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Bias in the Canon: An Exploration into Whitewashing in America's Classical Music and Its Forgotten African-American Past

*Bias in the Canon: An Exploration into Whitewashing in America's Classical Music and Its
Forgotten African-American Past*

Annotated Bibliography

Brown, Gwynne Kuhner. "Whatever Happened to William Dawson's Negro Folk Symphony?"
Journal for the Society for American Music 6, no. 4 (2012): 433-456.

This journal article is a history of William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony*, which was famously premiered in 1934 during the culturally enriching Harlem Renaissance; Brown describes it as the most prestigious and well-received of three symphonies premiered by Black composers during this time period (Florence Price, William Grant Still). The thematic content and programming of the symphony is explained, with its ode to spirituals and African heritage. It also contains important letters, telegrams and critiques about Dawson's symphony that point to its cultural and musical significance in America.

Brown, Rae Linda. "Selected Orchestral Music of Florence B. Price (1888-1953) In the Context of Her Life and Work." PhD diss., Yale University, 1987. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1987.

Brown's dissertation examines the career and works of the first Black American woman composer to achieve national recognition, Florence B. Price, in efforts to lessen the gap of scholarly research present on revolutionary African-American composers. Chapter IV is specifically dedicated to analyzing her *Symphony in E minor*, but also pays homage to the history made by several Black American composers simultaneously (Dawson, Price, and Dvořák's assistant, Harry Burleigh).

Colles, H.C. "Antonin Dvorák. III. In the New World." *The Musical Times* 82, no. 1180 (June 1941): 209-211.

This article written in 1941 explains the story of what brought Antonin Dvořák to America and how facets of African-American music culture influenced his composition of the *New World Symphony*. Analysis of this work distinguishes itself from his other traditionally Bohemian works and compares it with well-known Negro spirituals, predating that of future Black American compositions.

Farrah, Scott. "Signifyin(g): A Semiotic Analysis of Symphonic Works by William Grant Still, William Levi Dawson, and Florence B. Price." PhD diss., The Florida State University, Tallahassee, 2007. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2007.

This dissertation is a perfectly relevant source, as its table of contents is full of important scholarly information on composers Florence Price and William Dawson. Chapter One contains biographies on the aforementioned composers, and Chapters Four and Five are responsible for extensive music analysis of both the *Symphony in E minor* and the *Negro Folk Symphony*. They highlight the favored and authentically black musical characteristics that make these classical works unique, and enable a commentary on what the larger body of the American orchestral repertory might be like had racism had less involvement in the arts in this time period.

Hobbs, Erin. "Rehearing Florence Price: A Closer Look at Her Symphony in E Minor." Masters Thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 2017. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2017.

Hobbs' thesis addresses both the racial and gender discriminatory biases at play when Florence Price was an active composer, explaining the lengths she had to go to to have her

Symphony in E minor published, for example. Musical analysis of the symphony and research into Price's compositional style are present, which is highlighted by musical characteristics indicative of her African-American heritage and appreciation for Negro spirituals. This source contains ideas that go hand in hand with the analyses of Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* present in this bibliography, such as their shared struggle as African-American classical musicians and a symphony premiere that did not advance their careers past hindering racism.

Horowitz, Joseph. "New World Prophecy." *The American Scholar*, September 13, 2019.

<https://theamericanscholar.org/new-world-prophecy/#.XbjoTJNKjox>

This article by Joseph Horowitz was published on news website *The American Scholar* and mentions the historical irony of whiteness in America's classical music, citing examples of African-American musicians who garnered more success abroad in Europe than the U.S., for example. He mentions Dvořák's immense role in fostering a colorful collective of musicians and writers committed to creating musical history with the "New World" folk idiom of African-American influences in America. Horowitz ties William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* and Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* to the debatable fulfillment of Dvořák's "New World prophecy," which may in fact be finally seeing its time, 85 years later.

Huizenga, Tom. "Why Is American Classical Music So White?" *NPR*, September 20, 2019.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2019/09/20/762514169/why-is-american-classical-music-so-white>

This source is both an article and interview with American music historian Joseph Horowitz, which ponders the blatant whiteness of classical music culture in America. This article

explains the undervalue placed upon great works by black composers like William Dawson and Florence Price, as well as George Gershwin, who drew much influence from the African-American vernacular that most American composers resisted to acknowledge. This source makes notable mention of the *New World Symphony*, *Negro Folk Symphony*, and *Porgy and Bess*, which are important musical elements of this research.

Johnson, John Andrew. "William Dawson, 'The New Negro,' and His Folk Idiom," *Black Music Research Journal* 19, no. 1 (Spring, 1999): 43-60. <https://www-jstor.org/du.idm.oclc.org/stable/779273>

This article in the *Black Music Research Journal* seeks to define why works like William Dawson's *Negro Folk Symphony* and Florence Price's *Symphony in E minor* did not make it to the standard orchestral repertory, despite their deservingness and value to that of the American concert stage. Johnson also discusses the "folk idiom" present in much of the aforementioned composers' works during the Harlem Renaissance and its significance to Black and American musical heritage, which largely Eurocentric orchestras in America mostly resisted programming. The author wittily compares that perceived "lowliness" of Negro spirituals to that of the "high art" of traditional classical music.

Keith, Laura Jessena Johnson. "Eileen Southern, 'The Black Perspective in Music': Documentation of Black Music History." PhD diss., University of South Carolina, 2008. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2008.

The aim of this dissertation is to highlight the role that Eileen Southern's journal, *The Black Perspective in Music*, has had on documenting black music history from genre to sociopolitical contexts to music education. Chapter IV, titled "Classical Music/Concert Music" is especially useful in its mentions of scholarly works and analyses under

subheadings like “The Black Composer’s Struggle for Acceptance in the World of Concert Music” and “American Music by Black Composers,” which further many similar ideas put forth by Joseph Horowitz.

Noonan, Ellen. *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America’s Most Famous Opera*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012.

This book begins with a discussion of the different ways in which Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* was received by black commentators in different periods, a stark critique noting that its establishment of a stereotypical black narrative by whites compares it similarly to minstrelsy. However, a noted positive of *Porgy and Bess* is that its insistence on African-American performers gave them a host of professional opportunities to become respected and idolized “classical” musicians in America. Most integral to this research, this book also discusses the desire of both Gershwin and the African-American community to elevate their musical reputation through homage to the Black “folk idiom.”

Sims, Robert L. “Classical Music.” In the *African American Almanac*, edited by Christopher A. Brooks, 11th ed., 1095. Detroit: Gale, 2011. <https://link-gale.com.du.idm.oclc.org/apps/pub/2EIO/GVRL?u=udenver&sid=GVRL>.

This 57-page entry in the *African American Almanac* gives an impressive intersectional history of African-Americans and classical music from Early America until now, including subsections for all composers and conductors (Dawson and Price have entries), all prolific musicians, and information on academic research of African-American music. It also gives an important acknowledgement to the hybridity of music that resulted when African heritage had to forcibly merge with early America’s Christian culture, which ultimately describes the origins of America’s folk music. This source may be used for

important background information on African-American composers and history perhaps better than a general almanac, for its valuable cultural emphasis.

Smarty Pants. Episode 105, “Why Has American Classical Music Ignored Its Black Past?”

Hosted by Sudip Bose. Aired September 12, 2019. acast podcast, 31:17.

<https://play.acast.com/s/smartypants/105whyhasamericanclassicalmusicignoreditsblackro-ots->

This podcast is a discussion between host Sudip Bose and American music historian Joseph Horowitz. In it, they discuss Antonín Dvořák’s coming to America and his pre-1900 *New World Symphony*, which seems to predict the later stylistic tendencies of composers like Gershwin and Joplin and famously borrows from Native and African-American musics—all of which characterize the “Sound of America.” Horowitz discusses Dvořák’s prophecy, which claimed that the “negro melodies” and folk songs of African-American culture would be the future of American Classical Music; however, the outcome of this hope proved to be mostly less than successful, due to the racism embedded in social norms. The significance of Dawson’s *Negro Folk Symphony* and Price’s *Symphony in E minor* during this time period is also discussed, as well as mainstream music historians’ general unwillingness to acknowledge these composers or the idea of “American music” before 1910 (a scrubbing-out of plantation songs and a motherload of Black Music). This source gives a solid historical foundation for the exploration of African-American involvement in American Classical Music, as well as America’s profound influence on Dvořák.