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## **Theremin, Instrument of Paradoxes: A Composer's Journey**

Dalit Warsaw, Brooklyn College, CUNY, and The Juilliard School

I first met theremin virtuoso Clara Rockmore when I was a very young girl, during one of my frequent visits to her sister, the brilliant pianist Nadia Reisenberg. My relationship with Nadia was deeply unique, as she was the first significant musical role model during my development as a pianist, and the first to encourage my budding aspirations as a composer. At eight years old, I was greatly rattled by her passing in 1983 at the age of seventy-eight. Soon after, her younger sister Clara began to assume Nadia's precious and definitive role in my burgeoning life as a creative and performing artist.



*Nadia Reisenberg and Dalit Warsaw, age 7, 1982*

Throughout my childhood and adolescence, Clara was family. She would attend the performances of my latest orchestral music. She was one of the few mentors for whom I would play through a program for a pending piano recital or concerto appearance, as her reactions were always exceedingly intuitive and inspirational. These occasions would typically take place in her old Art Nouveau apartment at the Parc Vendome on West 57th Street, accompanied by elaborate teas that included her sister Newta Sherman's homemade *piroshki*. At other times, they would occur at my childhood home in upstate New York, where Clara always loved to visit during the last stages of autumn to see the leaves. I was eighteen years old when Clara introduced me to the inventor Leon Theremin (born Lev Termen), during his first visit to New York since his abduction by the KGB from his uptown apartment in 1938. That visit included his appearance in Steven M. Martin's excellent documentary *Theremin: An Electronic Odyssey*.

When I first heard Clara play her theremin, I was immediately struck by her incomparable tone that suggested a sonic *mélange* of violin and voice merged with the otherworldly. My natural ability for the instrument led Clara to begin teaching me in 1991, when I was sixteen years old. Bob Moog was invited to study her theremin (custom-built for her by Theremin) so that he could build a replica for me, my Moog 91W model.

Link: Clara Rockmore and Nadia Reisenberg play Achron's *Hebrew Melody*

I will always remember Clara best as she was in those years: though in her eighties she was luminous and immortal, ever stunning, jet black hair always beautifully coiffed, lips painted a vivid red. She kept her nails consistently bright red as well, to enhance the dramatic effect of her

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## Theremin, Instrument of Paradoxes (cont.)

aerial fingering, or “witchcraft,” as she amusedly called it.

The theremin itself is one big paradox. It is an electronic instrument, yet can sound profoundly musical, even human. It is the one instrument which, though electronic, is completely controlled by the person manipulating it. Invented in Russia in 1919 (and also known as the “Termenvox,” ethervox, or etherwave), its wiring includes two radio frequency oscillators, controlled by two metal antennas that respond to the position of the player’s hands: one antenna for frequency (or pitch), the other for amplitude (or volume). While it is the forerunner of so many subsequent technological inventions, from high security alarm systems to the synthesizer, it also remains the electronic instrument most sensitive to human presence, despite the fact that it is played without being touched. Engaging with the theremin is all about controlling the uncontrollable, as the performer is essentially disciplining air. A master performer possesses the capacity to transform an odd, alternately spooky and comical-sounding machine into an instrument that can sing, express, and be poignantly beautiful.

Playing the theremin presents a marvelous challenge, due in part to its imaginary, fluctuating



*Clara Rockmore and Dalit Warshaw, August 1991, in Clara's apartment on West 57th Street in New York City*

aerial fingerboard (for which having absolute pitch is preferable). Also, dynamics and articulations are achieved inversely, as the default state of the instrument—when at rest—is sound, the hand carving away at its negative space much like a sculptor chisels at stone, through interference within the

electromagnetic field. To perform the theremin as the inventor intended was to imprint the human musical capacity and technique onto the non-human: it was to lend soul to a machine.

Upon Clara’s death in 1998, some years before her 90th birthday, I resolved to realize her vision of the theremin’s admittance onto the roster of serious classical instruments, by creating a repertoire of art music that would reveal the hidden yet innate expressive potential of the instrument. My compositions would highlight its potential dramatic and technical facets, aside from more obvious novelty effects such as large multiple-octave glissandi, heavy vibrato, and capacity for dynamic extremes. What I had yet to find out was how intrinsic and crucial the role of the theremin became in my evolution as a composer, putting me back in touch with my creative intuition.

My own existence had always felt dramatically compartmentalized. Aside from having spent years grappling with the after-effects of prodigy-hood (having composed symphonic poems for over twenty-six orchestras throughout the United States and Israel from ages eight to eighteen, including the New York and Israel Philharmonic Orchestras under the direction of Zubin Mehta), I had spent a great portion of my adult life balancing multiple identities seemingly at odds with each other. I experienced frequent shifts in hierarchical importance: as composer, pianist, professor and thereminist. My thereminist identity always embodied the polar opposite of my more analytically-prone academic persona, as I would veer from one extreme to the other. When playing the instrument, one must surrender to a state of complete, visceral intuition, an essential and uninterrupted conversation between ear, body, air, antenna and heart. With my deepening self-revelation as a composer over the years, however, the theremin’s role in my life evolved unexpectedly to serve as a vehicle for traversing these boundaries, as well as the limitations of self-labeling.

It is possible that being a composer today entails far more stylistic self-definition than in the past. This type of aesthetic categorization in the course

## Theremin, Instrument of Paradoxes (cont.)

of discovering one's language—perhaps especially while young—can at times be premature, as commitment to a style brings with it an acceptance and adoption of specific creative and technical constraints. A time of unfettered exploration and “finger-painting” (to borrow a term from another early mentor, the composer/conductor Victoria Bond) can risk becoming unwittingly one of tentative self-consciousness.

As a composition student in the American academic environment of the 1990s, the musical language of my peers and teachers had a prevalently Modernist bent. I developed a deep-seated fear of exhibiting overt emotional expression and harmonic directness of any sort: it was preferable to be obscure, ambiguous, wary of such a chord as the potentially overly-revelatory dominant seventh. I strove to maintain my voice and remain true to the language that bound me in my helplessly passionate relationship with music, while simultaneously second-guessing every note, every harmonic effusion: hiding, blurring, and erasing. Composing became an increasingly painstaking and painful process.

It may not be a coincidence that this increasing distance from my own compositional self was, at least in part, what led me to an increased focus on theremin performance. My unanticipated realization was that the multiple relationships I had with my music (as a composer and performer of two highly contrasting instruments) could symbiotically inform each other, resulting in an ever-deepening comprehension and ability in both one's performing and writing. I have always believed it is important to perpetually self-challenge, to avoid coasting too safely along one's guaranteed strengths, as these self-tests can lead to unexpected truths and answers regarding one's art. There was also an inspired tension in confronting and conquering the unfamiliar. And it was liberating to have an alternate persona.

In times of discouragement or creative constraint, Clara's spirit would provide me with support, in the conviction that one could aspire toward the musical Divine while defying labels. It

provided an unforeseen window through which one could soar beyond such constraints. Knowing that Clara's specter was somehow with me provided strength, permission, and approval, along with the message that there is always an alternate solution “outside the box” (or “beyond the fingerboard,” so to speak). That one could, and should, be bold. The theremin became a blessing, a magical benediction in times of need.

After obtaining my doctorate in 2003, I embarked upon a decade chiefly devoted to professorial pursuits, teaching on the composition faculties of various colleges and conservatories. Ironically, that same period also marked a notable deepening and maturation as both performer and composer for the theremin. I premiered the orchestral parts of composer colleagues, including David Del Tredici's *Dracula* and Derek Bermel's *Elixir*. I performed the American premiere of Andrew Norman's theremin concerto, *Air*. I became the go-to thereminist for the conductor Alan Gilbert whenever he programmed Ives's Fourth Symphony, playing the part with him on four occasions over the course of nine years in New York, Boston, and Stockholm. These renditions were always elaborate, momentous happenings that involved my revising and embellishing the part based on Ives's own indications, in consultation with the composer/engraver Thomas Brodhead, who was then crafting and re-notating the latest critical edition of the score (published by the Charles Ives Society in 2011).

Experiencing Ives's phantasmagorical orchestral textures as a performer, especially in the transcendent and ethereal fourth movement (where the theremin solos reigned), was breathtaking. There were also some adventures: for example, the initial challenge of finding the right space for positioning the theremin onstage within an oversized orchestra. The original choice, to situate the theremin directly in front of the six trumpets and four trombones of Ives's hefty brass section, had not quite worked, as a thereminist needs the space and quiet to locate the opening pitch before playing, akin to a timpanist. Ultimately, the theremin was placed in between the cellists and violists, where my only worry was that their up-bows did not enter my electromagnetic

## Theremin, Instrument of Paradoxes (cont.)

field, affecting the instrument's tuning. There was the occasion in Stockholm when, upon encountering an initially temperamental, unfamiliar theremin, I was confronted with the task of gently earning its trust, much as would a lion tamer. I also have fond memories of the prime dressing rooms I was assigned, adjacent to whichever soloist was featured on the program. I well recall the lively conversations with Garrick Ohlsson in Stockholm (Heavens, those vigorous, commanding scales in thirds with which he would warm up every day!), and with Stephen Hough at the Boston Symphony, who apparently adored the theremin and requested a lesson. On another occasion, there was a hallowed impromptu moment when I found myself alone on the Carnegie Hall stage with my Moog 91W, playing a soulful *Vocalise* of Rachmaninoff to an empty auditorium. (Oh, if Clara could have heard me then!)

My multiple personae at times garnered confusion in terms of how I was perceived, even to myself. Urged to provide a brief autobiographical description, I would often struggle for words: was I a composer-pianist, a composer-professor, a composer-thereminist, or, Heaven forbid!, a



*Recording with Clara Rockmore's theremin, August 2010*

thereminist-who-is-also-a-composer? It became tremendously important to figure how to reconcile the differing aspects of my identity, for a true understanding of myself as an artist. I recorded a CD, *Invocations* (Albany Records, TROY 1238), which featured a broad spectrum of my works for solo cello, piano,

string quartet, voice, and theremin. The latter was featured in *Transformation* accompanied by string quartet, and *Nizk'orah* for two theremins and piano. In *Nizk'orah*, I performed and then overdubbed all parts, playing on two distinctive theremins: Clara Rockmore's instrument can be heard as Theremin I, and Theremin II is played on the Moog 91W, creating a rare dialogue between these two one-of-a-kind theremin siblings. My piano playing, in addition to both theremin parts, paid homage not only to Clara but also to her sister Nadia, her main accompanist during performances and recordings.

Link: *Nizk'orah* for two theremins and piano, composed and performed by Dalit Warshaw

In 2013, I was invited to perform these works as guest composer and thereminist with the San Francisco Symphony as part of their chamber series. The general reaction of players, audience and administration alike was one of enthusiastic surprise. No one had quite anticipated how human and expressively powerful the theremin could be, how it could in fact function as a "serious" instrument, and what an impact it could have on an audience. As Jon Carroll noted in a review appearing on the "Dear Abby" page of the *San Francisco Chronicle* entitled "The Theremin, Key to World Peace":

She played with unassuming grace, and the voice of the theremin mixed nicely with the other instruments. [...] The music was unearthly, more like a violin than anything else but not really like a violin, either. [...] Her right hand looked as though it were picking lint off a tapestry; her left hand looked as though she were petting an otter. [...] This is the kind of concert that 2013 was supposed to have.<sup>1</sup>

It was a real joy to make music on such a deep level with players who truly internalized the language and intent of my music. Moreover, it was a privilege to elevate the theremin to where it could be seriously appreciated for its latent humanity, soul and subtlety, in a concert hall context alongside the likes of Brahms and Martinů.

## Theremin, Instrument of Paradoxes (cont.)

The San Francisco Symphony concert left me with an enhanced technical versatility, enabling me to interpret yet more deeply and freely on the instrument. I was consumed with a new excitement, as the list of prospects now seemed infinite: due to the theremin's unlimited electronic qualities, one could skirt the limitations of human vocal ranges and technique, and thus, even personality or gender! What liberation, to channel my "inner opera singer" as Mimi, Micaela and Serena (of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*), along with more redemptive excerpts from Fauré's *Requiem* and Messiaen's *Feuillets inédits* (written for ondes Martenot and piano, published posthumously in 2001), or even to sing a most convincing *Dichterliebe* as a baritone! I named my Moog 91W theremin "Camille," for its androgyny. I began to perform arias along with my own pre-recorded piano accompanying.

Link: Debussy, "La Chevelure" from *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, theremin and piano performances by Dalit Warshaw, Electroacoustic Music Festival at Brooklyn College

Such explorations as a performer led to further ideas for reconciling the theremin with different kinds of ensembles within my writing, especially through the powers of recording. I revisited an earlier, yet unperformed work of mine, an *a cappella* choral setting of the Hebrew psalm "Al Naharot Bavel" ("By the Waters of Babylon"), composed during the week of 11 September 2001. I then recorded all four voices (SATB) on theremin, playing an "ether-choral ensemble" against myself through overdubbing. I also employed the Electro-Harmonix Talking Machine, a device chiefly used in conjunction with electric guitars in order to expand their timbral palette, adding a vast spectrum of quasi-vocal effects. I premiered the resulting composition, *While in Babylon*, at Joe's Pub, playing the soprano voice live against a pre-recorded mix of the other three voices.

Link: *While in Babylon* for theremin choir, composed and performed by Dalit Warshaw

On a practical level, such projects realized my idea of the "self-sufficient composer" in a way completely unique to my capabilities, and through total adherence to the aesthetic values I demand of myself as a true "complete musician."

Why, I asked myself as a composer, depend solely on other performers, when I could create chamber music myself, via recording and overdubbing? And then, in employing the various timbral and range capacities of the theremin, how might one then integrate one's instincts as an orchestral composer?

It was not lost on me that the theremin helped move my music beyond confines of new music audiences, audiences generally less inclined toward Neo-Romanticism. As my chamber works incorporating theremin into acoustic ensembles were increasingly programmed, I began to notice its power to traverse stylistic isms and worlds, and to reach audiences previously difficult to access. When composing in a tonally-inclined aesthetic, one's language can often be coined as "traditional." That said, add a theremin while writing in the same language, and one's music has morphed into "cutting edge programming." Due to the electronic quirkiness of the instrument, my music and transcriptions were now being programmed in atypical venues: on a predominantly rock-themed concert entitled PRAVDA at Disney Hall, an Experimental/Prog series at Spectrum NYC, and at the Gaudeamus Music Festival, where my Mahleresque *Transformation* was featured on a concert devoted to Russian Futurism! The



Performing with NY Festival of Song, "From Russia to Riverside Drive: Rachmaninoff and Friends" at Merkin Hall, November 2015  
Courtesy of Karli Cadel Photography

## Theremin, Instrument of Paradoxes (cont.)

theremin part, incidentally, was played with great lyrical deftness by classical thereminist Thorwald Jørgensen. In all cases, the music, whether my own or Rachmaninoff's, was heard with different ears, seemingly free of expectation or stylistic prejudice: the sound and visual drama of the theremin performance disarmed all.

Over the years, I have pondered how Clara's presence in my life has impacted me as a musician, artist and person. I realize that, on multiple levels, she had shared with me her innermost spiritual essence, along with the empowering message that the theremin could be a vehicle for conveying the ultimate expression of self. That the theremin is magical in its unforeseen way of assuming and conjuring whatever identity is necessary; that it is a chameleon, able to assume the roles of other instruments, while also defying and exceeding the very limitations of those it mirrors. The theremin may even be an allegory for how I have always approached the orchestral medium as a composer. When performing, I take on the challenge of imprinting a soul onto the electronic. Through my orchestral writing, I aim to create, via an organism of eighty-five instrumentalists playing individual parts, an emotive, breathing, deeply poetic, unified whole, akin to pixels merging to create a touchingly beautiful, if digital, photograph.

While I had featured the theremin in works for instrumental ensembles of varying sizes and varieties for years, my ultimate objective—yet another way to reconcile my various relationships to music—was to compose a concerto for theremin and orchestra that would feature its timbral versatility and capability to blend within, and solo above, the ensemble. I devoted my Guggenheim Fellowship year in 2016 to this venture, composing *Sirens*, a concerto for theremin and orchestra. Its first movement, entitled "Clara's Violin," highlights Clara's deep and early relationship with her violin, from her early years as the youngest pupil of Leopold Auer in St. Petersburg, where she studied alongside Jascha Heifetz and Nathan Milstein, before an injury to her bow arm compelled her to abandon a promising career, and to sublimate her violinistic spirit into her theremin playing. The

piece also depicts Clara's own personal and musical story, the narrative created through an interaction of leitmotifs derived from pitch sets of the names of the characters and their instruments. In addition to the leitmotif for Clara Rockmore, included are the inventor (and her suitor) Lev Termen, her sister Nadia (invoked, alongside another leitmotif derived from the word "piano," in the lilting evocations of pianistic Romanticism), her violin, her theremin (the basis of a "Thera-fugue" in the last movement, entitled "Fugal Horn"), even the KGB. At the concerto's climax, a large crescendo leads to a dramatic standoff between theremin and orchestra, as the two entities parry back and forth in histrionic, widely spanned glissandi. They finally join forces as a "meta-theremin," the ultimate integration.

*Sirens* will receive its world premiere by the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, conducted by Gil Rose, on 4 October 2019, followed with the New York premiere by the Albany Symphony on 9 November, conducted by David Alan Miller. As it happens, these performances will occur during the centennial of the theremin's invention in 1919. The concerto was composed for the brilliant thereminist Carolina Eyck, whose astounding technical capacity and deep musicianship with this piece has been a joy to experience thus far. *Sirens* is dedicated in memoriam to my dear former mentor Clara Rockmore.

### Notes

1. Jon Carroll, "The Theremin, Key to World Peace," *SFGate*, 25 June 2013.

# Eugenics and Musical Talent: Exploring Carl Seashore's Work on Talent Testing and Performance

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In the late 19th century, psychologists became interested in understanding the nature of “ability” or “talent” through quantitative testing. This was generally motivated by a desire to bring scientific objectivity to the realm of aesthetics, explicitly or not to substantiate claims for the superiority of certain musical traditions. One significant figure in this area was Carl Seashore at the University of Iowa. His seemingly objective approach to studying individual’s musical abilities through a battery of psychological tests on apparently objective musical components (e.g., pitch, loudness, rhythm, and timbre) was in fact influenced by a range of cultural biases about music that were borne of his belief in eugenics. Through his battery of tests, known as the Seashore Measures of Musical Talent, he was promoting a theory of musical talent deeply rooted in European classical music culture. Seashore applied the tests as “objective” measures to a range of non-white populations in order to draw conclusions about the relative degrees of musical ability in these groups. The tests were also used extensively in educational contexts, extending the reach of Seashore’s conception of musical talent beyond a purely psychological theory and into the realm of musical practice. They also laid the foundation for his work on analyzing musical performances, which has continued to be influential in contemporary empirical music performance work.

This article seeks to illuminate parts of this history in order to demonstrate how the Western canon is integrated in current musical training and practice in more than just the composers being discussed and the pieces being taught, but into the very nature of the conception of talent itself. I consider a number of questions regarding Seashore’s tests and their influence. First, how was Seashore’s belief that music talent was innate and measurable related to his beliefs in eugenics? Second, how did his approach to the testing of musical talent influence musical education? And finally, how did Seashore’s work on musical talent testing influence his later work in analyzing musical performances?



*Carl Seashore*

Musical talent, or aptitude, testing did not begin with Seashore. That distinction lies with Carl Stumpf, a German psychologist whose work has some influence in comparative ethnomusicology.<sup>1</sup> Stumpf’s tests of musical talent, published in 1883 and revised in 1890, evaluated participants’ perception of relative pitch, chord pleasantness, and tone fusions along with a single production task: singing back a note struck on a piano. His tests required individual administration and he compared the results of the tests to self-reports of musical ability. Seashore published his “Measures of Music Talents” test in 1919. It consisted of five components: Sense of Pitch (discriminating between high versus low), Sense of Intensity (discriminating between weaker versus stronger), Sense of Time (discriminating between longer versus shorter), Sense of Consonance (where participants determined which of pair of

## Eugenics and Musical Talent (cont.)

simultaneous notes blended better or worse), and Tonal Memory (a melody-based error detection task where participants heard two versions of a melody and had to identify which note had changed between the two). The test was designed to be given to groups of people at one time and, although Seashore would argue that for precise evaluation tests should be administered individually, this appears to be how it was largely administered. The most notable omissions from the early version of Seashore's test were rhythm and timbre, two aspects of musical practice that are still often underserved in traditional conservatory-based music curriculum.

Seashore added additional components to subsequent revisions of his test including Sense of Rhythm (also same/different) in 1925 and Sense of Timbre (a comparison task of two stimuli to be marked as same or different), which replaced the Sense of Consonance component in 1939. This latter change appears to be influenced by Jacob Kwalwasser and Peter Dykema's 1930 test, which aimed to cover a wider range of skills than Seashore's. Kwalwasser/Dykema's test, however, retained the atomistic nature of Seashore's test. This approach was challenged initially by James Mursell, an American educator who empirically evaluated the reliability of Seashore's test and espoused a more gestalt approach to the assessment of musical aptitude testing, with additional measurements and criteria. One such example of this was Herbert D. Wing's 1940 "Test of Musical Ability and Appreciation." While the gestalt approach appears to have had some impact on music education, it did not completely replace the atomistic approach, which was primarily developed through the work of Edwin Gordon and his colleagues.

From the 1960s through the 1990s, Gordon, a student of Seashore's, undertook extensive work on the evaluation and development of music aptitude tests. Gordon shared Seashore's belief that musical aptitude could be tested and that the results of such tests provided a measure of how much musicality ability a person may develop with the appropriate training. He released the first version of his "Musical Aptitude Profile" that is still available and administered today.<sup>2</sup> In the past

twenty years, a number of musical test sets, often referred to as batteries, have been developed to assess musical ability in specific populations. These include the Montreal Battery for the Evaluation of Amusia (2003), University of Washington Clinical Assessment of Musical Perception for English-speaking participants with cochlear implants (2009) and the Beat Alignment Test for assessing musical beat processing ability (2010). These batteries inherit many of the biases of the Seashore tradition, including the beat-based focus on repertoire from white Western musicians. One recent development that has at least introduced some nuance into these types of test is the shift away from the use of terminology like "aptitude" or "talent" towards "musical sophistication." Although the term "sophistication" is not without connotations of "high" versus "low" culture, it at least acknowledges that much of what these tests measure is influenced by specific musical exposure.

Seashore's interest in and philosophy about musical talent testing is perhaps best described in his own words, as presented to a congress on eugenics in 1923. There he argued that "musical talent is resolvable into a number of inborn natural capacities which may be isolated and measured or rated adequately for statistical or experimental purposes," highlighting "their availability in the study of racial differences as well as the study of individual differences in the experimental investigation of the inheritance of musical talent" and concluding that the "relation of these to eugenics is self-evident."<sup>3</sup> He subsequently argued that

The approach to the problem of inheritance of musical talent, from the point of view of eugenics, divides itself naturally into five stages or tasks: (1) the analysis of what constitutes musical talent and the isolation of measurable factors; (2) the development and standardization of methods of measurement and rating of each of these talents under control; (3) the actual field work of measuring sufficiently large numbers of generations in selected family groups; (4) the interpretation of such results in terms of biological principles



## Eugenics and Musical Talent (cont.)

of heritable factors; (5) interpretation and dissemination of established information for eugenic guidance.<sup>4</sup>



The tonoscope for analyzing the pitch of the tones on a disk phonograph record

*Carl Seashore with the tonoscope*

The development of Seashore's test fulfilled the first and second stages. The third and fourth stages were undertaken both through schools and through comparative analysis projects where Seashore and his colleagues attempted to demonstrate inheritance within racial groups and within families.<sup>5</sup> The fifth step does not appear to have been actively pursued, although Brenton Malin has noted that Seashore's subsequent adoption of eugenics to describe his work was a tactic that allowed him to side-step the increasing push-back against the biological determinism in eugenics while retaining a justification for dividing up groups of people on racial and/or gender lines.<sup>6</sup> Seashore's basic assumption was that the sensory capacities he was measuring were innate. The idea that talent is inborn has been widely disproved for other types of talents or aptitudes based on socio-economic factors (e.g., academic gifted tests for children). It has also been drawn into question for the sensory capacities Seashore's test examined. Experiments with his tests showed correlations of less than 0.5 between the performance of parents and children on the test, casting doubt on the inheritability of talent.<sup>7</sup> Other experiments have shown that sensory capacities such as pitch discrimination can be improved with training, demonstrating that these capacities are not necessarily inborn.<sup>8</sup> Current critiques of talent

tests are largely focused on the process of the tests, rather than the underlying assumptions.<sup>9</sup> As recently as Richard Cowell in 2018, scholars go as far as to argue that Seashore's use of simple musical stimuli shielded his testing approach from being influenced by race or socio-economic status.<sup>10</sup> An exception to this is the work of Hoffman who has explored how talent tests contribute to a construction of musical talent that is similarly biased to the concept of smartness and who has looked at musical talent testing of the early twentieth century (including Seashore's) through the lens of critical race theory.<sup>11</sup> Work like Hoffman's, however, has been limited in comparison to the continued uncritical use of talent testing in education and academic research.

Seashore's tests had an impact on music education at both the elementary and post-secondary levels. Through the Iowa Child Welfare Research Station, founded in 1917 at University of Iowa to study child development, Seashore had a voice and standing within the local education community. This likely helped the dissemination of his test and its findings. Interestingly, the work on general intelligence testing at the Research Station ultimately demonstrated that IQ scores could improve with training and thus were not an impartial representation of potential.<sup>12</sup> This view did not, however, appear to inform Seashore and his colleagues' work on musical talent testing. In terms of impact, Patricia Shehan Campbell has argued that interpretation and dissemination of the results of Seashore's Measures of Musical Talent test led elementary school music teachers to minimize efforts to teach rhythm in favor of vocal training, based on the argument that rhythm was not an important component of musical development.<sup>13</sup> Also, the idea that the musical talent was innate disavowed educators from having to consider the impact of socio-economic conditions on students' musical achievement.

At the post-secondary level, the most extensive implementation of Seashore's test was a ten-plus year experiment at the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music.<sup>14</sup> It was directly funded by George Eastman and began shortly after the School's founding in 1921. The experiment used the

## Eugenics and Musical Talent (cont.)

1919 version of the test, administered both during admission and during enrollment, in combination with qualitative information from the School's faculty. The test scores were also compared to four-year completion rates with modest results. Alexander Cowan has argued that the use of the test at Eastman contributed to racial- and class-based stratification.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the use of the test so soon after the School's founding likely allowed it to influence significantly the overall culture at the School much more than if it had been used later in the School's life-cycle.

The development and deployment of Seashore's musical talent test dominated the first part of his career. The second was focused on the empirical study of musical performances. The thread tying together these two projects was Seashore's desire to quantify artistic practice for scientific investigation. In his studies on musical performance, Seashore was trying to measure those aspects of the musical sound that characterized not just skill but also expression. The performance analysis undertaken by Seashore and his colleagues in the laboratories at the University of Iowa used a range of devices to measure timing and dynamics in piano performances and timing, dynamics, intonation, and vibrato in violin and vocal performances. They also used comparative musicological techniques to study musical practices in African-American and Native American communities, termed "primitive" music by Seashore and colleagues.<sup>16</sup>

The music was represented, prior to analysis, in pattern scores: a modified version of a Western musical score that retained twelve-tone divisions of the octave and Western rhythmic durations that also represented continuous changes in pitch and intensity. Thus, the analyses used techniques and terminologies designed for Western art music even as they sought to describe other musical practices. Through these analyses the researchers sought to assess performance practices directly from the recordings, without consulting the musicians being studied. Indeed, the attitude towards the musicians was dismissive; for example, Seashore, when describing one of the African-American musicians from the Howard Quartet assessed that "While this

singer has appeared before learned audiences and thrilled musicians, he is still ignorant and sings by his primitive impulses with a most charming abandon ... he could not sing the song twice alike."<sup>17</sup> This quote demonstrates both Seashore's bias against music that falls out of Western art musical training and the way in which this bias likely informed his analysis of the recording data. Specifically, his statement that the singer was not able "sing the song twice alike" raises queries about whether the similarity criteria Seashore was using was useful or appropriate. This also calls into question how useful Seashore's measurements were in describing non-Western art music practices. The performances were decontextualized and analyzed through a Western art music lens, much in the same way that members of various groups were assessed with the musical talent testing while maintaining the illusion of objectivity.

Carl Seashore's seemingly objective tests of musical aptitude and subsequent analyses of performances were deeply influenced by his eugenicist world view. His belief in the innateness of musical talent in combination with his beliefs about the primacy of pitch over rhythm and perception over any corporeal production outside of singing reflected his narrow conception of musical talent to the Western art music concertizing tradition. Seashore's musical talent tests had an influence on music education at both the primary and post-secondary levels in Seashore's time as well as on subsequent research in music education, contributing to notions of race-specific musical abilities. His work also had a strong influence on the field of music psychology, both in terms of test batteries used to assess musical abilities and the way in which talent in musical performance is conceived.<sup>18</sup> In both education and psychological domains, the idea that Seashore's tests are objective measures of musical ability pervades without appropriate consideration given to the biases underlying the design of the tests and related research protocols. One of the implications of this is that the narrow definition of musical talent likely influenced which people in Seashore's time were encouraged to study music seriously and continue into higher education music programs. This in turn

## Eugenics and Musical Talent (cont.)

defined the group accepted into graduate music programs and who performed the next generation of research. More broadly, even though a more developmental view in music education ultimately gained traction, the notion of natural-born musical talent that Seashore nurtured and promoted has continued to pervade in both popular culture and academia. More broadly, the belief in innate and testable musical talent parallels persistent beliefs regarding these same characteristics in general academic tests for children and young adults, which have wide-ranging implications on the type of education opportunities that people are afforded. Thus, the investigation of the origin of musical talent testing as part of a wider testing agenda has implications that go beyond the music classroom and relate to education accessibility and equality as a whole.

*An earlier version of this paper was presented by the author at the 2017 International Musicological Society conference in Tokyo, Japan.*

### Notes

1. For an in-depth discussion of Stumpf's influence in the development of comparative musicology, see Christensen, Dieter, "Erich M. von Hornbostel, Carl Stumpf, and the Institutionalization of Comparative Musicology," in *Comparative Musicology and Anthropology of Music: Essays on the History of Ethnomusicology*, ed. Bruno Nettl and Philip Bohlman (University of Chicago Press, 1991), 201–9.
2. John Grashel, "The Measurement of Musical Aptitude in 20th Century United States: A Brief History," *Bulletin of the Council for Research in Music Education* 176 (Spring 2008): 45–49.
3. Carl E. Seashore, "Individual and Racial Inheritance of Musical Traits," *Eugenics, Genetics and the Family* 1 (1923): 231.
4. Ibid.
5. Zaid D. Lenoir, "Racial Differences in Musical Capacities," (Ph. D. Thesis, Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1925); Guy B. Johnson, "Musical Talent and the Negro," *Music Supervisors' Journal* 15, no. 1 (1928): 81–96; Davenport, Charles B. Davenport, "Race Crossing in Jamaica," *The Scientific Monthly* 27, no. 3 (1928): 225–38.
6. Brenton J. Malin, "Not Just Your Average Beauty: Carl Seashore and the History of Communication Research in the United States," *Communication Theory* 21, no. 3 (2011): 299–316. Seashore distinguished between eugenics as "the science and art of being well born" and eugenics as "the science and art of living well or wise living." See Seashore, "The Term 'Eugenics,'" *Science* 94, no. 2450 (1941): 561.
7. Donald A. Hodges, "Human Musicality," *Handbook of Music Psychology* 2 (1996): 29–68.
8. Micheyl, Christophe, Karine Delhommeau, Xavier Perrot, and Andrew J. Oxenham. "Influence of Musical and Psychoacoustical Training on Pitch Discrimination," *Hearing Research* 219, no. 1–2 (2006): 36–47.
9. For example, see Joanne Haroutounian, "Perspectives of Musical Talent: A Study of Identification Criteria and Procedures," *High Ability Studies* 11, no. 2 (2000): 137–60; and Susan Hallam, "The Power of Music: Its Impact on the Intellectual, Social and Personal Development of Children and Young People," *International Journal of Music Education* 28, no. 3 (2010): 269–89.
10. Specifically, Cowell argued that Seashore "believed that pure tasks from music stimuli matched the pure tasks in intelligence testing. This was wise, as the concern for the influence of culture (race and socioeconomic status [SES]) that marred other music talent tests as well as IQ testing is not an issue with discrimination competence. This interest in ability, aptitude, talent, or musicality dominated testing for more than half a century and continues to be present in new formats. It remains important, as does Seashore's foundational research." Richard Cowell, "An Overview of Music Tests and Their Uses," in *The Oxford Handbook of Assessment Policy and Practice in Music Education*, Volume 1, ed. Timothy S. Brophy (Oxford University Press, 2019), 537.
11. Adria R. Hoffman, "'Blessed': Musical Talent, Smartness, & Figured Identities," *Equity & Excellence*

## Eugenics and Musical Talent (cont.)

in *Education* 48, no. 4 (2015): 606–20; Adria R. Hoffman, “Competing Narratives: Musical Aptitude, Race, and Equity,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Race and the Arts in Education*, ed. Amelia M. Kraehe, Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, and B. Stephen Carpenter II (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 103–17.

12. For an in-depth discussion of this see Henry L. Minton, “The Iowa Child Welfare Research Station and the 1940 Debate on Intelligence: Carrying on the Legacy of a Concerned Mother,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 20, no. 2 (1984): 160–76.

13. Patricia Shehan Campbell, “Rhythmic Movement and Public School Music Education: Conservative and Progressive Views of the Formative Years,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 39, no. 1 (1991): 12–22.

14. Hazel Martha Stanton, “Measurement of Musical Talent: The Eastman Experiment,” *University of Iowa Studies in the Psychology of Music* (University of Iowa, 1935).

15. Alexander Cowan, “Eugenics at the Eastman School: Music Psychology and the Racialization of Musical Talent,” presented at the 2017 American Musicological Society conference in Rochester, NY, <https://cowanaw.wordpress.com/2017/11/07/eugenics-at-the-eastman-school-music-psychology-and-the-racialization-of-musical-talent/>.

16. Seashore, “Three New Approaches to the Study of Negro Music,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science* (1928); Milton Metfessel, “Phonophotography in Folk Music: American Negro Songs in New Notation,” (1928); Ray E. Miller, “A Strobophotographic Analysis of a Tlingit Indian’s Speech,” *International Journal of American Linguistics* 6, no. 1 (1930): 47–68.

17. Seashore, *Psychology of Music* (University of Iowa Press, 1938), 352.

18. Dissemination of Seashore’s work and ideas had been aided in a large part through the availability of a low-cost Dover edition publication of *Psychology of Music* (1967).

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## Institute News



Brooklyn College Big Band concert, 30 April 2019

Here at Brooklyn College we welcome the first season in our new facility, **Leonard & Claire Tow Center for the Performing Arts**. Greeting students and the public at one of the campus's main entrances, the Center has been attracting a wide variety of audiences to productions by the Conservatory of Music and the Theater Department, both from the College and the surrounding community. It has also become a place for students to meet and socialize between practice sessions and during rehearsal breaks. On 30 April the **Brooklyn College Big Band** presented a concert there in the new Buchwald Theater—a performance that highlighted our new Global and Contemporary Jazz program. Members of the Brooklyn Raga Massive—**Arun Ramamurthy** (violin), **Pawan Benjamin** (bansuri), and **Swaminathan Selvaganesh** (kanjira)—joined the band in a fascinating encounter between classical Indian music and jazz, directed by **D.D. Jackson**, the coordinator of our new program. Highlights were arrangements by two Global Jazz students, with special guests **Frank Lacy** (trombone) and **Ron Gozzo** (tenor sax).

Other events in our Music in Polycultural America series featured guests with wide-ranging interests. In “Tuning In: Analyzing Recorded Vocal Performances” on 26 March new Brooklyn College faculty member **Johanna Devaney** considered how computational and psychological techniques can be combined

with musicological knowledge to expand our understanding of vocal performance. Composer (and HISAM staff member) **Whitney George** shared her thoughts on orchestrating a large part of Miriam Gideon's *Fortunato*, and fielded questions from the lively audience of composers, performers, and students. And on 23 May the Sonic Arts Student Union presented trumpeter **Nate Wooley** in performances of electro-acoustic works by Éliane Radigue and Annea Lockwood.

On 22 May **Whitney George** conducted the world premiere of Miriam Gideon's opera *Fortunato* (1958). Co-produced by The Curiosity Cabinet and Fresh Squeezed Opera at Elebash Recital Hall, CUNY Graduate Center, the project was generously supported by the Elebash Fund. The original had remained unperformed since its composition. Gideon left a sample orchestration of Scene 1, and a Piano-Vocal Score for the later two scenes only. George completed a style-study of Gideon's orchestration, and created an orchestration of the remainder of the opera, realizing it in a semi-staged performance. **Stephanie Jensen-Moulton**, who edited the A-R edition of *Fortunato*, gave a pre-concert talk with George to frame the historical significance of the work, and help demystify the process of orchestrating

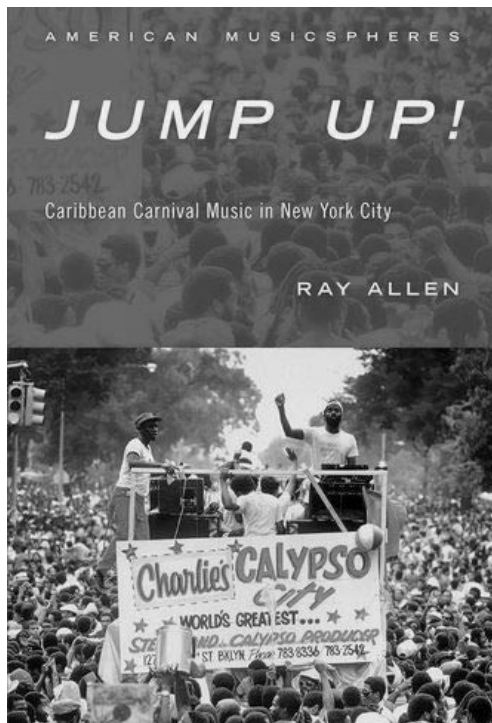


Premiere of *Fortunato*, 22 May 2019

## Institute News (cont.)

the opera. The performance, well-attended by the new music community, was presented with two commercial breaks of advertisements from the late 1950s between the scenes, as the opera was rumored to have been pitched to NBC television in the early 1960s. HISAM's Graduate Assistant **Lindsey Eckenroth** performed on flute in the performance. She also performed in Huang Ruo's opera *Bound* in April and presented her work on Amy Winehouse—specifically the function of Winehouse's music in the 2015 documentary *Amy*—on 1 June at NYU's Music and the Moving Image conference.

**Stephanie Jensen-Moulton** received a Leonard and Claire Tow Professorship in the Humanities, which will fund research, travel, and publication subventions for her work in music and disability studies. HISAM Sr. Research Associate **Ray Allen**'s latest work, *Jump Up! Caribbean Carnival Music in New York City*, will be released by Oxford University Press this summer, just in time for Brooklyn Labor Day Carnival. Pre-orders are available here.



*AMR* notes the passing of pianist, composer, arranger, and bandleader **James Dapogny** this past March at age seventy-eight. He is featured in an insightful obituary by Neil Genzlinger of the *New York Times* (19 March 2019),

which contains links to several performances. I first met Jim in the early 1980s, at the legendary and much-missed Emporium of Jazz in Mendota, Minnesota, a club and restaurant that featured primarily music of the pre-1940 era (as Dapogny once told me, he didn't like to play music composed after the year of his

birth—1940). A few years later I enrolled in graduate school at the University of Michigan, partly because he was on staff (he taught there for over forty years). I worked as his assistant on various projects, and he became a mentor, advisor, and friend, as well as a fellow foodie. Though Jim could be quite taciturn (Genzlinger describes this trait as his “subtlety”) I remember long conversations and listening sessions at his home, interrupted only occasionally by the beloved border collies he and his wife Gail raised. His knowledge of early jazz was staggering, as was his talent at transcription. His *Ferdinand ‘Jelly Roll’ Morton: The Collected Piano Music* (Schirmer, 1982) remains a classic. Typically, our last email exchange was about food rather than music; he was intrigued I was growing on my windowsill a type of lime tree whose leaves are ubiquitous in Thai cooking (“A *makrut* grows in Brooklyn,” he noted). My condolences go out to Gail, a talented potter whose work is scattered throughout my apartment. I will miss Jim's friendship, advice, and magnificent playing.



*James Dapogny*

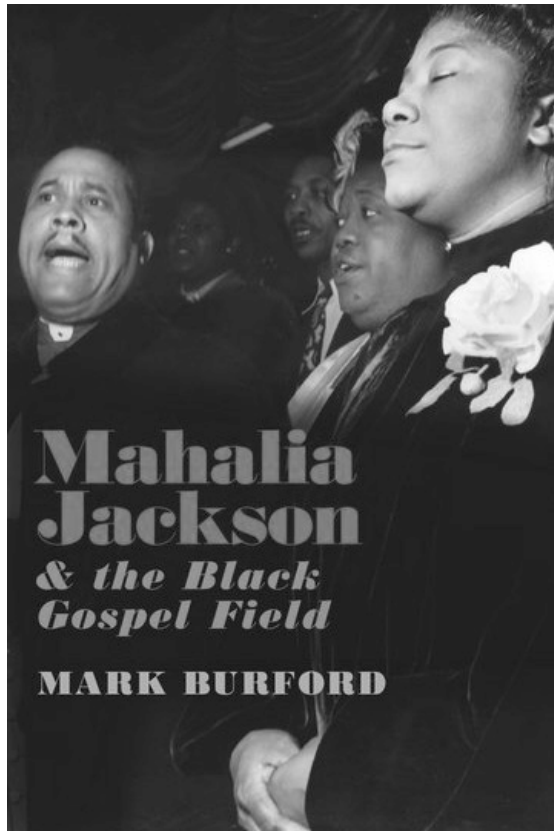
Finally, speaking of pre-1940s jazz, **Jeff Taylor** will be going on sabbatical leave for the 2019-2020 year, primarily to finish a book on Earl Hines and Chicago Jazz. **Stephanie Jensen-Moulton** will be taking over as Director of the Institute in my absence, and I know already has some intriguing projects in the works.

— J.T.

## Revisiting the Queen of Gospel Music

Ray Allen, Brooklyn College, CUNY

Let's start with an unimpeachable fact—Mahalia Jackson was the most popular and influential black gospel singer of the twentieth century. Her majestic contralto echoed from the floors of countless black churches to the stage of the Newport Jazz Festival to the rarified air of Carnegie Hall. Her songs reached millions of Americans, black and white, through early television appearances and her own nationally syndicated CBS radio show. Her bounty of audio recordings, first for the independent Apollo label and later for the entertainment giant Columbia, won her broad acclaim from church-going gospel fans to aficionados of jazz and American roots music. She wore the well-deserved appellation “Queen of Gospel Music” with grace and dignity.



Jackson's impact on American music has inspired a substantial body of writing. An autobiography, two biographies, hundreds of newspaper and magazine reviews, and ample portions of standard gospel histories, including Anthony Heilbut's *The Gospel Sound* and Horace Boyer's *How Sweet the Sound*, have told her life story and recounted her enduring contributions to the American music mélange. Could another book-length study possibly be warranted? Indeed yes, because much of the scholarship on Jackson has tended to be impressionistic. Penned predominantly by adoring journalists and one filmmaker/biographer, the existing literature lacks solid historical sourcing and fails to offer the critical perspective necessary to position Jackson's life and music in the broader cultural context of black postwar America.

With an eye toward filling this scholarly void, Mark Burford offers *Mahalia Jackson and the Black*

*Gospel Field* (Oxford, 2019). Burford, trained in musicology at Columbia University, came up in a black Seventh Day Adventist church that did not practice gospel music. Thus he came to the music a bit later in life, first as an avid fan and then as a devoted scholar. As his title suggests, the book purports to be more than a third biography of Jackson. Drawing on the work of French cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu, Burford situates Jackson and her music within a broader “field” of cultural production that considers “the relations among a diversity of individual agents, particular [musical] works, specific performance practices, sources of prestige, and political and economic dynamics...” (25–26). In other words, he seeks to hyper-contextualize Jackson and her music, first as a means of expanding the history of black

gospel practice, and second as a lens through which to view the larger role black musical production played in postwar urban life. Given the magnitude of this task, Burford has focused his investigation on Jackson's accomplishments during the period stretching from the mid-1940s through the mid-1950s, a pivotal time in her transformation from local church singer to national icon.

Following a provocative critique of previous black gospel scholarship, Burford provides two fairly conventional chapters on Jackson's early years in her native New Orleans followed by her move to Chicago in the early 1930s. There she teamed up with famed gospel composer Thomas Dorsey and began her long association with the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses. In the fourth chapter he ventures into the world of gospel programs and song battles, identifying them as sites for both religious worship and popular entertainment. Here he introduces

## Revisiting the Gospel Queen (cont.)

the gospel promoter and entrepreneur Johnny Meyers, whose gospel shows propelled Jackson, Ernestine Washington, Georgia Peach, the Dixie Hummingbirds, and dozens of other gospel acts to prominence among New York's black church-going folk.

Next Burford dives deep into the music, focusing initially on Jackson's 1946–1954 Apollo recordings. He recounts the history of the New York-based independent label which, under the management of Bess Berman, became a leading promoter of African American jazz, R&B, and gospel during the early post-war years when the major labels showed relatively little interest in black vernacular music. Rather than employing standard Western notation and analysis, Burford encourages readers to engage in deep listening with select examples drawn from Jackson's Apollo catalogue. Based on stylistic parameters of meter, tempo, and rhythmic pulse, he categorizes her gospel songs as falling into three "feels": a swing feel (fast tempo, four-beats-to-a-bar articulation, swinging eighth notes), a gospel feel (slower tempo, compound meter), and a free feel (extremely slow tempo, lacking a discernible steady beat, reserved primarily for hymns). In addition, Burford examines Jackson's renditions of non-gospel songs such as "The Lord's Prayer," "I Believe," and other popular religious songs that Berman encouraged her to record in hopes of reaching a broader, multiracial audience.

Jackson's Apollo recordings reflect her unwavering commitment to grassroots gospel songs and hymns, but also reveal her willingness to test the waters with more popular religious material and to expand her vocal influences. The performances also caught the attention of white jazz aficionados and helped increase her visibility to such a point that in 1954 CBS radio offered her a nationally syndicated show and Columbia records lured her away from Apollo. Burford devotes full chapters to these developments. The *Mahalia Jackson Show* was a weekly, nationally syndicated CBS radio program that premiered in September of 1954 and ran through early January of the following year. In this short-lived but influential program, Jackson

had to negotiate a new setting and medium—the radio studio, with predominantly white spectators and scripted text between her songs. With an ear toward a national audience she learned to balance her demonstrative gospel arrangements with more staid spirituals and inspirational songs. "You've got to remember we're not in church—we're on CBS," she once chided an overly exuberant studio audience (297). Under the watchful eye and ear of Columbia Records' legendary music arranger Mitch Miller, Jackson further broadened her repertoire and style, beginning with her 1955 LP *Mahalia Jackson: The World's Greatest Gospel Singer*. Burford meticulously analyzes Jackson's 1954 and 1955 Columbia Recording sessions that resulted in arrangements grounded in the black gospel and spiritual traditions but increasingly reflecting the influences of jazz, country, and popular folk styles. As Columbia producer George Avakian ruminated in his liner notes to Jackson's 1955 Christmas album, *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*, she could choose to swing with a light jazz beat, articulate with the eloquence of a concert singer, break free with the spontaneity of the gospel spirit, or croon like a romantic balladeer.

Although CBS cancelled *The Mahalia Jackson Show* in early 1955, the company continued to promote its gospel star by featuring her in a local TV program that was broadcast twice a week to a Chicago audience. Burford devotes the penultimate chapter of his book to *Mahalia Sings*, which aired thirty-four episodes between March and September of that year. The program was a local rather than a national broadcast, making its success dependent on support from Chicago's black churchgoers as well as an expanding base of local white listeners. The show firmly established Jackson's reputation as a local star, a role cemented by her relentless schedule of appearances in neighborhood churches and high visibility mixed-audience events including the *Chicago Tribune's* annual Chicagoland Music Festival. Burford ends his story with the city's 1955 birthday salute to Jackson, hosted by Studs Terkel, and featuring testimonies by a cadre of influential church leaders, journalists, and civic leaders including Chicago Mayor Richard Daley. The granddaughter of Louisiana slaves had risen up



## Revisiting the Gospel Queen (cont.)

to become one of Chicago's most prominent citizens and an international celebrity.

Burford's study is built on a solid foundation of historical sources, ranging from an array of interviews and contemporaneous reviews to Jackson's expansive catalogue of commercial recordings and radio/television broadcasts. The private journal of the singer's confidant and unofficial assistant, Bill Russell, offers fresh insight into her daily life and personal views on music and religion during the critical mid-1950s period. Burford's penchant for detail and digression occasionally slow down the work's flow, but this is a small price to pay for such a richly chronicled narrative. Readers can easily skip over sections that stray too far off the book's main path.



*Mahalia Jackson at the South Side Church in Chicago, 1958*

*photograph by Ted Williams*

Burford concludes that Jackson served as something of a “cultural interpreter” as she “shuttled between the church and the world of popular culture, to negotiate and mediate the visceral pleasures new audiences took from the sound of gospel music...” (386). In doing so he illuminates a transformative moment in the

development of the gospel field and one that reveals the paradoxical nature of the genre. From its inception, gospel song was rooted in the traditional spirituals, sanctified songs, and folk hymns employed by southern, rural Afro-Christians to worship and commune with their deity. The gospel music that emerged in the north remained anchored in black urban churches, but would eventually find followers among black and white secular listeners. LP audio recordings, radio, and the emerging medium of television came together mid-century to usher black gospel music beyond the confines of the African-American church and into the realm of American popular culture. Jackson was a conduit and the most influential player in that crossover drama. With one foot firmly set in tradition and the other stepping confidently forward into the modern world, she set the stage for the contemporary gospel movement that took off in the late 1960s with the Edwin Hawkins Singers international hit “Oh Happy Day.” That scene has continued to flourish into the new millennium with gospel/R&B stars such as Kirk Franklin and Mary Mary. For Jackson, and a few who came before and many who would follow, gospel song was an expression of spiritual entertainment whose sacred and secular parameters demand constant renegotiation.

Is Burford's *Mahalia Jackson and the Black Gospel Field* the definitive work on this magnificent singer? Doubtful. While his focus on the early postwar years through the mid-1950s documents her rise from an obscure church singer to an international luminary, he chooses to leave the period from her 1955 birthday celebration up to her passing in 1972 for others to tackle. During this time Jackson continued to record and perform for mixed audiences around the globe while becoming deeply involved with the burgeoning United States civil rights movement. Her rendition of “How I Got Over” at the 1963 March on Washington, where Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech, has become legendary. There is much more to say about Jackson and her influence on American music in general, and the gospel field in particular. Burford has set a high bar for future scholarly inquiry.

## Celebrating the Maurice Peress Archive

Sean Colonna, Columbia University

When I first met Maurice Peress during the summer of 2017, we talked for over an hour in the living room of his spacious Manhattan apartment at 310 West 72nd Street. I did not know what to expect from our meeting or where it might lead, and I recall being shocked and humbled that this accomplished conductor and scholar would take such a keen and immediate interest in learning about me and my research. After we settled down in his living room, he began to ask me a series of questions: What did I think my dissertation was going to be about? Did I know about this book, this piece, this recording? Was my last name Italian? Where were my parents from?

This was to be my first of several windows into Maurice's character. He had a deep-seated love for American music and for the people in his life, particularly those who shared his musical passions.

I returned several times to his apartment that summer with Jennifer Lee, the Performing Arts Curator for Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscripts Library (RBML). Maurice had been battling a terminal illness for some time, and Jenny and I were helping organize his materials for transport to Columbia's RBML. Ellie Hisama, one of my mentors and professors at Columbia, had recently suggested to Maurice that he house his archive here. The two of them had known one another for decades: Ellie had performed in the student orchestra while Maurice was serving as conductor and instructor at the Aaron Copland School of Music in Queens College, CUNY, and she had also worked as his assistant for three concert reconstructions Maurice mounted as part of Carnegie Hall's 1989 Jazz Legacy Series. After Maurice visited Columbia and saw the rich variety of material already housed at the RBML, he was convinced he wanted to leave his materials there.

I had the honor of getting to know Maurice both personally and professionally as Jenny and I helped organize the archive. Combing through his overstuffed boxes and creaking bookshelves, the two of us were regaled with stories—and sometimes, when the mood struck, songs—prompted by a particular



Maurice Peress

book, letter, or picture. This article offers a brief biographic sketch of Maurice's life as well as a description of a small sample of some of the items in his archive.

The following list of some of Maurice's professional accomplishments gives a good sense of the breadth of his intellectual and musical interests: he led the student orchestra at Queens College for over thirty years, conducted several major orchestras (including the New York Philharmonic), premiered Leonard Bernstein's *Mass* at the Kennedy Center, orchestrated a number of Duke Ellington's most well-known compositions, and staged recreations of influential historic concerts such as Paul Whiteman's premiere of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and the Carnegie Hall debuts of both Duke Ellington and James Reese Europe's Clef Club Orchestra. He also published *Dvořák to Duke Ellington: A Conductor Explores America's Music and Its African American Roots*, which is filled with both archival and ethnographic research pertaining to the training, legacy, and influence of several prominent African American composers.<sup>1</sup> As

## Celebrating the Maurice Peress Archive (cont.)

is likely already apparent, Maurice's life and career did not sit comfortably in any generic category—he was conductor, arranger, entrepreneur, historian, ethnographer, and musician all at once.

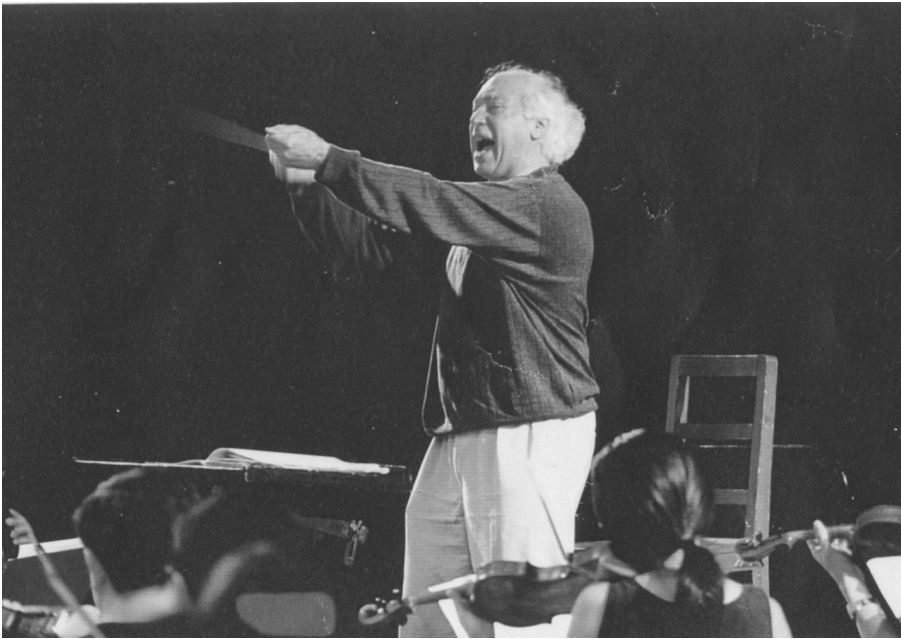
Maurice framed his life's startling trajectory in his aptly-titled memoir, *Maverick Maestro*: “How does a firstborn son of Jewish immigrants from Washington Heights who decides *not* to take over the family business and plays jazz trumpet instead end up conducting opening night at the Kennedy Center—or a symphony orchestra in Vienna, or an Ellington premiere in Chicago?”<sup>2</sup> He was born in Manhattan on 18 March 1930, and his father, Heskell-Ezra Moshi Peress (later Americanized to “Henry Peress”), emigrated from Baghdad to New York City in 1926, opening a lingerie shop one year later. There he met Maurice's mother, Elka (Elsie) Frimit Tiger, who had emigrated from Poland with her sister in 1923. Music was a profound influence on Maurice from a very young age. His father would play the *oud* on Sunday mornings, filling their apartment with the sounds of Arabic music. At age thirteen, Maurice became “infatuated” with the bugle and his love of the instrument would carry him through private lessons, his high school years at Brooklyn Tech, summer performance programs at Juilliard, and his undergraduate studies in music at NYU.<sup>3</sup> Although his musical life started with a love of jazz, hearing a rehearsal of “The Infernal Dance of King Kashchei” from Stravinsky's *Firebird* during his time at Juilliard was an electrifying “epiphany” for Maurice, “filling [him] with sounds [he] had never thought possible.”<sup>4</sup> His love of music continued to grow, and, after a brief stint as a drafted member of the newly desegregated 173rd Negro Regimental Band at Fort Dix, he met his soon-to-be wife, Gloria Vando. They married in the summer of 1955, taking up residence in a small apartment at the corner of Sullivan and West 4th Street (Maurice called the place “very *La Bohème*”) and after he completed his master's in musicology at NYU three years later he began working as a trumpeter with the as-yet undiscovered composer David Amram during the early days of the New York Shakespeare Festival in Central Park.<sup>5</sup>

Maurice's conducting career surged forward when Leonard Bernstein appointed him Assistant Conductor to the New York Philharmonic for the 1961–1962 concert season, along with John Canarina and Seiji Ozawa. That year brought Maurice not only close personal friendship with Bernstein, but opportunities to learn from both veteran musicians and guest conductors, including the Viennese conductor Josef Krips and the composer-conductor Nadia Boulanger. His connections eventually led him to sign with Columbia Records, which in turn gave him the opportunity to take over the newly vacated position of music director for the Corpus Christi Symphony in Texas. He held that position for the next twelve years, until he took over leadership of the Kansas City Philharmonic in 1974. During his time as a professional conductor, Maurice devoted himself not only to standard repertoire, but also newer, experimental pieces by contemporaneous composers such as Morton Feldman (he premiered *Rothko Chapel* in 1972) and John Corigliano (conducting his Piano Concerto in 1970).

However, what Maurice called “the musical high point of [his] life” came when Bernstein asked Maurice to conduct the 1971 premiere of *Mass* for the inaugural concert of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.<sup>6</sup> Composed in memory of Kennedy after his assassination, *Mass* was received with great emotion by the high-profile politicians who had been invited to the final dress rehearsal: “At the end of this first-ever *Mass* the members of the company, and many in the audience, were shattered, in tears. The sadness and sense of loss—for the Celebrant, for our lost innocence, for John Kennedy—was palpable. That night Ted Kennedy came down the aisle to the pit to thank us. He was deeply moved.”<sup>7</sup>

In addition to immersing himself in both performing and advocating for classical music, Maurice also maintained his life-long love for and involvement with jazz, working with the Modern Jazz Quartet throughout his time at Corpus Christi and Kansas City. The ensemble was led by pianist John Lewis and “modeled their format after classical chamber groups ... Their programs were

## Celebrating the Maurice Peress Archive (cont.)



Peress leading a rehearsal during one of his concert tours in China in the early 2000s

not simply 'sets' of tunes strung together, but rather John's highly developed, formally structured essays on bebop classics and American standards and, of course, the blues."<sup>8</sup> Maurice's omnivorous musical tastes—spanning the canonical, the avant-garde, and jazz—would remain central to his musical practice for much of his life, and it was likely this ability to treat music as something “beyond category” that led to one of Maurice's most inspiring and lasting friendships, namely that with Duke Ellington.

Maurice met Ellington at the White House Festival for the Arts, hosted by the Johnson administration on 14 June 1965. The event itself was designed to showcase the work of some of America's leading artistic and cultural figures—for one extraordinary day, the White House displayed sculptures by Alexander Calder, paintings by Mark Rothko, and photographs by Alfred Stieglitz. There were performances of pieces by Ned Rorem, George Gershwin, and Bernstein, as well as scenes from plays such as Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. Maurice had been invited to conduct the Air Force band for the Robert Joffrey Ballet's performance during the evening show (hosted by Gene Kelly), and Ellington was there to bring the night to a conclusion. Among the pieces Ellington's band performed was *Black, Brown, and Beige*, subtitled

“A Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America.”<sup>9</sup> Although the piece had been premiered during Ellington's Carnegie Hall debut in 1943, Maurice heard it for the first time that night at the White House. He later recalled that he “realize[d] that Ellington chose to place his ‘tone parallel’ alongside the other American masterworks performed and displayed at the festival, reaffirming his faith in the work, no matter its less-than-enthusiastic reception by most critics and fans when it was first presented.”<sup>10</sup>

Maurice was inspired by the piece and wanted to conduct a symphonic arrangement of it. When he proposed the idea of orchestrating it to

Ellington that night, the composer was skeptical, replying “What's wrong with it the way it is?”<sup>11</sup> Eventually, however, after Ellington heard Maurice's improved orchestration of a disappointing symphonic arrangement of *The Golden Broom and the Green Apple*, he asked Maurice to go ahead with his idea to orchestrate *Black, Brown, and Beige*. The new version was premiered with the Chicago Symphony in 1970. The success of Maurice's orchestration led him to further collaborations with Ellington, most significantly on *Queenie Pie*. Commissioned by the National Educational Television Opera Company in 1970, *Queenie* was to be Ellington's “opera comique” for television.<sup>12</sup> Although it was not completed before the composer passed away, Maurice finished the orchestration some years later and, with the help of Ellington's son Mercer, mounted a production of the piece in 1986 with the Music Theater of Philadelphia.

At the conclusion of his sixth season with Kansas City, Maurice describes himself as having “[blown] a deep hole in [his] life,” one that it would take him “nine years to dig [himself] out of.”<sup>13</sup> After a combination of labor disputes between orchestra players and management as well as an extramarital affair, he left Kansas City having burned many professional and personal bridges. He began to see a psychiatrist, and he describes the results as follows:

## Celebrating the Maurice Peress Archive (cont.)

Slowly, I learned to forgive myself and earned my way back into the lives of my three beloved children [Lorca, Anika, and Paul], who were making their way in music and the theater ... Gloria remarried and built an enviable literary career: editor, poet, publisher, and feminist. In time she, too, would let me into her life again. I met and married a marvelous woman, Ellen Waldron, landscape designer and artist.<sup>14</sup>

Over the years spent working on rebuilding his personal and professional relationships, Maurice found his way back to New York City as a conductor. Not long after his move, the musicologist and bebop musician Howard Brofsky helped him to find a position as conductor and instructor at Queens College in 1984.

Although he was initially hesitant to take up a teaching position after several decades of working in professional performance circles (“was I cashing in my chips?”), Maurice came to love his work conducting the student orchestra.<sup>15</sup> It not only provided him with stability, but allowed him the space to expand his intellectual and scholarly pursuits. During his time at Queens College and the CUNY Graduate Center, he not only published *Dvořák to Duke Ellington* but also organized

and conducted reproductions of several historic performances in American musical history.

One such reproduction was mounted on 12 February 1984 at Town Hall, just before Maurice had officially started his second career. For this concert, Maurice reconstructed Gershwin’s debut performance of *Rhapsody in Blue*, originally conducted by Paul Whiteman in 1924. The research he did in preparation for the concert involved exploring the Whiteman archives in order to determine the other pieces on the program as well as conducting interviews with the few players from that original performance who were still alive at the time. The pianist and lawyer Milton Rettenberg—who knew both George and Ira Gershwin personally and had performed the solo piano part with Whiteman’s ensemble—supplied Maurice with Gershwin’s autograph copy of the piano reduction in addition to his memories of the musicians who performed with him. The concert reproduction was a sell-out and a great success. This inspired Maurice to follow up with several other concert reproductions, offered through Carnegie Hall’s 1989 Jazz Legacy Series—Ellington’s 1943 debut at Carnegie Hall, during which he premiered *Black, Brown, and Beige*; George Antheil’s 1927 premiere of *Ballet Mécanique*; and James Reese Europe’s 1912 Clef Club Concert at Carnegie Hall, the first performance in the space by an all-black ensemble.



Maurice’s preparatory work for these concerts led him to many archival sources, most of which pointed to the influence of Antonín Dvořák on many early-twentieth century African American composers. Indeed, he uncovered what he called “an irrefutable historical connection between Dvořák and three seminal twentieth-century American composers. Two of Dvořák’s American composition students, Will Marion Cook and Rubin Goldmark, had in turn become the teachers of Duke Ellington, Aaron Copland, and George Gershwin!”<sup>16</sup>

*Peress rehearsing for the performance of his 1989 reconstruction of the premiere of Antheil’s Ballet Mécanique*

## Celebrating the Maurice Peress Archive (cont.)

Until just a few months before he succumbed to a long battle with leukemia, Maurice maintained both his conducting and teaching schedules. When travel to and from Queens came to be too arduous, he continued giving conducting lessons from his apartment. As I got to know him over the course of his final summer, I was repeatedly struck by how passionate and energetic he was about his work, even as he was wheelchair-bound and occasionally needed to pause for breath. I realized, watching him lovingly go through his papers, scores, notes, and correspondence, what a great gift Columbia would be receiving.

The archive includes a wide range of materials including photographs, scores, correspondence, programs, and research materials. Scholars can access this archive through Columbia University's Rare Book and Manuscripts Library, which will soon be featuring a finding aid for this collection.

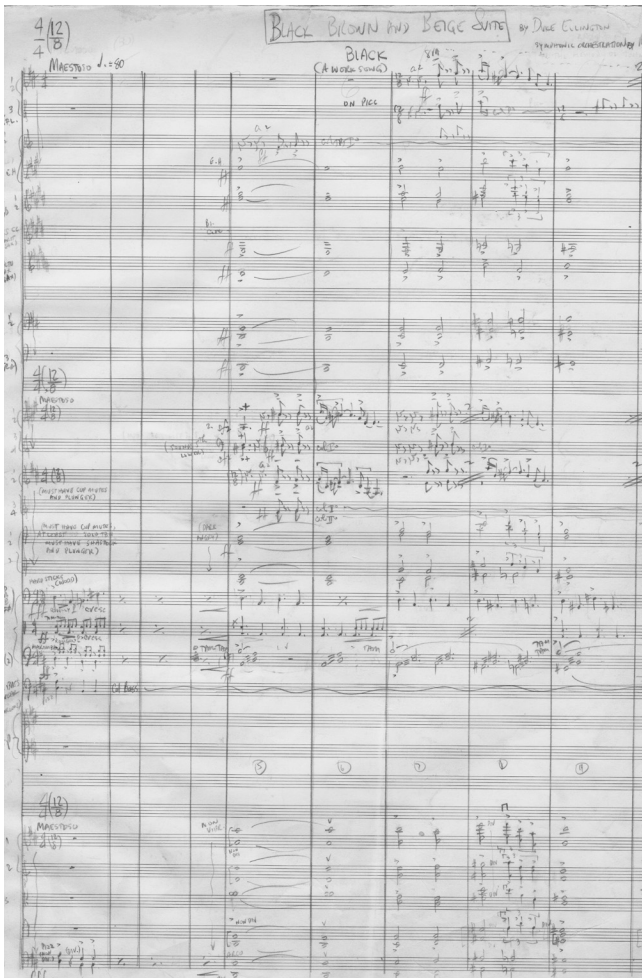


Figure 1

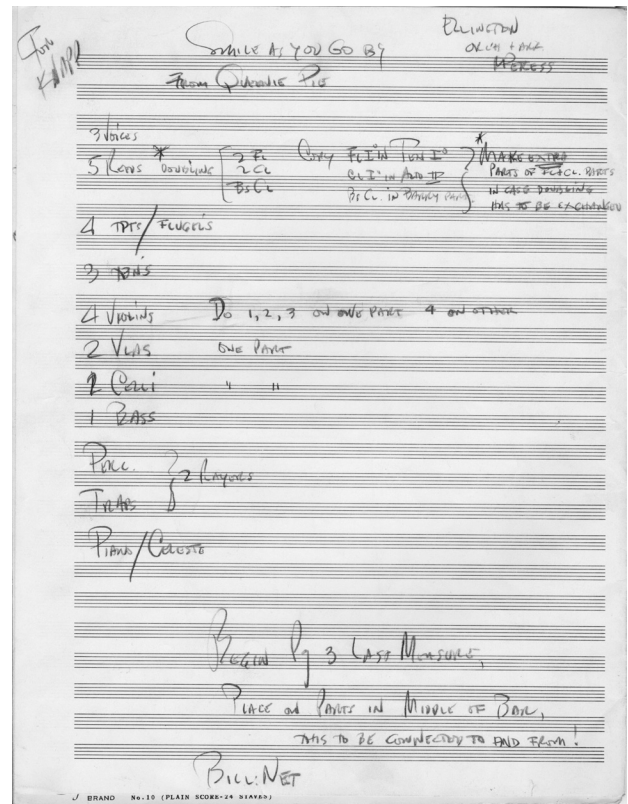


Figure 2

Perhaps one of the most interesting components of the archive is the collection of the scores for Maurice's concert reconstructions. Particularly for the three Carnegie Hall reconstructions—Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* premiere, Antheil's *Ballet Mécanique*, and Europe's Clef Club debut—such a trove of musical information will prove invaluable for those interested in the history of these events. Testifying to the meticulousness with which Maurice organized and tracked his materials, the majority of the scores for these pieces also include a complete set of parts, including the pianola rolls for Antheil's *Ballet*. Those interested in the history of performance practice and conducting will likely find Maurice's annotations and preferred bowings informative as well.

In addition to the scores for his concert reconstructions, there are also scores and parts for those pieces he orchestrated himself. Figures 1 and 2 show excerpts from Maurice's orchestrations of *Black Brown and Beige* and *Queenie Pie*, respectively. A comparison of the re-orchestrated version of the former with its original provides a view into both the techniques of symphonic

## Celebrating the Maurice Peress Archive (cont.)

jazz and Maurice's painstaking attention to sonic detail. His arrangement of *Queenie Pie* merits close scrutiny not only for the reasons above, but also because it provides some cohesion to this late, unfinished piece by Ellington.

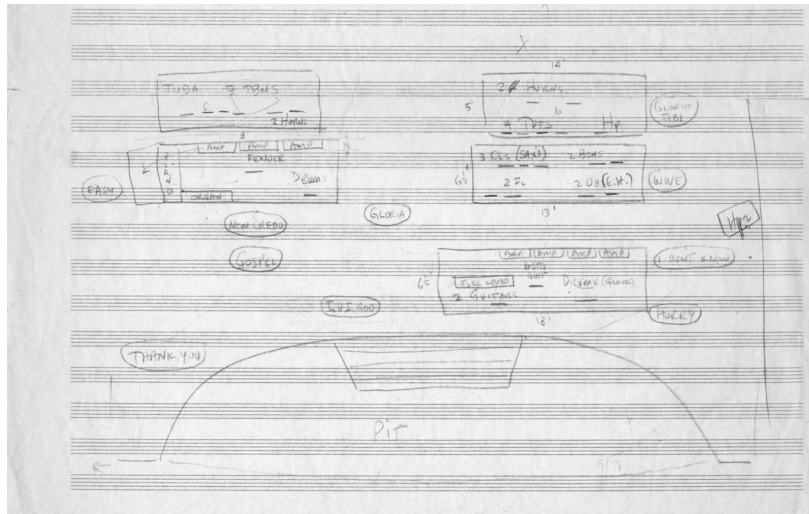


Figure 3

The archive also includes his annotated score for Bernstein's *Mass*, in addition to the preparatory materials Maurice created for rehearsals. Figure 3 shows a page from Maurice's sketches of the staging, showing his understanding of how the action onstage related to key sections of the piece.

For all their richness and variety, the scores and parts are only one fraction of the material in this archive. In addition to these and much of his correspondence, there are program books from the many concerts Maurice conducted. Perhaps the most fascinating of these is the 1965 White House Festival for the Arts (Figure 4). Leafing through the program booklet provides a sense of the enormous breadth of material presented at this historic occasion, a window into what the Johnson administration held to be exemplary American art and culture.

Maurice's scholarly side is also well-represented in his archive. His research materials for his various concerts and projects have been preserved, offering a wide range of information for historians of American music. An indication of the rigor and

care with which Maurice conducted his research for the Clef Club reconstruction, Figure 5 shows his annotations of a photograph of the historic ensemble, complete with the names of each of the players he was able to identify. Similarly detailed information can be found for his other concert reconstructions in addition to the wide range of materials Maurice collected for *Dvořák to Duke Ellington*.

As this brief overview shows, Maurice's archive has much to teach us. He left it to Columbia in the hopes that it will contribute to the growing body of research on American musical history as well as provide insights for performers, orchestrators, arrangers and conductors. Although Maurice passed away in December of 2017, his collection reveals his personal affability, intellectual curiosity, and the breadth and depth of his passion for music.

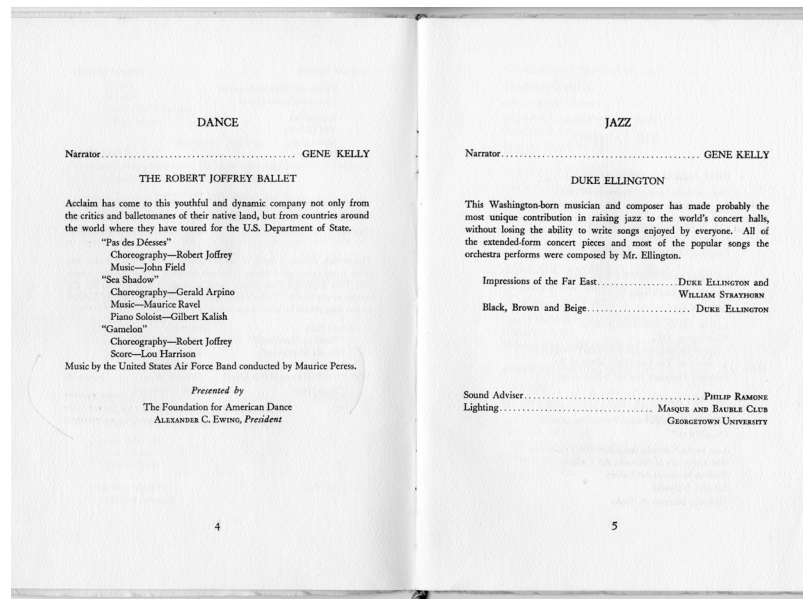


Figure 4

### Notes

1. Maurice Peress, *Dvořák to Duke Ellington: A Conductor Explores America's Music and Its African American Roots* (Oxford University Press, 2004).
2. Maurice Peress, *Maverick Maestro* (Paradigm Publishers, 2015), xii.

## Celebrating the Maurice Peress Archive (cont.)

3. Ibid., 13.

12. Ibid., 128.

4. Ibid., 25.

13. Ibid., 192.

5. Ibid., 45.

14. Ibid., 193.

6. Ibid., 2.

15. Ibid., 198.

7. Ibid., 123.

16. Ibid., 202.

8. Ibid., 140–41.

9. “Program for the First Carnegie Hall Concert: 23 January, 1943,” in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (Oxford University Press, 1993), 161.

10. Peress, *Maverick*, 156.

11. Ibid., 157.

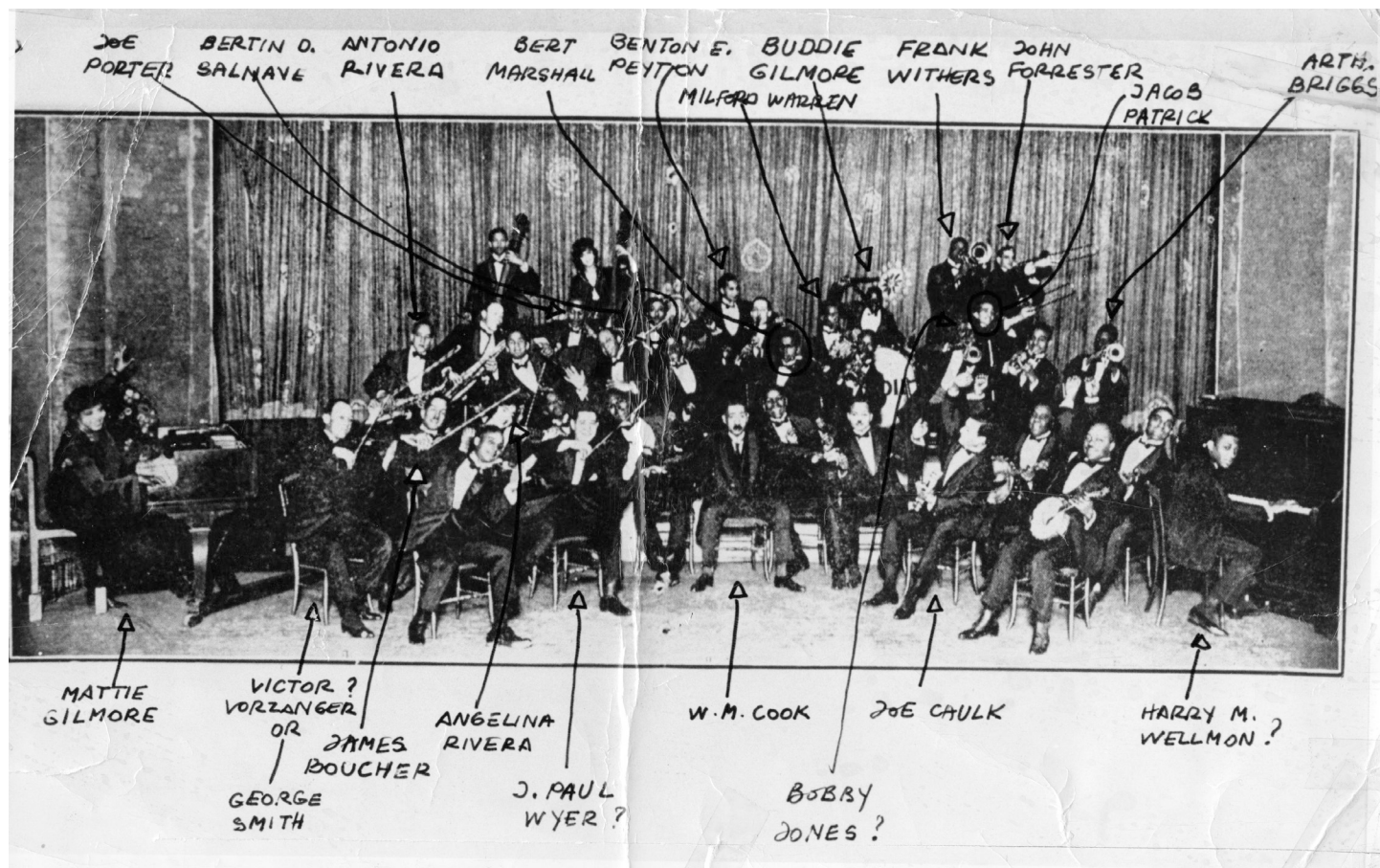


Figure 5