundation of at least one phase of modern musical art."¹⁵

"Her conservatory training brought her to the conclusion that she grafted onto the ideals of the New Negro (i. e. Harlem Renaissance) rhetoric: racial equality, black cultural nationalism, and American musical nationalism based on black musical idioms."¹⁶ Alain Locke, the leading philosopher of the Harlem Renaissance, (in *The Negro and His Music* 1936) approached the issue differently. He believed that a scientific and scholarly understanding of the African origin would ultimately elevate the black citizens' social standing." (Ramsey 1996, 26) Yet the role of jazz, avoided by Locke and Cuney-Hare, received direct support from Langston Hughes who believed in the legitimacy of jazz as well as blues.

The rise of jazz scholarship – more than 100 articles in the leading American magazines during the period 1917-1929, according to Collier 1988 – held out the hope that through the internationalizing of jazz. Therefore, this indigenous artifact (jazz) would receive elevated scholarly stature, he reasoned. Whether the American music fraternity of the time between the world wars remained what Levine called, "a colonized people attempting to define itself in the shadow of the former imperial power" (Levine 1989, 8-9 quoted in Ramsey 1996, 35), it is clear that Southern's *The Music of Black Americans* (1971, 1983, 1997) and Floyd's *The Power of Black Music* (1995) resolved the scholarly divide between cultivated and vernacular musics of black Americans. The same biases of the scholarly community against vernacular music have been born out to a large degree by the black intelligentsia in America during the last two centuries. The evolutionary model of the turn-of-the-century thinking – regarding Africa as primitive – unwittingly perpetuated the notion of racial inequality and advancement as *a priori* presuppositions of black music scholarship. Indeed, only recently a black American visitor to a notable foreign music institution was told that they did not own any scores by black composers, since they did not deal with improvised music. In the USA, scholars in cultural studies have vigorously pursued scholarship in black vernacular music, nudging music scholars to rise to the challenge.

It might well be that, similar to the drive of jazz scholarship by non-musicologists starting in the second and third decades of this century, scholars outside musicology

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

are the scholars who have prodded musicological investigation into black vernacular music during the last decade. Interestingly, probably the most substantial scholarly treatment of rap to date, for instance, is written by Tricia Rose, an English literature scholar. Frequently, such scholars avoid the musical substance and discuss only the social-cultural context of black music. The proactive contribution of ethnomusicology has always concerned itself with black vernacular music investigations, since the time of anthropological studies at the turn of the century particularly on African music and wherever the African diaspora existed. The contribution of ethnomusicology, previously called musical anthropology, has in the last two decades raised the ante for historical musicologists (systematic musicologists) to address black musics within their historical and methodological domains. Could it be that historical musicologists might find their music-cultural investigations benefiting from social science without sacrificing the principles of good historical musicology? Might we relinquish some grip on musical paleography as a sign of the changing field of research we believe musicologists will be capable of doing in the new millennium?

Having examined the historiographic background to the vernacular/cultivated music issue in black music research, we briefly turn our attention to a few problem areas in the field.

Validation of Vernacular Music and Traditional Analysis:

Recently, the search for analytical examination of vernacular music has gathered momentum. Colleagues, using significant recordings of vernacular performers, let's say Coltrane for instance, have applied Schenkerian analysis to such recorded texts. The analysis comes after transcriptions of the recordings have been made. Works by Charlie Parker, Charles Mingus, Thelonious Monk and especially John Coltrane have been subjects of such investigation.

Reception History and Black Concert Music:

Though the black orchestral concert music tradition extends a little over a century, there is a need for reception history studies to be undertaken in black music research. The initial groundwork of reference sources both biographical and bibliographical has been laid during the past twenty years.¹⁷ Many studies have concentrated on genre, biographical, or bibliographical investigation. One recent example of the application of reception history to a black composer is an unpublished paper on William Grant Still and his eighty-year programming history with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (ca. 1915-1995).¹⁸ Such a longitudinal investigation into the reception history of one composer's work with a particular orchestra also lays bare significant issues of American concert life in the process.

A related and even better example is this year's (1998) Sonneck Society for American Music's prize-winning article *In Search of Will Vodery* by Mark Tucker. In this article, Tucker's reception-history approach opens a new door in black music re-

¹⁷ In this regard note the reference materials prepared by Southern, Floyd, Reisser and De Lerma.

¹⁸ Johann Buis: *William Grant Still and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO)*, a paper read at Northern Arizona University conference (Summer 1998) „Multicultural Celebration Diversity in Music Conference: A Tribute to William Grant Still and Multi-Ethnic Dance.”

search. He shows convincingly that the jazz arranger's contribution could be "*seminal for the establishment of music arranging as a clearly defined area of scholarship,*" in the words of Floyd.¹⁹

Referencing Stereotypical Compositional Elements:

Since orchestras in the USA see their numbers dwindling and resultantly, they have to "explore diverse audiences" to make such organizations financially more viable, the programming of music by black composers has been co-opted for the purpose. For instance, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Neemi Yärvy, Music Director of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, has an annual Unisys Composer-in-Residence program, aimed at exposing the public to a festival of black composers' music. St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, Hans Vonk, Music Director, has taken a different approach. This orchestra took over a predominantly black community school and instituted a tutoring program in which orchestra members participate.

Whenever black audiences are sought to fill orchestra halls, the unspoken expectation sometimes among both the general public and orchestra management is that the composition by black composers would contain stereotypical elements with which black audience members could identify. The highpoint of such an undertaking was the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's (CSO) concert performances and CD recording of African Portraits by the unknown black composer, Hannibal Peterson (Lukembe?), conducted by Music Director, Daniel Barenboim. This piece, using a symphony orchestra, a kora-playing African griot, bluesman, gospel choir, and other performers had filled the hall to capacity in Chicago and Detroit, before then. Though this undertaking brought many people into the concert hall for the performances, the numbers did not translate into regular concert-goers. This current subscription season (1998-99), the CSO has scheduled two works by black composers in which no stereotypical references are evident. This mature programming strategy captures the understanding that all compositions must stand on their own merit, and stereotypical elements only could not give an orchestral composition the integrity it needs.

Fluid Disciplinary Boundaries in Black Music Research:

It has become clear to many researchers in black music research that the conventional analyses (be they Schenkerian or any other method) address virtually nothing about the cultural, artistic and contextual milieu from which such works spring. For this reason, the Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College Chicago, the only research facility of its kind worldwide, has brought together national and international scholars over the past decade to develop a comparative research strategy that aims at greater analytical depth and breadth than conventional research approaches. Interart inquiry, the name of the process, aims to take two or more works of art (one being a musical work) and lay bare through comparative analysis underlying elements of black expressive culture. Rather than invent a new analytical lexicon for the static and dynamic arts, interart inquiry proceeds from an analytical vocabulary that is applied to music, visual arts, theater, literature, dance, film, etc. The provisional list of common-language vocabulary concepts consists of movement, gesture and posture,

¹⁹ Floyd, p. 1.

line, space, color, placement, texture, unity and diversity, narrative. Specialists in one field are forced to examine a musical work plus others in ways that lay bare the analytical essences (in the phenomenological sense of the word) of such works. Resultantly, the aesthetic, disciplinary and cultural elements of musical and other art works are examined in-depth. In the same way that musicologists in black musicology today draw upon both vernacular and cultivated traditions as research materials, so too are they required to step out of the comfort of their traditional musicology training into fields outside their expertise. An aside: most musicologists in the United States researching black music are not of African descent.

African Diasporic Studies and Musicology of Black Music:

When the first slaves landed in the New World during the seventeenth century, they became a significant wave of an African diasporic people contesting a European diaspora who were plantation owners. Since the European diasporic presence has always positioned itself in an asymmetrical power constellation regarding all African diasporic peoples, the ascent of the intellectual and academic domain has therefore marginalized the expressive culture of African derived peoples in the academy. It is clear that the significant work on the commonalities in the diverse African diasporic communities throughout the world and their expressive cultures have only recently come into sharper focus. Much needs to be done.

Conclusion:

It is clear that musicology in the USA has undergone great change during the last thirty years. Certainly one of the most significant of these changes has been the burgeoning research brought about through systematic and rigorous musicological investigation of black music subjects and materials.

It was Leo Treitler who posed the provocative questions: "*How, in practical terms, do we find our way toward a historiography of the WECT that can embrace black music history? Would it be by thinking how to reduce segregation of our publications and other institutions of scholarly transmission and exchange?*"²⁰ Hopefully, in the next century, the field of black music research will not be separate, but an integral part of a broad landscape known as musicology in the USA, if not the world over.

²⁰ Treitler, pp. 9-10.