

PHANTOM GENEALOGY

Sonic Blackness and the American Operatic Timbre

The Saints were supposed to be Spaniards [wrote a *Time* reviewer about *Four Saints in Three Acts*,] but Virgil Thomson had chosen Harlem Negroes because of their diction. White singers, he feared, would act foolish and self-conscious chanting such lines as “Let Lucy Lily Lily Lucy Lucy let Lucy Lucy Lily Lily Lily Lily Lily let Lily Lucy Lucy let Lily. Let Lucy Lily.”

—“Music: Saints in Cellophane,” *Time*, 1934

A great diva with a long career behind her was singing Tosca at the Met in 1961. Her dresser asked her whether she had yet heard Leontyne Price, who had just made her unmatched debut as Leonora in *Il Trovatore*. “Ah, yes,” purred [the diva]. “Price. A lovely voice. But the poor thing is singing the wrong repertory!” The dresser registered surprise. “What repertory,” he asked, “should Price be singing?” The great diva smiled a knowing smile. “Bess,” she purred. “Just Bess.”

—Martin Bernheimer, “Yes, but Are We Really Colour Deaf?,” 1985

On a cloudy January 7, 1955, the golden-red auditorium glowed with expectation. On the dark, gaping stage beyond the proscenium, Marian Anderson took her position as the gypsy sorceress Ulrica in Verdi’s *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Anderson recalls, “The curtain rose . . . and I was there on the stage, mixing the witch’s brew. I trembled, and when the audience applauded and applauded before I could sing a note I felt myself tightening into a knot . . . and things happened to my voice that should not have happened. . . . My emotions were too strong.”¹

FIGURE 2.1 Marian Anderson at the Metropolitan Opera, 1955, as Ulrica in Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*. Reproduced with the permission of the Marian Anderson Collection, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, and CMG Worldwide.com.



The emotional power of this moment is not surprising. At the time of Anderson's debut, the Metropolitan Opera, the largest and most prestigious opera house in the United States, had been exclusively white for its entire seventy-two-year history. Despite her brief 1955 tenure (only eight performances over two seasons) Anderson's hiring was a decisive moment on the path toward desegregating classical music; it was celebrated as a new chapter in American racial relations and policies. As the *New York Times* noted, it would "open doors" for "other Negro singers."² In fact Anderson's triumphant debut was one of many concrete manifestations of incremental improvements for which the civil rights movement—which came to a head the same year, with Rosa Parks's activism and the Montgomery bus boycott—had fought long and hard.

Many of the conditions that Anderson had to overcome to reach this pivotal moment gradually improved for later generations of African American singers. However, while the second half of the twentieth century saw American opera houses decisively integrated, the black performer is still consistently viewed as peculiar. While descriptions of her visual appearance have been toned down over the decades, the timbre of her voice has routinely (if often admiringly) been characterized as "black." Which door (was it really the front door?) had

been opened for Anderson to step through when she was only being engaged to portray the other? Case in point, only a few years later the African American soprano Camilla Williams debuted next door at the New York City Opera in the role of Madame Butterfly, the abandoned Japanese geisha. And what did that mean for subsequent generations of African American classical and opera singers, and for the filters through which they were heard? In which ways did this compromised invitation reflect the politics of the racism under which these singers and their audiences lived? While chapter 1 detailed the process of vocal timbral entrainment, this chapter shows how a given historical-political moment set the agenda for entrainment, casting into relief how figures such as Anderson were limited in artistic opportunities due to structural racism. Moreover I detail how, despite the considerable progress signaled by the Metropolitan Opera's desegregation, the old story about vocal essence is upheld today.

The year 1955 was pivotal in the path the United States took toward becoming a desegregated country. Anderson's January debut and another decisive event in American history, Parks's December arrest, bookended that year. And while the two women had different relationships to the civil rights movement and to their individual roles within it, they both emerged as major figures within the story. Anderson's appearance was the first desegregated performance on the Metropolitan Opera stage, arguably the country's loftiest music venue; Parks's resistance led to desegregating public space. Both milestones offered the promise of a society beyond race. However, in thinking about today's post-civil rights landscape, we see that the country as a whole is still acutely aware of race, acting it out sensorially, through, as we learned in the previous chapter, formal and informal pedagogies—and, more specifically, still hearing it.

A Phantom Genealogy of Timbre

The strong connotation of race associated with celebrated African American opera singers was something that took me greatly by surprise when I began spending substantial time taking voice lessons in the United States (in 1995) and subsequently moved here (in 1999). Listening within a European context, I was familiar with more general timbral brackets such as operatic timbre versus different types of popular music, and various national schools of singing, as discussed in the previous chapter. I also recognized that certain musical genres were culturally connected to particular communities and that members of a given community could hence be easily associated with a musical and timbral style. In moving to the United States from Europe, I nonetheless believed that all singers growing up in this country would come to the operatic musical tradi-

tion and most of its repertoire on an equal footing, as cultural outsiders.³ However, I found that African American opera singers were discussed in a particular way in regard to their relationship to this tradition and repertoire.

Based on the graphic nature of historical and late twentieth-century descriptions of African American classical and operatic voices, I also expand upon the issue of acousmatic listening by attending to the question posed in the introduction: What do we name when we name voice in general, and vocal timbre specifically? I have found that the response given to the acousmatic question is not merely a consideration of the sound at hand. If assessment is not limited to aural components, then, through what associative network are African American singers' vocal timbres assessed?

This question was partly addressed in chapter 1. Some of these networks can be teacher genealogies or national schools of singing.⁴ We also learned that associative listening filters can be informed by singers' visual presentation as it pertains to gender, race or ethnicity, and bodies that are considered normative. In this consideration I am indebted to scholars of avant-garde music, jazz, and literature, such as Fred Moten, who is concerned with the rematerialization of the visual through sound, and the objectification of persons based on how their visual presentation is understood.⁵ Specifically, contextual information concerning the singer seems to be considered differently when comparing so-called normative and nonnormative opera singers. This is also the case when it comes to understanding African American operatic vocal timbre in a historical context. What dynamics are at play in listening to African American vocal timbre? For African American opera singers, in Kimberlé Crenshaw's formulation, what are the "multiple avenues through which racial and gender oppression" are expressed through vocal timbral assessment?⁶ And how do they play a part in listeners' responses to the acousmatic question?

The dynamics of networks constitute the focal point of actor-network theory (ANT). Because mapping the effect and affect of music requires mapping across human and inanimate agents, scholars concerned with analyzing music culture are increasingly drawn to this approach. "Whatever music might be," Benjamin Piekut writes, "it clearly relies on many things that are not music, and therefore we should conceive of it as a set of relations among distinct materials and events that have been translated to work together."⁷ Crossing the domains of people and things, ANT offers one approach to addressing music's human and nonhuman aspects.

In Piekut's consideration of ANT in relation to music scholarship, the potential analytical power of the *network* is often limited to "something . . . thin," which he labels "network 1." This consists of understanding music culture and

mediation by identifying and narrating who is connected and what comes of these connections and actions. Piekut offers a useful schematic example: “Composer A knew violinist B, who travelled to San Francisco and met composer C, a childhood friend of writer D.” However, as Piekut has identified, ANT also holds the promise of greater analytical potential if we invoke network 2, which “encompasses all the labours necessary to make network 1 actually work: things such as state regulatory agencies, maintenance equipment, corporate barons, international standards bureaus, and so on.”⁸ We may describe these two networks that Piekut identifies as surface dynamics and depth dynamics. Piekut suggests that, without considering the forces at work in network 2 that underpin the movement that takes place on the surface, our understanding of network 1 is superficial.

In the context of vocal timbre, network 1 could describe the genealogy of actors: teachers, vocal coaches, voice students, directors, conductors, and so on. Network 2 would identify actors such as music conservatory policies and regulations like segregation that prohibited African American singers from taking lessons with white teachers or singing in integrated contexts. While the two networks Piekut identifies could theoretically encompass everything, I have identified a third network that is at play when the vocal timbre of African American classical singers is conceptualized. Listeners, the actors in network 3, may also be analyzed within the two other networks, but, under the umbrella of network 3, they are considered specifically in terms of their capacity to listen to and name sounds, including voices and vocal timbres. Through this focus I suggest a particular path—listening to how actors listen and name—to understanding social mediation in music. Specifically, in the case of vocal timbre, conceptions about timbre and timbre itself form a never-ending spiral in which the “regimes of material-semiotic meaning that condition each sounding and make it significant” are at play.⁹

Network 3 points back to our third corrective: voice’s source is not the singer; it is the listener. Here the listener—not only in the form of voice teachers but also of listening audiences—amasses an associative fabric of naturalized musical and cultural genealogy that includes voices described as “husky, musky, smoky, misty,” “[retaining] much . . . original savagery,” and “thrilling with their weight of sorrow.”¹⁰ Thus, connecting the identification of network 3 to my overall framework reveals how the symbolic dimension is re-created in the material—that is, in the seemingly correct response to the acousmatic question.

The key to understanding the dynamic at play around network 3 is realizing that the network that surrounds and is believed to explain a given singer’s vocal timbre (as identified by the listener-actors) is not necessarily based in reality.

However, it is nonetheless acted upon and acted out. That is, listeners apply associative filters whether they are truly associated with the singer or only believed to be so by the listener as he or she prepares to respond to the acousmatic question. Moreover the narrative descriptions of voice and timbre that arise from the application of these filters then enter the realm of discourse, and thus are actors in subsequent assessments of African American opera singers.

I think of network 3 as a *phantom network* or, in the case of vocal timbre in relation to African American singers, more specifically as a *phantom genealogy*.¹¹ Like a phantom limb, together the listeners that make up this network materialize their conceptualization of timbre, even if it is not found in reality or even recognized by the singers involved. And, like a phantom limb—a lost limb that seems to ache but cannot be treated because it does not physically exist—a phantom genealogy's associations and their ramifications are more difficult to debunk, as they are continuously renewed through unexamined listening practice. A phantom network is one with which the person it purports to describe does not identify, nor does he or she identify with the discourse that develops from this network. For example, Anderson was explicit in asserting her identity as an artist rather than a political activist. Yet she was repeatedly framed and heard through a particular interpretive lens: as an African American singer in the context of the civil rights movement. While she understood her own artistry within the context of the operatic vocal tradition, she was often viewed as a natural singer within the genealogy of African American music.

While there are multiple streams of discussion within the humanities and social sciences regarding the question of human and/or nonhuman actors, I would like to forward the notion of a human actor who becomes an actor when naming something: when he or she names African American vocal timbre and offers an explanation for it. Hence, as stated in chapter 1, I believe that to understand the phenomenon of singers' racialized vocal timbre is to understand listening to and identifying that vocal timbre.

By paying close attention to how actors describe the voices and vocal timbres of African American classical singers, and by tracing the associative networks that influenced these descriptions, we can reveal the story of the timbral bracketing of African American classical singers. By considering the phantom network that is activated and acted upon by listeners, I identify the constructed phantom genealogy that is used as a rationale for this timbral bracketing. In short, I show that the timbral traits (real or imagined) often cited as evidence for racial essence arise from listeners' beliefs, not from the voices themselves—and thus, like a phantom limb, both material existence and effect exist only in the imagination. Specifically I posit that at the pivotal moment when Marian An-

derson was invited to sing at the Metropolitan Opera, she was cast and staged in such a way that connected her to the phantom genealogy associated with earlier generations of female African American classical singers who sang during segregation. In other words, the phantom network—network 3—continued to act upon subsequent generations of African American singers.

Listening Filtered through Nonsonorous Aspects

Several opera scholars discuss the visual appearances of African American singers in terms of casting. Rosalyn Story investigates the ambiguous feelings expressed by many African American singers toward George Gershwin's black cast-only opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and its racial typecasting. Lisa Barg describes how the first casting of Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934) relied on preconceptions that tended to exoticize African American performers.¹² And Jason Oby's important bouquet of interviews reveals that it is easier for African Americans to succeed as baritones or basses because the roles written for these vocal types are typically villains.¹³ George Shirley has also addressed the ways in which African American male opera singers with baritone and, especially, bass voices tend to have more successful careers than tenors.¹⁴ The particular obstacles for African American tenors relate to the operatic tradition of assigning set character types to set *fachs*, akin to typecasting. Typically, villainous roles are composed for basses and sometimes baritones, while the hero and romantic lead characters are written for tenors. Therefore the careers of tenors like Shirley are at a double disadvantage due to the typecasting of their voice type. First, there is resistance toward casting African American tenors as romantic leads, and second, there is resistance to creating what would, in most instances, result in interracial romances portrayed on stage, as a major production would most likely not fill both feature roles with African Americans. And third, as Naomi André has noted, the black operatic protagonist as antihero can be found from *Otello* to *Johnny and Porgy*.¹⁵

There are both overlaps and differences in how the intersections of race and gender play out for female and male African American opera singers. The way female character types are written for vocal types, with the heroine set for the soprano, while mothers, servants, and villainous figures are set in lower voices or in extreme vocal ranges, parallels that of the relationship between male character type and pitch range. Notably some characters who are othered in terms of race and ethnicity are set for soprano, and, as we've seen, those roles often serve as an entry point or limited casting opportunity for opera singers of color. Thus while African American female singers share roles of others, villains, and tragic

characters, Farah Jasmine Griffin has shown that African American women's vocality serves an additional role: they are called upon to heal the country. Anderson is used to fulfill the latter function.

However, while much research exists on racialized language perception and casting, there has been no thorough investigation of the oddly discerning listening practice that so readily identifies certain classical voices as "black" and specifically locates blackness in timbre—the aspect of the voice that remains essentialized.¹⁶

The identification of a person who has mastered Western classical vocal production and repertoire as black requires a very different conceptual process than does the identification of a popular-music singer as a member of a racial category.¹⁷ In popular and vernacular music genres—say, blues or country—vernacular languages and pronunciation styles signal performers' social distinctions.¹⁸ In other words, contextual or linguistic information is available in popular music genres that enables listeners to position the singer. The resultant identifications are not primarily about race *per se*; they involve, for instance, geographic and social locations, which often coincide with racial divisions. Therefore what might mistakenly be understood as vocal distinction due to race could be a correct identification of difference, but misguided in its assumption about the cause of this difference.

In contrast, when people make statements about race in relation to operatic timbre, this misunderstanding cannot be explained as a misguided statement about geographic or social location. While the singers' native languages and dialects may influence their pronunciation, there are a number of reasons why this cannot be the cause of perceived differences associated with the singers discussed in this chapter. First, all native speakers of American English come to the core repertoire of opera (Italian, German, and French) with a foreign accent. Thus if native language and dialect were the causes of the differences that are identified, all American singers would be flagged as outsiders. Second, while accents are difficult to overcome, diction in core operatic languages is a foundational aspect of training for singers who aspire to professional careers. Singers who do not gain an extremely high level of proficiency in this area are weeded out and thus do not fall within the scope of our discussion. Third, in general the aesthetic of operatic timbre rides such a narrow line that any voice that falls even slightly outside it would simply not be considered a legitimate operatic voice.

In addition, not only does classical repertoire feature narrowly defined conventions of pronunciation, timbre, and stylistic range determined by a work's historical period, geography, and composer, but the notated compositions also

dictate fixed pitches and durations for syllables and pauses, which therefore must be produced in the same way by each singer.¹⁹ Unlike in popular music genres, where individual style is encouraged, taking liberties with pronunciation is not rewarded in the classical vocal world.

It is not an exaggeration to say that adherence to these established aesthetic, technical, and stylistic conventions defines the classical singer and that instruction in these conventions results in the characteristic vocal timbre recognized as a “classical voice.”²⁰ A singer without these vocal qualities is simply not considered a classical singer by the opera community. Hence my question: Given that American classical singers are trained in a (European) musical culture that is equally secondary to all of them, and given classical music’s minimal indulgence of individual style, what singles out African American classical singers as nonetheless inhabiting a particularly “black” voice?

If we believe that the black body is intrinsically different from the white body, that the voice communicates unmediated essence, and that, even when emitting a timbre recognized as classical, the resonance of a singer’s black body is evident, the “black voice” is not an unthinkable idea. We can see the reasoning that seeks to explain it along these lines. For example, reactions to recorded reproductions of the black voice frame it as distinct: “Negroes [record] better than white singers, because their voices have a certain sharpness or harshness about them that a white man has not,” the trade paper *Phonogram* reported in 1891.²¹ This notion of a fundamental physiological difference was clearly expressed in a 1903 *Washington Post* article: “There is a peculiar vibrating quality in the negro voice, due, perhaps, to a peculiar arrangement of the vocal chords [*sic*], which is not found in the white race.”²² However, research on vocal morphology concludes that there are no more similarities within a so-called racial group than there are differences between groups.²³ Therefore the distinction must lie beyond the sound itself, in a phantom genealogy that is often activated by nonsonorous cues.

A Phantom Genealogy of Early African American Classical Singers

In order to better understand the listening context within which Anderson’s Metropolitan Opera debut took place, we must move back in time from this performance. I first call to mind earlier performance contexts that laid the foundations for the association of black voices with certain repertoires. African American singers performed classical music in the same spaces and on the same programs with the minstrel repertoire, burlesque shows, and spirituals;

thus perceptions of classical performances by African Americans became inextricably linked to these genres. Second, I engage Jon Cruz's work on how abolitionists listened to slave song, examining his notion of *ethnosympathy* to understand how provisional subjectivity was granted to slaves and what this meant to how they and subsequent African Americans were heard. Third, I revisit two American operas from the early twentieth century, *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *Porgy and Bess*, which formally reenacted prevalent white views of African American identity and performance skills. Having unpacked the cultural baggage at play in the years leading up to the pregnant moment recalled at the opening of this chapter, I return to Anderson's story. Finally, in light of the surge of African American operatic divas who entered the scene during the 1960s and 1970s, I look closely at the frayed edges and visible seams of the integrated stage. Many centuries of racial politics that were activated by listeners in the 1960s and 1970s are similarly activated today. Thus, for contemporary operatic artists such as Ryan Speedo Green, the phantom genealogy of race is acutely present and, like a phantom limb, is famously challenging to negotiate.²⁴

In the nineteenth century Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (1820s–1876) and Matilda Sissieretta Jones (1869–1933) were among the first African American singers to perform classical repertoire for large interracial audiences, winning national and international acclaim (see figures 2.2 and 2.3).²⁵ Their performance practices and reception by audiences—where listeners based their opinions on related artists' work and on the work of white artists in blackface—have influenced the later reception of African American classical singers.²⁶

Greenfield, a freed slave, was largely an autodidact, as no voice teacher during her era would have staked his or her reputation on a black singer. A generation later, improved race relations enabled Jones to train. But beyond this, Jones's and Greenfield's experiences bore similarities, many based in hardship resulting from the racial climate and white audiences' limited perceptual frameworks. Both singers had to either perform in segregated venues, with black audience members relegated to separate balconies, or sing for all-white gatherings. The dissonance felt by many members of the public when confronted with the unfamiliar sight and sound of a black person singing classical music was too much to overcome. On the one hand, the solution for which many reached, it seems, was to categorize these performances as minstrel shows rather than artistic experiences, attempting to deny that African American voices were suitable for classical music qua classical music. On the other hand, the connection audiences made between opera and minstrel show can also be seen in one of the nicknames by which minstrelsy was known during Reconstruction: "black opera."²⁷



FIGURE 2.2 Poster for Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield's 1853 performance at the Birmingham, United Kingdom, Town Hall. Birmingham Archives and Heritage, Local Studies and History: LF 55.4 _F2 (8/351). Reproduced with the permission of the Library of Birmingham.

For audiences of the day, the sight of a white usher accompanying Greenfield to the stage was so jarring that, judging by their reactions, the viewers might have been watching a “carnival freak show.”²⁸ In 1854 the *New York Herald* described one escort who “seemed afraid to touch her with even the tips of his white kids, and kept [the performer] at a respectable distance, as if she were a sort of biped hippopotamus. The audience laughed at the attitude of the gentleman usher and still applauded with all their might,” treating the performance as a “super minstrel show.”²⁹

The public's interest in Greenfield's and Jones's physical appearance is clear from their sobriquets. Greenfield performed under the name “the Black Swan,” most likely a reference to her Scandinavian vocal contemporary Jenny Lind, endearingly called “the Swedish Nightingale.” Jones was dubbed “Black Patti,” a play on the name of a contemporary Italian diva, Adelina Patti. Both nicknames imply that the American women were their namesakes' lesser counterparts.

FIGURE 2.3 Matilda Sissieretta Jones poster: “The Black Patti, Mme. M. Sissieretta Jones: The Greatest Singer of Her Race.” New York: Metropolitan Printing Co., 1899. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, LCUSZC4-5164.



In addition to these caricatured and derogatory comparisons to renowned opera singers, music critics also applied racial epithets to Greenfield’s and Jones’s physical appearance, overlooking their musical abilities, including instrumental proficiency.³⁰ The *Cincinnati Enquirer* called Greenfield the “African Crow”; the *Detroit Daily Advertiser* described her as a “woolly headed, flat nose[d] negro woman, and no one would suppose there was any more enchantment . . . in her than a side of leather.” Some critics were aware of their racist biases. An Ohio journalist wrote, “We know the natural prejudice that we all have against [Greenfield’s] color . . . and it is very difficult to divest one’s self entirely of them and criticize fairly and justly in such a case.” In the same spirit, another critic reported, “Upon the suggestion of another . . . we listened to her without looking toward her during the entire performance of ‘The Last Rose of Summer’ and were at once satisfactorily convinced that her voice is capable of producing sounds right sweet.”³¹ Elsewhere Greenfield’s voice was lauded for

its “naturalness,” as though it were somehow primal, primitive, untouched by cultivation.³² Despite such self-awareness on behalf of a few reporters, when Jones was presented to the public a generation later, the singer’s physique continued to fascinate white audiences. Jones’s attributes were logged with the most embarrassing details. “Her teeth,” a journalist reported, “would be the envy of her fairer sisters and the despair of dentistry. Her rather thin lips are fond of exposing heir [*sic*] even row of teeth.”³³ Knowingly or otherwise, these journalists acknowledged that historical-cultural lenses influenced how they heard Greenfield’s and Jones’s voices.

Although audiences shamefully deprecated Greenfield’s and Jones’s visual appearance, critics could not help but be in awe of their voices. Nevertheless, much like participants in a linguistic experiment in which listeners’ perceptions of a recorded voice were deeply affected by visual cues, audiences’ limited exposure to the sounds of black classical singers—via performance genres and repertoire predicated on stereotypical and derogatory depictions—caused them to project their expectations of blackness onto those performers’ operatic vocal timbres.³⁴ Again, through network 3, listeners connected African American *voices*, while the timbral phantom genealogy was based on the singers’ appearance.

Greenfield’s voice rivaled that of her contemporary, the world-renowned Lind, reaching to an E6. Unlike Lind, Greenfield also reached a G2 in the bass clef. In 1852 the *Toronto Globe* not only rhapsodized about “the amazing power of [Greenfield’s] voice, the flexibility and the ease of execution,” but also reported that the “higher passages were given with clearness and fullness, indicating a soprano of great power.”³⁵ Although Jones was intermittently criticized for her lack of training, she was also reputed to have “great range,” “power,” “sweetness and smoothness” of tone, and “distinct enunciation,” with compliments for the “ease and naturalness with which she handled the voice.”³⁶ Such praise points to her excellence as a classical singer, but she was nonetheless framed as a *black* singer.

Both Greenfield and Jones performed in a wide range of genres. Although Greenfield was noted for her performances of Handel, Bellini, and Donizetti, audiences frequently requested such songs as Steven Foster’s “Old Folks at Home.” Jones also offered a collection of favorites from the operatic repertoire—arias from *Robert le Diable*, *L’Africaine*, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, and more—mixed with popular ballads such as “Home Sweet Home” and “Swanee River.” She also sang a “stammering” song, “Wait ’til the Clouds Roll By,” and an early “coon song,” Paul Allen’s 1883 hit “A New Coon in Town.”³⁷ Even though minstrel vocal style was timbrally close to bel canto style, and for the most part was

given voice by white performers,³⁸ Greenfield's and Jones's repertoire lists conformed to white audiences' expectations of black voices.

In the nineteenth century the classical repertoire seemed an anomalous choice for black singers. Audiences' expectations posed perennial challenges to Greenfield's and Jones's obvious desire to be taken seriously as artists while also having to consider the reality of earning a living. An overbalance of classical music seemed inappropriate for, and probably unmarketable to, the burlesque venues in which African American artists were typically able to perform. Although during Jones's lifetime the African American baritone Theodore Drury headed a black opera company (with which she did not perform), there were hardly any opportunities open to black singers in the world of art music.³⁹ As John Graziano points out, few companies were willing to pay black artists enough to make a living.⁴⁰ Prohibited from major performance outlets, African American singers were primarily relegated to minstrel songs, popular songs, and spirituals.

In Jones's case, difficulties in finding sufficient opportunities and willing coworkers to sustain an operatic career forced her to reevaluate the direction of her line of work. In 1896 she rejoined the minstrel circuit after a hiatus as the lead singer of Black Patti's Troubadours.⁴¹ The Troubadours offered a rousing and popular "Operatic Kaleidoscope" that included scenes from such operas as *Carmen*, *Faust*, *Il Trovatore*, *La Bohème*, and *Rigoletto* while conforming to the minstrel show format. Although she appreciated the Troubadours as an outlet for her operatic skill, Jones always preferred concert venues. "There are so many things in vaudeville performance to distract the attention of the audience," she said, "that they are not in a proper frame of mind to enjoy straight singing."⁴² In her own way, Greenfield too was reconfinned to the minstrel show, as she became the inspiration for the minstrel "wench" character Lucy Neal—implying that audiences made little distinction between a blackface performer in an Italian burlesque opera and an African American singer performing classical repertoire.⁴³ Even with superb reviews and calls for listening beyond racial difference, neither Greenfield nor Jones was able to shed the timbral blackness that their audiences heard in response to the acousmatic question, over and above their otherwise celebrated renditions.

In summary, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century white audiences dealt with the shocking phenomenon of black classical singers by re-relegating the singers to stereotypical black roles. Even when they were included in classical performances, these singers' vocal abilities and timbres were impossible for white audiences to assess independently of visual and other contextual infor-

mation. Visual blackness was projected onto auditory timbre, resulting in the perception of sonic blackness.

Atop this identification of African American classical singers' timbral otherness lay an even more complex historical listening practice: the particular way black voices first gained a listening public as part of the shift from being regarded as subhuman, and thus justifiably enslaved, to subjects worthy of consideration as sentient human beings. Both of these strains contributed to the networks activated by those who listened to Marian Anderson on the Metropolitan stage and to her subsequent colleagues.

A Dimension of the Phantom Genealogy Created by Early Abolitionists

In 1845 Frederick Douglass—emancipated slave, author of the first well-known ex-slave autobiography, and one of the foremost leaders of the abolitionist movement—asked his readers to pause and listen to the songs of the slaves. In their “songs of sorrow” a listener would hear “tales of woe,” for “every tone was a testimony against slavery.”⁴⁴ Douglass's audience did listen, and by the end of the Civil War voices and melodies once considered noise were heard as song and were used by abolitionists as symbolic weapons against slavery. The sociologist Jon Cruz describes this as a “new mode of hearing,” possible only under the assumption that slaves possessed an inner life. Cruz terms this mode of reception *ethnosympathy*: a humanitarian pursuit of classifiable subjects. In this perceptual mode, the spiritual was recognized as a clear cultural expression, the form preferred for blacks by “white moral and cultural entrepreneurs.” The ability of whites to hear the cries to God embedded in spirituals indicated a mature cultural interpretation of a vocal culture that, until then, had been impenetrable.⁴⁵

Such unprecedented interest in slaves' songs constituted a break from the previous perceptual framework that classified black song as alien noise. The combination of white efforts to convert slaves to Christianity (under the assumption that blacks, like whites, were created and loved by God) and whites' growing appreciation of slaves' religious songs gradually “granted [slaves] a new subjectivity” within white discourse. It also functioned as a vehicle for sympathetic whites, particularly abolitionists, to further imagine slaves as culturally expressive subjects. “Cultural authenticity,” Cruz writes, “was the key to subject authenticity.” In other words, evidence that slaves were capable not only of worship but also of cultural exchange was taken as proof that they possessed agency

and emotion—that they were human subjects, not mechanisms or animals. Hearing enslaved voices with ethnosympathetic ears allowed listeners to discover an “underlying authenticity of subjects through their cultural practices,” a perception arguably carried over into conceptions about African Americans singing classical music.⁴⁶ Possibly ethnosympathy underlies audiences’ prevailing preference for spirituals paired with classical repertoire, as well as discourse that attributes the emotional capital present in interpretations of classical music to a natural aptitude for spirituals.

In the changing perception of the slave voice, from noisy and incomprehensible to lamenting and expressive, voices become metonyms of skin and hair, often referred to by placeholder terms indicating exceptional emotional expressivity. When the Fisk Jubilee Singers introduced spirituals to the concert circuit in the 1870s, the performers’ vocal presentations were praised as “plaintive and touching,” “thrilling with their weight of sorrow,” and having “an indescribable pathos.”⁴⁷ An anonymous reviewer described the voices as being “so full of character and so full of color, and so little originality is met with these days that their strangeness is agreeable.”⁴⁸ As Julia Chybowski observes, this language echoes that of the abolitionists, especially that of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who sponsored many of Greenfield’s British appearances. Greenfield’s reception in America and Britain would influence that of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. For her British listeners, Greenfield embodied American slave culture. Audiences were “charmed by her perceived musical humanity” and “[Anglo-European] musical achievement.”⁴⁹ A review of Jones echoes both abolitionist accounts of slaves’ voices and reviewers’ sketches of the Fisk Jubilee Singers:

In every note Mrs. Jones sang in her concerts here that one quality was unfailingly present. In the arias, in the ballads comic or sentimental, it was noticeable, and it soon became evident that it was the most individualizing element in the voice, and that no amount of schooling or training could create it. Not that one would desire to have it eradicated. It is the heritage the singer has received from her race, and it alone tells not only of the sorrows of a single life but the cruelly sad story of a whole people. . . . The tones of the negro voice are totally devoid of the humorous quality. The song that is sung may be comic but the voice itself never ceases to be plaintive. This is true of Mrs. Jones, and is it not equally true of every negro singer in every place and under every condition?⁵⁰

In the *Washington Post*’s 1903 consideration of the “Negro voice,” the author made associations between sentiments and language resonating with earlier descriptions of slaves; African Americans, such as Greenfield and Jones, who tried

their luck as concert singers; and later the Fisk Jubilee Singers. In the *Post's* account, the voice is “absolutely unique and indescribable,” with a “remarkable quality” that would be “lessened by cultivation”: “This unique quality arises from a music almost as old as the world, for it has been chanted in the wilds of Africa to the accompaniment of rude drum and punctured reed ever since human beings could articulate. It still retains much of its original savagery, and when sung with the peculiar timbre which is the especial attribute of the negro’s voice it produces an effect which sets the nerves tingling.”⁵¹

Just as the perceptual filter of ethnosympathy changed the way abolitionists heard slaves’ voices, we can see that the modern assumption of sound as stable and knowable leads to readings of blackness as essence rather than as stylistic expertise. Such selective listening offers African Americans a place in this normative cultural space while maintaining their difference. Might the persistent association of black classical singers’ voices with the sound of the spiritual be an updated form of ethnosympathy? And is this ethnosympathy derived from a phantom network that attributes the Fisk Jubilee Singers’ artistry to voices that “[retain] much . . . original savagery” instead of to their daily rehearsals, vision-ary director, and discipline?

The phantom genealogy of operatic timbral blackness arose from several historical and cultural turns. White audiences first perceived the black body in performance as enslaved and subhuman through distorted, derogatory images brought to life by, among other cultural-social forces, minstrel performances. Because of how such imagery colored whites’ perceptions of the first African American classical performers, it was difficult, if not impossible, for those performers to advance their careers without reinforcing stereotypes, as Jones’s return to the minstrel stage attests. Even when black voices won the ethnosympathy of white listeners, their acceptance as subjects was contingent on blacks’ distinctiveness from other members of society.

Along with its complex history, the belief in the existence of timbral blackness has significantly influenced the trajectory of subsequent African American singers’ careers, including Anderson’s, as well as characterizations and vocal writing in original American opera. I suggest that this particular trajectory, which also played a role in how Anderson developed vocally, has proved difficult for subsequent African American singers to escape. It is to that story, and to an exploration of how American opera deals with the idea of blackness, that I now turn, considering the ways in which sentiments about race have been written into the American operatic repertoire and its casting practices. In this inscription we see the phantom network—the association created between African American singers and othered vocal timbre as evidencing essen-

tial difference—as an actor in the formation of American operatic repertoire and practices.

How Phantom Genealogy Filters Racial Sentiments in All-Black Casting

Characterization and vocal writing in early American opera were not far removed from African American performers' burdensome roles in burlesque, vaudeville, and minstrel shows. As such, associations with African American singers built up around burlesque, vaudeville, and minstrel shows were not disengaged from the first castings of African Americans in opera. For example, Thomson's opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, which premiered in 1934 with an all-black cast, is described by Barg as rehearsing "romantic racialist discourse on black sound."⁵² There are a few explanations of Thomson's casting choice in circulation. Carl Van Vechten quoted the composer on tone quality: "[Negro singers] alone possess the dignity and the poise, the lack of self-consciousness that proper interpretation of the opera demands. They have the rich, resonant voices essential to the singing of my music and the clear enunciation required to deliver Gertrude [Stein]'s text."⁵³ In an interview he shared that they had a "more direct and unself-conscious approach to religious fantasy."⁵⁴ Thomson also related that the idea for an all-black cast came to him in 1932–33, after he attended a Harlem performance featuring Jimmy Daniels as host and entertainer. "I turned to Russell [the architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock], realizing the impeccable enunciation of Jimmy's speech-in-song, and said, 'I think I'll have my opera sung by Negroes.' The idea seemed to be a brilliant one; Russell, less impressed, suggested I sleep on it. But next morning I was sure, remembering how proudly the Negroes enunciate and how the whites just hate to move their lips."⁵⁵

Here it seems Thomson was attracted to what he viewed as the "racial qualities" of Daniels's voice. Yet another story relays how he conceived the idea for an all-black cast while attending DuBose and Dorothy Heyward's play *Porgy* in Princeton.⁵⁶ Whichever inspirational moment came first, these tales convey Thomson's fascination with the black voice and body, his recognition of and pleasure in the "grain" of the black voice.⁵⁷ But he expressed his approval in patronizingly loud praise that, to Barg, masks a "deeper racial logic, one with considerable historical precedence in cultural commentary about black singing."⁵⁸

The material from which this "racial logic" was bred is also evident in the public discourse surrounding *Four Saints*. After opining that the conceptual

strength of Thomson's opera consisted in its resistance to traditional "reason and logic," one critic observed, "[It] is doubtful if white singers could have given the core, with its strange alternation of comedy and exaltations, the flavor it requires."⁵⁹ Another review found that "the players from Harlem . . . speak their lines without spoofing them, and lend a poignant dignity to even some of the most absurd moments of the text."⁶⁰ W. J. Henderson agreed that the "spell" of the production was "to be found in the natural talent of Negroes for playing seriously like a lot of children." The cast, he wrote, "knelt and rolled their eyes toward stage heaven, genuflected, saint before saint with the deepest gravity, and sang their nonsense syllables with as much faith and devotion as they might have sung, 'It's me, Lord, standin' in the need of prayer.'" He added, "[Ma]ybe it was meant to be a burlesque on 'grand opera.' If so, it is a gorgeous success."⁶¹

One contemporary humorist mocked the opera by writing a parody of a spiritual: "Nobody knows the opera I seen; nobody knows but Gertrude."⁶² Additionally commentators ran with the idea that Gertrude Stein's libretto played with racialized speech. Stein's nonsensical use of the name Lucy does indeed carry references to two minstrel songs, one of which features a Lucy, the ur-wench of minstrelsy.

Let Lucy Lily Lily Lucy Lucy let Lucy Lucy Lily Lily
Lily Lily Lily let Lily Lucy Lucy let Lily. Let Lucy Lily.⁶³

At least two of the most popular songs in minstrel repertoire referred to this stock character. "Miss Lucy Long" was a love song with a twist of humor, while "Miss Lucy Neal" was a sentimental "plantation song" with a tragic ending. And if indeed Greenfield was the inspiration for the character of Lucy Neal, the idea that an early African American singing classical repertoire was perceived as burlesquing opera is also invoked here. Over and over, in the conception and production of *Four Saints in Three Acts* and in the discourse surrounding the opera, we observe a multitude of preconceived tropes of blackness. Tropes of blackness were freely reimaged in the musical references to minstrelsy and the spiritual, the staging of the voice and body, as well as the parodying of black language and pronunciation.

Premiering one year after *Four Saints, Porgy and Bess* stipulated a similar cast. Gershwin's folk opera in three acts (with a libretto by DuBose Heyward and lyrics by Heyward and Ira Gershwin) has been a mixed blessing for African American singers ever since. "Thank God, I never had to sing Bess," the Metropolitan Opera soloist and longtime executive director of the Harlem School of the Arts Betty Allen said. She continued, "I never had to sing Aida. I was really

against the typical casting that had nothing to do with your voice, or your type, but just to do with your dark skin. What's that?"⁶⁴ Allen's sigh indicates relief at avoiding what some African American singers call the "Porgy and Bess curse" and also points to the larger issue of racialized casting in opera.⁶⁵ In 1985, when the Metropolitan Opera mounted a fiftieth-anniversary production of *Porgy and Bess*, the employment rate of African American singers rose to 25 percent, compared with only 2 percent in the 1970–71 opera season. In 1989, when *Porgy and Bess* was not produced, the employment rate dropped to 14 percent.⁶⁶ These statistics show that there is a decent amount of work for African American opera singers only when *Porgy and Bess* is mounted. Regarding the depiction of African Americans in *Porgy*, Edward Said declared, "It is so condescending. These are not real characters. These are folklore characters, harmless in some ways, distant. . . . A natural sense of rhythm; they eat watermelon—all the clichés that go back to Al Jolson."⁶⁷

Overall, while operas such as *Four Saints in Three Acts* and its contemporary *Porgy and Bess* help launch careers and secure work for African American singers, they are double-edged swords, working against efforts to integrate American opera in earnest. These operas reproduce stereotypical ideas about African American culture, music, and voice and oblige African American performers to be molded into "natural" portraits of the stereotypes, which the performers themselves thereby unwillingly reinforce. Since American opera (and not only minstrel, vaudeville, burlesque, or spiritual concert performances) presented African American singers in what may be described as compromising roles, the question becomes whether African Americans *could* be cast and perceived beyond such stereotypes in opera and classical performance.

The phantom genealogy through which African American classical singers were heard was constructed around othered visual traits and caricatured character associations. As we saw with *Four Saints*, connections that were transposed to the realm of opera and cemented there included stereotypes about African Americans: how their enunciation reflected a lack of reason and a childlike attitude to life, that their musical gifts were born of the spiritual tradition, and that they were heavily associated with burlesque and minstrelsy. Anderson—who, as we will see, was subjected to many of the same challenges as Greenfield and Jones—did break through the barrier, appearing on the most important opera stage in the United States. But did this new platform break or retain the association of African American singers with the phantom genealogy?

Listening to Anderson: Which Door Was Opened?

Overlapping twenty-one and twenty-eight years with Greenfield's and Jones's respective life spans, Anderson (1897–1993), the granddaughter of a freed slave, was born into a working-class Philadelphia family. Biographies of her early life tell of a young girl feverishly absorbing music with the help of communities that recognized and supported her talent and dedication.⁶⁸ Her church community, the Union Baptist Church in Philadelphia, embraced and supported her vocal talent, inviting her to sing solos during services. But racism and financial difficulties obstructed her efforts to obtain musical training. Even when the congregation offered to pay for her tuition at a local music school, she was turned away: the school “[didn’t] take colored.”⁶⁹ It proved impossible for Anderson to study with a white teacher who would have had the necessary performing experience and professional connections to offer. Years went by with help from various black teachers and choir directors, but it was not until 1919 that she found her first long-term instructor, one who possessed the competence she deserved. He was the Russian Jewish Philadelphian Giuseppe Boghetti (born Joe Bogash), graduate of the Royal Conservatory in Milan, a mentor with whom Anderson maintained contact throughout her life. With Boghetti she expanded her vocal technique and repertoire and developed the desire to perform opera.⁷⁰

During the initial phase of her career (1915–27) Anderson toured the American South. But growing steadily impatient with the restrictions imposed on black traveling musicians by Jim Crow laws, and with an increasing desire to delve deeply into the German lieder repertoire, she set out in 1927 for London and a year later had her London debut.⁷¹ Despite her recent training with some of the foremost European vocal pedagogues, critics in London were far from impressed. Although her “warm and rich tone” is mentioned by one reporter, others noticed a certain “naive appeal in her readings that compensated for occasional lack of subtlety.” One wrote, “Her voice has the peculiar timbre common to colored vocalists.” Another opined more harshly, “The ‘scoop’ is evidently a racial fault, for it fell into place as the natural thing in some Negro spirituals.”⁷² These journalists questioned her delivery of classical repertoire while noting that what they heard as vocal flaws in that genre seemed to suit her realization of spirituals.

Like American reviewers, London critics typically insisted on a connection between African American timbres and spirituals, questioning any black singer's choice to attempt anything but the latter. Before Anderson, the African American tenor Roland Hayes experienced considerable resistance to his performance of lieder. And years after Anderson's debut the Paris critic Mercer

Cook dryly wrote, regarding a skimpily attended American performance of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, that had it offered a program of spirituals, “the theater would have been packed for months.”⁷³

Vincent Sheean’s reception of Anderson’s performance of spirituals in Salzburg is not unusual and echoes the London critics’ sentiments:

In the last group she sang a spiritual, “They crucified my Lord, and he never said a mumblin’ word.” Hardly anybody in the audience understood English well enough to follow what she was saying, and yet the immense sorrow—something more than the sorrow of a single person—that weighted her tones and lay over her dusky, angular face was enough. At the end of this spiritual there was no applause at all—a silence instinctive, natural and intense, so that you were afraid to breathe. What Anderson had done was something outside the limits of classical or romantic music: she frightened us with the conception, in musical terms of course, but outside the normal limits, of a mighty suffering.⁷⁴

Recalling the “collective sorrow” that reviewers heard in Jones’s voice, Sheean evokes the same sentiment for which abolitionists reached as, for the first time, they grasped the humanity and subjectivity of slaves. But even Sheean’s favorable review insists on the spiritual as the root of African American expressivity. Anderson’s attitude toward repertoire was very open and exploratory. Her repertoire encompassed all of the major arias suitable for her *fach*, including some for soprano.⁷⁵ She went on to develop programs of Finnish, French, German, Italian, Norwegian, Spanish, and Swedish art and folk songs, always ensuring that she would sing something by a national composer in her concerts throughout Europe. When she was invited to sing a recital at the White House, she was asked to sing only spirituals, but, characteristically, she insisted on including a few pieces by Franz Schubert.⁷⁶

Although she was arguably one of the most gifted singers of the twentieth century—of whom Arturo Toscanini said, “What I heard today one is privileged to hear only in a hundred years”—in the public’s mind Anderson’s artistic career was often overshadowed by her assigned role as a “tattered social symbol.”⁷⁷ While her appearance at the 1939 Lincoln Memorial on Easter morning, where she sang for over seventy-five thousand people, including President Franklin Delano and Eleanor Roosevelt, became an iconic moment for the civil rights movement, her symbolic role in the movement ran counter to her own intention to be a classical musician. It is likely that listeners who had also associated blackness with singers such as Greenfield and Jones, had seen the racialized casting of African American singers in *Four Saints*, and had heard Ander-

son within the context of the spiritual were unable to shake such associations when Anderson was finally hired by the most prominent opera company in the United States. By casting her as a gypsy sorceress, the Metropolitan Opera arguably intensified and further propagated this association. Considering the long associative chain invoked when African American singers are heard in terms of race rather than style and technique, which door did this pivotal moment open for Anderson and subsequent African American opera singers?

Racialized Casting

After Anderson's debut at the Metropolitan Opera, a relatively large number of African Americans won operatic roles. Dorothy Maynor, Leontyne Price, Martina Arroyo, Grace Bumbry, and Shirley Verrett triumphantly sang on both American and European stages. However, the majority of the roles they were asked to sing perpetuated the association of their voices with othered, racialized characters, and as much as they were recognized as divas, attitudes toward color always haunted them. For example, critics credited Price's voice with "an unmistakably individual fragrance—husky, musky, smoky, misty (on a bad day foggy!)—and palpitating pagan sexiness. It is not the voice of a good girl."⁷⁸ Like Anderson, Price ultimately lamented, "Whenever there was any copy about me, what I was as an artist, what I had as ability, got shoveled under because all the attention was on racial connotations."⁷⁹ Robert McFerrin Sr., who appeared at the Metropolitan three weeks after Anderson in the role of the Ethiopian king Amonasro, the protagonist's father in Verdi's *Aida*, shared, "I had been [at the Met] for three years and had done only three roles, which averaged out to a role a year." Observing that this rate was much lower than that of comparable white colleagues, he reflected, "I did not want to continue the uncertainty of my future of whether or not I would progress beyond the status of singing the role of a brother or father." Instead, he confessed, "I wanted to sing Wotan or Count di Luna or a romantic lead. I guess this would have created too much controversy. Therefore, I simply chose to resign my position on the Met roster and take my chances in Hollywood."⁸⁰ While these artists were hired alongside whites, their color and its intersectionality with gender (which led to differing problematics for female and male opera singers) was a novelty factor that diverted attention away from their vocal ability. Besides the basic challenges involved in just being hired, the considerable professional strain led artists like McFerrin to leave the opera industry altogether.

We have seen that African American operatic singers had limited performance opportunities. While it would seem that shattering the operatic glass

ceiling would eliminate these obstacles, and while opera companies now offered these singers opportunities beyond characters that parodied black speech and sound, a curious pattern also emerged. The term *typecasting* refers to an actor's strong association with a character he or she has played, with a certain type of character, or with the idea that his or her personal appearance and demeanor lend themselves to a particular kind of role. In regard to female African American opera singers, Rosalyn Story refers to the "maid/slave-girl/gypsy syndrome" as a form of racialized typecasting.⁸¹ As I have shown, the black body in opera has been so consistently associated with certain categories of roles that this association amounts to a typecasting of African Americans in the role of the other: Japanese war bride slowly going insane, enslaved Ethiopian princess, gypsy seductress, the cripple (a liminal figure), and so on. For example, with her 1946 debut at the New York City Opera, Camilla Williams was the first African American woman to receive a contract with a major American opera company. (While she preceded Anderson, Anderson's debut eclipsed hers in symbolic importance.) Williams was hired to sing the title role, a Japanese war bride, in *Madame Butterfly*. One year earlier Robert Todd Duncan became the first African American member of the New York City Opera, signed as the hunchback Tonio in Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*. Price, who might be considered the first African American operatic diva after debuting in the role of St. Cecilia in the premier of Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, went on to sing the role of Bess. However, her versions of the black characters Aida and Cleopatra (the latter role written for her by Samuel Barber) are the interpretations with which her audience came to identify her most strongly. Duncan's assignment as a duplicitous character with physical limitations and Price's regal characters reflect the different ways in which race intersected with gender for female and male African American singers. What Duncan, Price, and most of their African American opera-singing colleagues have shared is the experience of being plugged into the standard repertoire's liminal roles.

As African American singers were integrated into the standard repertoire, their visual appearance underwent debate. This is, of course, noteworthy precisely because the world of opera is, in general, a world of suspended belief. The critic Bernard H. Haggins recounts a 1974 performance of *Don Giovanni* at the Met, describing "Price's superb singing as Donna Anna up to the concluding florid last [*sic*] passages of 'Non mi dir,' which she managed in a sort of vocal shorthand that implied the notes she didn't sing." Haggin continues, "Price presented with her Donna Anna the same obtrusive incongruity as previously with her Leonora in *Il Trovatore* and her Pamina in the *Magic Flute* but not with her Aida. When I look at what is happening on stage my imagination

still cannot accommodate itself to a black in the role of a white.⁸² And, as I have indicated, one white diva imagined Price, despite her celebrated voice, to be appropriate only for the role of Bess. While we know that realism in terms of age and body size is routinely violated in opera, a so-called realistic hue of skin was apparently a crucial point on which many audiences were unable to suspend disbelief.

Although he has sung at major opera houses across the world, one of the most celebrated African American baritones, Simon Estes, has encountered obstacles throughout his career because of the practice of racialized casting. At Bayreuth, Estes sang the title role of the *Flying Dutchman* (1978) with great success, as well as Amfortas in *Parsifal* (1982). However, when Sir Georg Solti and Sir Peter Hall assembled their new *Ring* (1983), Estes's audition for the role of Wotan was rejected. Stephen Fay writes that Hall "might indeed have been troubled by the idea of a black Wotan surrounded by a large family of white singers. . . . He did not object in principle to a black Wotan, as long as there were black singers among his daughters, but he felt that Estes' audition had relieved him of the need to make such a choice." Despite denials by Hall and Solti, who claimed that the decision was based purely on his vocal abilities, Estes publicly claimed that the unfavorable casting decision was racially based.⁸³ The implication is that racial conflicts that, in late twentieth-century culture, were unable to be tackled head-on could be freely discussed under the auspices of vocal aptitude.⁸⁴

For a Glyndebourne Festival production of *Don Giovanni*, Director Sir Peter Hall ignored suggestions that he hire Leona Mitchell for the role of the Spanish aristocrat, Donna Anna. Her presence, he said, would "ruin the realism and social structure which were to form the very heart of the production."⁸⁵ In opera, then, even many insiders seemingly suspend disbelief in all aspects but race. The stories are mythical and fantastical; plots turn on devices such as a man's inability to recognize his wife because she has donned another's clothes; and narrative flow is suspended in time by arias that meditate on a singular feeling over improbably long stretches of time. Yet when it comes to the question of integrated racial hiring, a production calling for demographic "authenticity" is often a key objective. Might directors be wary of the influence of a visually raced body on the way audiences will hear the voices in the production?⁸⁶

While the suspension of disbelief around many aspects of operatic performance—most notably those having to do with the bodies of singers—is an established part of the tradition, critics and audiences have often failed in this imaginative activity when faced with significant incongruities, such as differences in weight and age, between the visual image and the specified character.

However, African American singers' presence on the stage represented a new level of incongruity, one that largely white audiences were less prepared to assimilate. In other words, this new incongruity brought social issues outside of opera into play, while previous incongruities had not. Mitchell responded, "You'd think people wouldn't even consider all that any more. They just shouldn't be saying that somebody doesn't look the part when certain singers are 350 pounds fat. Now are they gonna play a nice young Donna Anna?" Cynthia Clarey was turned down for a role when a director claimed he wanted to do an "authentic" production of a particular opera. "If the director feels that way, fine," said Clarey. "I don't like it—it's a job that I could have had. But if he really feels that way, I think I'd be a lot happier not doing it." Such subtler forms of discrimination are difficult to pinpoint. "Opera is such a subjective art," said Mitchell, that "they can always hide behind words like 'She's just not my type.'"⁸⁷

In more recent opera journals and reviews there seem to be fewer public conflicts of this nature, but there are also considerably fewer major black opera stars today than there were in the golden age, beginning with Price and continuing through the 1980s.⁸⁸ The latest highly exposed and publicly debated incident of which this author is aware is Hope Briggs's 2007 dismissal from the San Francisco opera.⁸⁹

Racialized casting is yet another materialization of the phantom genealogy, a phenomenon that arises through omission. This omission takes place when performers who appear to be white are cast in most operatic roles, especially as prestigious characters. The phantom genealogy also arises when African Americans are cast in othered roles, not only reflecting the current state of society but also amplifying this type of framing. Network 3 listeners project their listening schema through casting, by naming a given timbre as an appropriate representation of their idea of a particular character. Through the continuous alignment of black bodies with certain characters, a connection between these bodies and these characters is made, not through the voices alone but through consistent association.

Listening through Phantom Genealogy

The listener who assesses voices based on a set of associations that are not connected to the vocal education of the singer in question is an actor within the undulating dynamic that determines perceptions of African American classical voices in the United States. That listener takes part in manifesting and perpetuating a particular image of African American classical singers, an image that,

in turn, shapes how other African American singers are understood. Hence, through an activated phantom genealogy, listeners understand vocal performance as race instead of hard-earned style.

A popular narrative attests that African American singers arrive at a distinctly “black” version of the classical timbre by first working with spirituals. Simon Estes and the celebrated soprano Barbara Hendricks do indeed cite their experience with spirituals as influential in their growth as classical singers. Specifically Hendricks attributes her ability to express suffering in Mozart arias to her embodied understanding of spirituals. In contrast, the first African American Metropolitan Opera coach, Sylvia Lee, hired in 1950, bemoaned African American soprano Martina Arroyo’s attempts at spirituals. Lee claimed that she had never heard such white spirituals in her life.⁹⁰ Lee subsequently coached Arroyo in that repertoire in the same way she coached diction and phrasing in German lieder.⁹¹ Thus while some singers acknowledge spiritual singing (or any other musical genre, for that matter) as an important stage in their artistic development, others not brought up with the spiritual were in fact “illiterate” in the idiom and had to learn it in the same way as any other vocal style—as part of a professional repertoire. Nonetheless the claim that a distinguishable African American operatic vocal timbre is conditioned by singing spirituals is relentless. Based on the studies mentioned earlier, one may suspect that this narrative’s persistence stems from unspoken beliefs about a uniform black culture, as well as the belief that the black body is distinct from the white body and thus possesses a different vocal timbre.⁹² Within such a narrow understanding of the black body and voice, an *either/or* dynamic dominates. Sufficient space to hold *both/and*—a space that can contain different situations simultaneously—is not facilitated. Instead within the *either/or* model, any such richness is interpreted along the lines of deviance or incoherence. That is, black cultural life is not granted complexity and depth.

As Arroyo’s “white-sounding” spirituals demonstrate, the African American vocal apparatus possesses no physical features that would account for the perception of its “black” vocal timbre.⁹³ Nor do socialization and acculturation quite make sense as explanations for lingering dialects or accents vis-à-vis vocal virtuosi who routinely sing in languages of which they are not native speakers. Moreover listeners have been known to misjudge singers’ or actresses’ races—Marilyn Horne as black, Arroyo as white.

While Arroyo grew attuned to the interpretation of the spiritual genre through careful coaching in vocal and musical style, listeners naturalized the performative effect as arising from her blackness. The actor who articulates

the sentiments and ideas that the dominant discourse will perpetuate is the audience member who knows nothing about the beautifully stylized spiritual acquired in a practice room as standard preparation for a scheduled concert. This listener's response to the acousmatic question is related to essentialized notions of vocal timbre. Thus this listener-actor will be moved by the exquisite performance and will attribute its effect to an assumed network or a phantom genealogy.

If, as Piekut explains, action is a kind of translation, listeners' articulation of an association constitutes action.⁹⁴ Through this limited and highly interpretive mode of listening, the hearing and articulation of blackness act upon the narrative through which the voices are subsequently heard. These articulated listenings also act as translators or as particular "responses" to the acousmatic question. In reply to the question *What is this?*, a given listener musters his or her intellectual and associative resources and responds, *I hear a singer whose voice expresses the suffering of all black people through the essential blackness of his or her body*. We know, however, that the answer could instead be *I hear a singer who, through careful coaching by a person who understands the stylistic aspects of this genre, is able to perform this genre with stylistic fidelity and thus express the cultural, affective, and social sentiments from which the music arises*. And as captured by the both/and model, a singer can, of course, sing a spiritual perfectly as the result of absorbing the repertoire and stylistic grammar from cradle to adulthood, but this is also a learned style.

My point is that in each of these scenarios style is learned. But while style is acquired through social and cultural contexts, the learning process remains unacknowledged; it is explained instead as naturalized essential timbre, with a phantom genealogy erected around it, affecting all perceptions. In the alternative scenario, learning is acknowledged, as are the singer's aesthetic, social, and cultural locations. The difference is that, in the latter scenario, cultural heritage is understood as such rather than reduced to racial essence.⁹⁵

In choosing Anderson, years beyond her vocal prime, to break the color barrier, the Metropolitan Opera presented a figure who symbolized quiet perseverance and patience. Listeners could therefore hear Anderson through the "new mode of hearing," *ethnosympathy*.⁹⁶ Although Patricia Turner lauds the Metropolitan Opera director Rudolf Bing for his astuteness in casting Anderson as Ulrica, a role that did not require a young, fresh-sounding voice, it was, to one reporter, a "tardy tribute to [Anderson's] rank and achievement as an artist of international fame."⁹⁷ Moreover the gypsy role reaffirmed the hearing of Anderson's voice as other. Finally, the year—1955—coincided with the decade

in which amateur minstrel performers finally put down their cork and with the Montgomery bus boycott.⁹⁸ I wonder if this role—like Jones’s and Greenfield’s often compromised performance opportunities—led audiences to again connect the voice of Anderson with the sight, and therefore with the sound, of the other, thus confirming the otherness of blackness. Would “the door,” as the *New York Times* dubbed Anderson’s Met debut, open only for those who could credibly be heard through a phantom genealogy that helps to explain and justify listeners as actors by reaffirming timbral blackness in response to the acousmatic question?

Because of the politics of pervasive racism under which opera desegregation was defined, the appearance of the first African American female performer at the Metropolitan Opera failed to disrupt the phantom genealogy. We feel pain in a phantom limb long after the actual limb is gone, but because that limb is no longer connected to the body, traditional treatments cannot be applied. With Anderson’s debut, the segregated state of major American opera stages was cut off, like an amputated limb. It might seem, then, that the problem of inequality had been dealt with, like a body freed from infection with the severing of a limb. But, as with a phantom limb, it has been difficult to pinpoint and treat the persistent pain of the marker of difference. Deep-seated assumptions about difference that listeners projected onto African American voices have affected the way subsequent African American voices—even those lauded by Metropolitan Opera audiences—are heard. African American singers and their audiences are still affected by the impact of the phantom limb, by desegregation as a veneer only. Even Ryan Speedo Green, the 2011 Metropolitan Opera competition winner, has experienced repeated typecasting through requests that he sing “Ol’ Man River.”

Addressing the emotional, economic, and social afflictions that arise through being marked as an outsider in relation to a repertoire or vocal practice is as challenging as prescribing a cure for phantom limb pain, as in each case the cause of the pain is no longer present. To cure phantom pains in an amputated arm, a mirror may allow the amputee to come to grips with the limb’s absence. To cure the pain of being reduced to the sum of a phantom genealogy constructed within a racist history, we may also hold up a mirror. However, since the phantom genealogy is not materialized by the singer, but is instead located within the listener, the mirror should reflect not the singer, but the listener.

The mirror shows this: listeners not only categorize voices but also construct a genealogy around voices that serves to support racial sentiments. Such erroneous historiography contributes to the rationalization of the naming. And the

cure we can apply with the tool the mirror allows is deconstructing such listening. In deconstructing listening, and in devising new listening heuristics, we can attend to the phantom genealogy—the collective conception that voices and difference are essential, stable, and knowable—and enrich and complicate listeners’ responses to the acousmatic question.