

# AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

The H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music  
*Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York*

Volume XLIX, Issue 1

Fall 2019

## “The Scented Parabola”: Occasions of Cecil Taylor’s Poetry

David Grubbs

It was, in retrospect, an especially inapt introduction. On the occasion in the spring of 2012 of Brooklyn College awarding Cecil Taylor, longtime resident of the borough of Brooklyn, an honorary doctorate of Fine Arts, Taylor’s contributions—introduced with the caveat “Some contend . . .”—were described exclusively in terms of the development of jazz, and with various incongruities, including John Coltrane inexplicably referred to in the introduction as “Johnny.” As Taylor approached the microphone, one might have anticipated his remarks to center on a lifetime in music. And, in a way, they did.

After a brief greeting, Taylor began:

it leans within the scented parabola  
of a grey slated rising  
palm of dampened mud  
impossible to discern  
the trigonal or endomorphism  
set and the architectural grid [ . . . ]<sup>1</sup>

Seated among the faculty close to the dais, and thus with my back to the thousands of attendees on the quad at Brooklyn College on a late May morning so perfect that I still recall the sunburn on the top of my head, I turned around and saw several thousand mouths to varying degrees agape at the spectacle of this unexpected performance. It seems impossible to overstate how unprepared the crowd was to receive Cecil Taylor’s delivery of his poetry, and I imagine that I will never again see an audience of that size so mystified—but also concerned. I think that many in attendance experienced it as a flow of malfunctioning speech, as something gone profoundly

**UNIT STRUCTURES** THE ART OF CECIL TAYLOR

Oct. 23-26, 2019  
The Graduate Center, CUNY  
and Brooklyn College

Sponsored by the Center for the Humanities, Advanced Research Collaborative, the Institute for Research on the African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean (IRADAC), PublicLab, Last & Found!, The CUNY Poetics Document Initiative, the James Gallery, the Shirley Powell Elbowah Ford, the PhD Program in English, the PhD Program in Music at the Graduate Center, CUNY, and the Hitchcock Institute for the Study of American Music at Brooklyn College, and Constance Old.

Photos of Cecil Taylor by Allen Ginsberg, courtesy Stanford University Libraries/Allen Ginsberg Estate  
Design by Partner & Partners

## Inside This Issue

Institute News by Stephanie Jensen-Moulton.....	5
Sonic Arts for All! by Max Alper.....	7
Helena Brown on the Met’s <i>Porgy and Bess</i> .....	11
Haitian Jazz in Brooklyn, by Ray Allen.....	17
Review of <i>Amazing Grace</i> by Mark Burford.....	19
Review of <i>The Contemporary Musical</i> by Alison Walls.....	23

## “The Scented Parabola” (cont.)

wrong with this elderly distinguished guest, a commencement speech gone haywire, in which the anticipated mode of reflection on a life and corresponding exhortations to graduates and their families instead gave way without warning to this syntactically ambiguous locution. A listener so inclined might have tried to enter into the poem’s meaning through its most basic material: its word choices, however learned, however daunting—the parabola, the trigonal and endomorphism sets, the architectural grid—terms that seemed to reflect the academic setting with reference to mathematics and engineering. Or the unprepared, unforeshadowed listener might have appreciated such ornate diction primarily as glittering array, a reception made possible by the sonic beauty of Taylor’s recitation. In a 2004 interview with Taylor by Chris Funkhouser that appeared in *Hambone*, what is intended to be a discussion of poetry turns to Taylor’s interest in dance, architecture, and the work of structural engineers, and one gets the sense that these were among his favorite poets: Nureyev and Calatrava and so on. In the same interview Taylor lays down a dictum, a basic statement of his ethos that seems fundamental to any discussion of intersections between his music and poetry when he remarks, “I never understood how musicians could play music for poets and not read poems. I don’t understand musicians who can play for dancers and not know how to dance.”<sup>2</sup>

What’s the origin of the parabola’s scent? What manner of fragrance suffuses the poem? The mirrored, u-shaped curve of the geometric figure resonates with the on/off, on/off patterning in the marvelous alternation of four vowels and four consonants, small virtuosic run pitched at the scale of a single word: *parabola*. And yet the mystery of the poem has to do with the “it” with which it begins—the unknown, unnamed entity that “leans within the scented parabola” (bringing to mind a similar kind of “it”-riddle from one of the long list of Taylor’s characteristically beguiling album titles: *It is in the Brewing Luminous*). In the course of this short poem the “it” might best be understood as an animating force, one “established by nature’s limbs” and responsible for “nutrients spread to rise spread to rise spread to rise / to the teeth and rim of leaves,” unspecified force that, in the final line

of the poem—reminding us again that this is both poem and riddle—is described as “having no parts of its own.”

That’s one way I can describe Cecil Taylor’s poetry and its occasions: as animating force seeking instantiation, especially in the form of a productive ambush. A sound engineer who assisted Taylor on a concert in Philadelphia in 2006 told me that when Taylor announced that in addition to playing the piano he would be reciting poetry, he chose not to have a vocal microphone positioned at the piano. Instead, Taylor proposed that they should set up several microphones throughout the space; in the end, they created four stations throughout the hall with microphones and taped-up Xeroxes of his poetry manuscripts, including one that was set up backstage—so that Taylor would best be able to surprise the audience when the time came, as he described it, “to poetry them.”

I can also describe Cecil Taylor’s poetry as multimodal event, as scented parabola. Historically these occasions have tended toward the fleeting, the uncollected, and at times marvelously startling: printed poems in small magazines; poems functioning as liner notes on LP jackets (*Unit Structures*, *Spring of Two Blue-Js*, *Dark to Themselves*, etc.), whether reproduced handwritten or typeset either lineated or as prose; as spoken introductions to musical performances, in concert or on record (*In Florescence*); as vocalizations incorporated into musical performances; as complete performances unto themselves (*Chinampas*)—not to mention as interview or album title or enigmatic response to an invitation to speak publicly.

Taylor poetried his audiences in numerous ways while largely keeping aloof of print culture. His is an especially strong counterexample to the idea that the test of a poem is how it functions on the page: that print publication, or more to the point, book publication, is the determining fact, the litmus of quality, one that above all is correlated to—beholden to—a test of time. Research to come into Taylor’s work will help to explain decisions with regard to poetry—but also regarding recordings and other kinds of publications—of what in his lifetime to compile and to put forward, and what to hold back, and why. I’m curious to learn more about

## “The Scented Parabola” (cont.)

his conspicuous reticence with regard to collecting and publishing his poetry in book form, especially in this moment before, one can well assume, his writings are posthumously collected and published, and the experience of his writing as decisive intervention, as rare occurrence, as performance, as ambush and event becomes more and more difficult to reconstruct.

I'm of mixed feelings about my own impulse at present to speak of Taylor's relation to poetry in terms of a refusal to publish or a thwarting of print culture. On the one hand, I'm looking forward to that moment when Taylor's poetry is collected in one place and one can better survey its breadth or better understand it in terms of its chronology or better align it with the different phases of his career as a musician and composer. And yet until now my experience of Taylor's poetry has been anything but that of the absence of print publication—it seems a strange way to describe it. I picked up the thread of Taylor's work in the late 1980s, just in time for the 1990 album *In Florescence*, released in the United States on the major label A&M (the same year that in their Modern Masters Jazz Series they also released titles by Don Cherry and Sun Ra). Three months after Taylor, together with William Parker and Gregg Bendian, recorded this album of short, focused trio performances, he returned to the RCA Studio in New York to memorialize brief, poetic introductions to the majority of the album's fourteen tracks, and decades later it's a snap to recall the electric effect of these oblique, uniquely affected wake-up calls. “In the glare of an obsidian blade . . .” is the one that still caroms around in my head.

*In Florescence* sent me in search of his 1987 album *Chinampas*, the one where his vocalizations and his poetry come to the fore, largely unchallenged. On *Chinampas*, the individual pieces move in beautifully modulated long arcs of sometimes frenetic activity not unlike his solo piano concerts and recordings; they travel from the lowest register of speaking voice to the highest range of squeaking voice, the one that sounds like the most physically wrenching moments of Antonin Artaud's radio play *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*, the artist—these two artists—less signaling through the flames than forcing air through an increasingly constricted windpipe, pitch ascending all the while,

in Taylor's case the voice leaping sufficiently and uncannily high so as to sound at a handful of especially chilling moments like a panicked child. It bears mention that this artist, who bestowed gems of titles to dozens of musical works, on this album of his poetry uses track lengths as titles—“5'04,” “3'43,” “5'46,” etc.; I understand this to signify that these otherwise untitled performances are mere slices of a continuum, segments, but I also appreciate the gestures as the mark of a master contrarian. Even as *Chinampas* is usually described as Taylor's one poetry record, his voice is rarely unaccompanied, and Taylor himself contributes interjections and textural beds of timpani, bells, small metal percussion objects, and, in crucial moments and passages, a multitracked doubling of his own voice. Occasionally a word is hammered into the ground through repetition, an obsessive handling or worrying or hectoring interrogation of a single note on the piano, a tremolo, that mocking tone, that perhaps self-mocking tone that ironizes, defamiliarizes—a technique for a favored subject: transformations that occur through natural physical processes, in one of *Chinampas*'s resonant phrases, “one mineral crystallizing into another.”

For the moment, it still makes sense to speak of the occasions of Cecil Taylor's poetry as those rare occasions, those bubblings up, those four microphones placed around the hall at the University of Pennsylvania's International House, somehow always in potential. Even after the preparations that were made to poetry the audience that evening in Philadelphia in 2006, Taylor stuck to the piano exclusively, and afterwards apologized to the sound engineer for having forgotten that he had planned to give a recitation, had forgotten that those four microphones stood at the ready. The occasions yet to come of Cecil Taylor's poetry will have to do with research and recovery, with editors' efforts, and if the experience of it will be less predicated on surprise or ambush, it's still likely to make a few mouths gape. These occasions will have to do with printed poems but also all manner of recordings, with wordless vocalizing as well as with verbal brilliance—wit, sonic wit—for which “poetry” seems as much of a stretch, which is to say no more of a stretch than those sometimes ambiguously honorific formulations through which the most

## “The Scented Parabola” (cont.)

distinctive voices in any of a number of fields—designers of clothing, designers of bridges—are hailed, crowned, dubbed, categorized, marginalized as poets.

### Notes

1. Video documentation of Taylor’s recitation can be found online here. The sole appearance that I have been able to discover of this poem in written form is as part of a dossier titled “With Cecil Taylor” containing interview excerpts and unpublished poetry compiled by Zach Layton and published on the website of the Brooklyn venue ISSUE Project Room on the occasion of their presentation with Harlem Stage of two performances by Taylor in 2012. See <https://issueprojectroom.org/news/cecil-taylor>. In personal correspondence, Layton notes that Taylor gave him permission to copy the unpublished poems, and the lineation in the above extract relies on the form in which this poem appears in the ISSUE Project Room website, with several alterations reflecting the video documentation of Taylor’s reading.

2. Chris Funkhouser, “Being Matter Ignited. . . : An Interview with Cecil Taylor,” *Hambone* no. 12 (1995):17–39, <https://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/funkhouser/ceciltaylor.html>.

## The H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music

**Stephanie Jensen-Mounton**, Interim Director

**Jeffrey Taylor**, Director (on leave)

**Ray Allen**, Senior Research Associate

**Lindsey Eckenroth**, Graduate Fellow

**Whitney George**, Administrative Assistant  
& Website Manager

### *Advisory Board:*

**George Boziwick**, Chief, Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (Retired)

**Susan Tyler Hitchcock**

**Richard Crawford**, Distinguished Professor emeritus,  
University of Michigan

**George Cunningham**, Chair, Department of Africana Studies,  
Brooklyn College

**Ellie M. Hisama**, Professor of Music, Columbia University

**Tania León**, Distinguished Professor of Music, Brooklyn  
College and the Graduate Center, CUNY

**Ursula Oppens**, Distinguished Professor of Music, Brooklyn  
College and the Graduate Center, CUNY

**Katherine Preston**, David N. & Margaret C. Bottoms Profes-  
sor of Music, The College of William and Mary

**Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.**, Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Term  
Professor of Music, University of Pennsylvania

**Judith Tick**, Matthews Distinguished University Professor,  
Northeastern University

American Music Review  
Volume XLIX, Issue 1

ISSN 1943-9385  
Fall 2019

Editors.....Ray Allen  
Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

Contributing Editors.....Jeffrey Taylor  
Jennifer C.H.J. Wilson

Managing Editor.....Lindsey Eckenroth  
Production Assistant.....Whitney George

AMR is published in the Fall and Spring. Copyright 2019 by the H. Wiley Hitchcock Institute for Studies in American Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, 2900 Bedford Ave., Brooklyn, NY 11210.

Tel: 718-951-5655  
Email: [hisam@brooklyn.cuny.edu](mailto:hisam@brooklyn.cuny.edu)  
Website: [www.hisam.org](http://www.hisam.org)

# Institute News

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

The decade's last installment of Institute News takes stock of HISAM's past and future. As Editor-in-Chief Jeff Taylor takes his well-deserved sabbatical leave, I am honored to step in as Interim Director of the Institute. While the Polycultural America Speaker Series and *American Music Review* still maintain their emphasis on American Music writ large, the editorial staff has agreed that the topic of American Music Pedagogy will be among the work we consider for each issue. In addition, given the broadening employment profiles of our contributors, we have decided to recognize our writers with bios at the end of the issue rather than with a single institutional affiliation. It's satisfying to read the brilliant work we've received from this wide spectrum of authors, and we look forward to reading more submissions for our first issue of the new twenties.

One great advantage of our location at Brooklyn College is the strength of our interdisciplinary programs. The events on our Polycultural America Speaker Series continue to draw upon these strengths. The series began 20 September with a Haitian Creole Jazz Symposium and Jam Session, co-sponsored by the CUNY Haitian Studies Institute (see Ray's report in this issue).

From 23 through 26 October, **Michelle Yom**, a Ph.D. student at the CUNY Graduate Center, led a three-day conference on the enigmatic Cecil Taylor, co-sponsored by the Hitchcock

Institute and the Center for Humanities. The comprehensive symposium offered four nights of superb experimental performances, live poetry readings, and academic papers. Institute contributor **David Grubbs** vividly remembers the unusual commencement address given by Taylor at Brooklyn College in his contribution to this issue. Our Spring 2020 issue will share more of the wealth from this extraordinary event.

We all celebrated with our HISAM colleague **Ray Allen** as he gave several book launches this fall, one of which made it on to our speaker series. His latest monograph, *Jump Up: Caribbean Carnival Music in New York City* (Oxford, 2019) "traces the migration and transformation of Trinidadian calypso music in Harlem and Brooklyn through a diasporic transnational lens." Ray spoke to a packed audience in Tanger Hall on 6 November, introducing soca (soul/calypso) arranger **Frankie McIntosh** and steel pan players **Garvin Blake** and **Winston Wellington**, three Brooklyn-based Carnival musicians who figured prominently in the book. McIntosh and Blake closed the presentation with a rousing performance of calypso jazz. Congratulations, Ray!

Our final speaker for the Fall 2019 series remembered performing in the old Gershwin Building when he was a Master's student in 2009. **Carl Patrick Bolleia** has since earned his DMA from Rutgers and entered the historical performance



*Big Band Concert featuring the music of Cecil Taylor, lead by Karen Borca  
photo by Robert I. Sutherland-Cohen*

## Institute News (cont.)

program at The Juilliard School, but he was thrilled to return to his alma mater to perform his passion: American piano works. Carl performed on both harpsichord and piano to a lively audience of undergraduate music majors who were fascinated by his program of onomatopoeia in keyboard pieces dating all the way back to the eighteenth century.

As noted earlier, **Jeff Taylor** is on sabbatical this year. Thanks to a Tow Travel Grant, he has made trips to do archival research in Chicago and Berkeley for his book on Earl “Fatha” Hines and the Chicago jazz scene of the 1920s and 1930s. He is also rediscovering his love for the piano.

In addition to continuing with her work at RILM and HISAM, managing editor **Lindsey Eckenroth** spent the summer as a fellow at the Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP), where she assisted the curatorial director in researching and developing content for new exhibits. Lindsey also had the pleasure of playing flute in the summer 2019 premiere of **Whitney George**’s opera *Princess Maleine* at La Mama Experimental Theater Club, as well as performing in Concrete Timbre’s production of *Voyage de Ouf* in October.

**Whitney George**’s summer was overtaken with rehearsals and the premiere of her opera *Princess Maleine*, hailed as “an operatic gem” by *Opera Wire* and a “stunning new opera” by *Voce di Meche*.

Since completing my term as Director of the Conservatory of Music, I’ve kept busy. As a 2019–2021 Tow Professor, I will have the opportunity to complete several longstanding research projects in the area of American music and disability. Spring 2020 will bring a long-awaited Symposium on American Disability Arts to Brooklyn College. And look for more exciting news from the Hitchcock Institute as we look forward to our 50th Anniversary!

Yours truly,  
Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

“*At Sonic Arts For All!, I get to be me.*”

# Sonic Arts For All! Reaching New Students Through Music Technology

Max Alper

- DJ Storm, age 11

I founded Sonic Arts For All (SAFA!) in late 2015 in response to what I observed to be an alarming trend happening today in music education. With the undeniably crucial role technology plays in today's continuously evolving music industry, why is it that students only formally study this technology in higher education settings and not elementary and middle school? Why are K-12 students left to fend for themselves when it comes to accessing the necessary tools to pursue this artistic field? Of the meager 20% of New York City public schools with music programs, astonishingly fewer than 5% of those schools have implemented any technology components to their curricula. After completing my Bachelor's degree in music composition and technology, I made it my mission to make music technology more accessible. Providing a support system for the next generation of artists is where the root of the Sonic Arts For All mission lies: to make music technology accessible to diverse K-12 student demographics. Click here to watch a SAFA! student DJ Rock.

## Accessible Technology

SAFA! courses and workshops are an alternative and/or supplement to traditional K-12 and special needs music education. Immediacy and autonomy are important for growing and sustaining passion. Unlike more traditional music classrooms, our mission is to provide students a space for learning concepts through a hands-on technological approach. Rather than learning to read music before learning to make music, music technology allows students to interact directly with sounds on day one. Therefore, at the heart of the SAFA! program are open-ended projects where students develop a portfolio of their own compositions. In completing these projects, students are allowed to follow whatever thread they find most exciting, whether it be a pulsing beat or an otherworldly soundscape.

We create studios that act as sound laboratories, providing structured guidance while allowing students opportunities to explore the full range of sonic possibilities afforded by electronic and digital technologies. Not only do we believe in providing



access to music technology, but we also consult our students and their families in utilizing accessible consumer technology for the purpose of engaging in digital music making. For this reason, the iPad has become the bread and butter of the SAFA! Learning tools.

Many K-12 students use iPads or other tablets and smartphones for a variety of recreational activities online. This includes watching videos on YouTube, gaming, or maintaining a social media presence. Without even realizing it, many families already own the necessary tools to create digital music. A nearly endless selection of introductory to advanced music production applications for iOS and Droid platforms exists, many of which are free or cost less than five dollars. The SAFA! Workshop Model uses touch screen technology because of this affordability and availability. Touch screens also eliminate the intimidation factor that comes with approaching new musical instruments and interfaces for the first time. While the concepts can be new, the device is quite familiar.

Through this familiarity, students are able to walk away from their first workshop experience with a new perspective on a device they have, up to that point, only used for recreation. We witness this lightbulb turn on, time and time again, when a student realizes

## Sonic Arts For All! (cont.)

they already possess the necessary tools to make music outside the classroom. In many ways, the SAFA! teaching model facilitates this Do-It-Yourself mentality in students. It's about fostering a classroom environment that inspires students to tap into musical capabilities they otherwise may not have even realized they possessed. Click here to listen to DJ Thunder's "Happy Cockroach."

### Fundamentals Meet Technology

The primary goal at SAFA! is to preserve, respect, and support local music traditions by allowing each of our sites to take our centralized curriculum and adopt it to the history and needs of their specific community. This way we not only enable new students to create music, but also foster stylistic diversity and honor local musical heritages. Too often educators lose the interests of their students by not providing a classroom repertoire that speaks to them.

Through popular music genres, music technology education has the ability to engage new student demographics in curricula dedicated to more traditional or fundamental music concepts, including:

- rhythm and tempo in relation to popular genres (determining BPM for a hip-hop beat vs. a famous film score)
- pitch and scale qualities in relation to a popular song (Is \_\_\_\_\_ in a major or minor key? How can you tell?)
- melody vs. harmony through synthesizers (utilizing pads and other polyphonic synth patches to create harmony, while using monophonic synth patches for arpeggiated basslines and lead melodies)

In the case of teaching music fundamentals through technology, SAFA! has found success using Garageband for iOS as a primary teaching tool. Throughout 2018 and 2019 we had the pleasure of serving as resident educators at the Apple Stores in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and SoHo, Manhattan. There, we crafted weekly lesson plans dedicated to navigating fundamental music concepts through the Garageband digital audio workstation (DAW) for iOS. Group discussions at the beginning of each workshop

allowed us to connect the weekly fundamental topics to the musical interests of our students. Two particular features of this software that proved effective in covering more of these traditional music topics were the Smart Keyboard and the Beat Sequencer.

### iOS Garageband: Smart Keyboard

The Smart Keyboard allows for the user to perform and record on pre-made chord pads, each automatically tuned to the key of the project. As opposed to a traditional keyboard, the Smart Keyboard allows for instant chord and scale performability without any keyboard training whatsoever. This has proved to be quite useful when working with young beginners, many of whom have never before taken a music class. Through the Smart Keyboard, chord changes and compositional structure are made simple and intuitive for experimentation and performance, allowing for compositional ideas to be recorded on the spot.

The Smart Keyboard has a built-in arpeggiator that



*iOS Garageband Smart Keyboard*

allows for any harmonic materials to be broken into melodic patterns. This has proved to be an effective tool when explaining the difference between harmony and melody to young beginners. The arpeggiator has the ability to run at a variety of rhythmic note values, anywhere from whole notes to dotted 64th notes. This has prompted our students to experiment in creating melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic patterns as well. Some of the past topics covered while using the Smart Keyboard have included:



## Sonic Arts For All! (cont.)

- instrumental arrangement (using chord functions for pad synthesizers and piano, using arpeggiator for a bassline)
- polyrhythms (assigning separate rhythmic note values to individual arpeggiator instruments, such as a 16th note bassline over a melody in triplets)
- chord structure (using Smart Keyboard as a guide to composing chord structures, as seen below)

Click here to listen to DJ Shanza's "Sequencers And Arpeggiators."

### iOS Garageband: Beat Sequencer

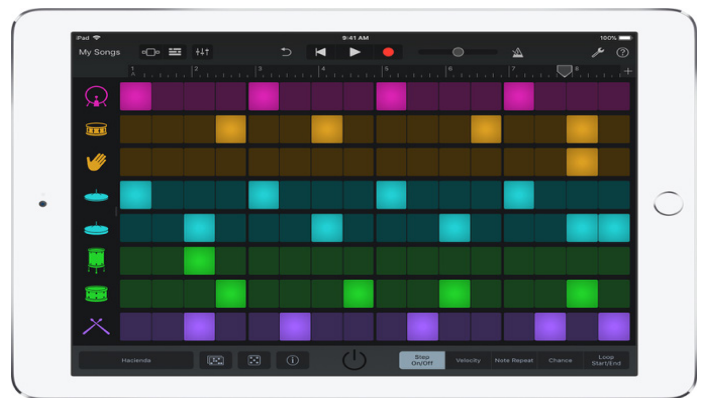
The Beat Sequencer is a sixteen-step programmable drum machine that serves as an alternative drum interface to the standard "finger drum" pads that Garageband has used since its first iOS edition. The function of a sequencer allows for musical data to be manually programmed ahead of time or on the fly while the sound is automatically generated. The utilization of generative instruments over performative instruments has negated much of the typical anxiety of live performance for many SAFA! students.

Through automated sound generation, students translate their musical ideas into electronic gestures without needing to worry about specific cues or changes one would typically find in more performative instruments. This is also due to the fact that most generative electronic instruments are quantized, meaning musical input is limited to predetermined rhythmic and tonal values. Not only does this result in more sympathetic rhythms and pitches, but it allows for students to compose and produce works through custom presets determined ahead of time.

Similar to other step sequencers, the rhythmic note values are illustrated through sixteen steps in a linear grid. For students with little to no experience in music notation, this linear grid provides a unique image that teaches rhythmic note values in a visual way that, in essence, is another form of music notation. Some topics that have been taught through step sequencers include:

- time signatures (16 steps divided into 4 sections = 4/4)
- polyrhythms (assigning separate sequence lengths to each track of the sequencer, such as 16 over 12 over 10, etc.)
- rhythmic arrangement (how does a hip-hop drum pattern sound vs. a techno drum pattern?)

These unique tools in Garageband have allowed our students to carefully write their compositional ideas into musical realities. This streamlined approach to music making provides new windows into music fundamentals and composition. It acts as a confidence-booster for all of our beginning students, many of whom have been excluded from the typical music classroom entirely. Click here to listen to DJ Ami's "Robot Funk."



*iOS Garageband Beat Sequencer*

### Addressing Disability Education Through Technology

Before founding Sonic Arts For All in 2015, I had worked as a music technology consultant for AHRC New York, a citywide social services group dedicated to providing opportunities for New Yorkers of all ages with both intellectual and physical disabilities. Each site was allotted ten iPads to be used by clients for recreational activities, many of which already had Garageband installed on them. This was the first time I was able to witness the impact of touchscreen technology on inclusive music classrooms.

While many of my students were unable to play traditional instruments due to limitations in motor skills, automated technology such as generative

## **Sonic Arts For All!** (cont.)

instrumentation and quantization of musical input has allowed these artists to digitally express musical gestures. For many, this was the first time they were able to physically create music. Something as small as a light tapping gesture on an iPad could result in endless musical ideas. The ease of navigating this technology created autonomy and empowerment.

When SAFA! was founded, part of our mission was to continue this practice of providing inclusive music learning environments for special needs students, in both the private and after school setting. Since 2016, I have had the pleasure of working privately with DJ Noah. He is a thirteen-year-old student, born and raised in Brooklyn, who loves pizza and video games, and also has autism. Though Noah is quite musically adept and had some prior keyboard training, he would often find piano performance frustrating and physically triggering. His parents reached out to SAFA! to find a way to nurture his love of music making in a more sympathetic, sensory-friendly environment. Like most kids his age, Noah is well versed in iPad technology, which made for an easy transition to making music on his own personal device with some guidance. DJ Noah has excelled at utilizing the Korg Kaossilator family of instruments, a touch-based synthesizer and drum machine that is performed solely by dragging one's finger across or tapping an LED-lit X/Y grid. Unlike most synthesizers and drum machines, the Kaossilator has no faders, pads, buttons, or keys.

The physical relationship between gesture and musical result is strengthened through its immediacy. When Noah holds down the grid, a drum beat of his choosing begins to loop. When he drags his finger to the right, the more complex the beat becomes. When he taps the grid and immediately lets go, he hears a long slapback delay tail on a single drum hit. When he performs a monophonic synthesizer, Noah sets the scale of the instrument ahead of time, sliding his finger across the X-axis to hear each individual note in the scale. Through its quantized loop function, the Kaossilator is able to save sequences in a consonant, rhythmic grid, allowing for on-the-spot composition through live performance.

This intuitive instrument design has meshed well with Noah's abilities and its flexibility has allowed us to customize curriculum designs for other students

with motor disabilities. It allows for complex music to be made immediately regardless of the level of motor skills in a student. Since the Kaossilator's creation, other iOS softwares such as Garageband and Animoog have added X/Y graphic touchscreen features, allowing more accessible interactivity for special needs populations. [Click here to listen to DJ Noah's "Friday Jam."](#)

### **Moving Forward**

Our goal as sonic arts educators is to continue our research into accessible digital music interfaces through partnerships with like minded music technology developers and manufacturers. In the past year alone, SAFA! has partnered with Korg and Apple, as well as start-up developers such as Artiphon and Auxy, to forge new curricula centered around creating an inviting music making environment. Music technology is now intuitive enough to engage students of any learning style, allowing the individual to design music at a pace that suits them.

By focusing our workshops on learning by doing, we've seen a tremendous growth in retention and interests among our students. Music technology empowers young people to work independently, build self-confidence, and explore musical ideas they've never before executed. The Sonic Arts For All! staff facilitates this self-empowerment among the populations we serve. We seek to sustain a musical interest even among our youngest students that will lead them on the path towards higher education and a position in the professional workforce.

# Helena Brown on Classical Singing, New York, and the Met's Production of *Porgy and Bess*

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton interviews Helena Brown

After several weeks of negotiating her punishingly busy schedule, I finally had a chance to sit down to a dim sum lunch with emerging opera star Helena Brown, who is a dramatic soprano based in New York City. I caught up with Brown just before a performance call time she had that evening, and the day before her general audition as a soloist for the Metropolitan Opera.

Brown did not always know she would become an opera singer. For a time, she considered careers in medicine, political science, or law; given her direct manner, clear and resonant speaking voice, and poised presence, any of these choices would have been a successful one. But once Brown had joined the college choir at Randolph Macon Women's College, her singular voice and distinct musical talent could not go unnoticed for long. Brown then transferred and graduated as a Voice and Arts Administration Major from Hollins University (my own alma mater).

Upon arrival in New York to pursue her MM degree at the Manhattan School of Music, Brown found that although she was vocally very competitive, the challenges to a singing career were more spiritual. So she made a concrete decision to keep going, and to understand her career as a business. She recalls:

HB: The public perception was, "OK, you have these things going on in your voice," "you sound more vibrant here [in the *passaggio*] as a soprano," and everyone thinks they know better and that I should do something about it. Some people would say I'm a contralto and that I should really do something about it. Well, I'm already singing some contralto-y things, if you will, and contraltos don't just sing things that are marked as "contralto," do they? Of course not.

SJM: It seems really odd to me that people try to cast aspersions on what you're doing beautifully already to assert that you need to do something better. That must have been so frustrating.



Helena Brown, Dramatic Soprano

HB: Yeah!

SJM: So did you take these comments back to your teacher?

HB: I did. I already knew that I could do both [soprano and mezzo singing] and that it was really a kind of marketing strategy. What will satisfy the public enough to let them enjoy my voice and allow me to work? But it is also worth noting that I particularly enjoy dramatic soprano roles and can identify to characters in many ways. I'm not saying that one *fach* is better than the other; I just could go either way. So, eventually I started to experiment with some roles and really sing them. Like *Ariadne*: that was one of my transitional roles and it's something that's still right for me.

SJM: I can totally hear that in your voice!

HB: Thank you! Maybe the Met will call it from my repertoire list during my audition tomorrow...maybe! But back to the *fach* discrepancy—there are some *zwischen* things in Wagner that I can sing.<sup>1</sup> Some German coaches say that I could [be a *zwischen-fach*]

## Helena Brown (cont.)

however, I would say that my voice is more needed as a dramatic soprano. It fulfills me a bit more to stay in that fach primarily and then branch out. It took years to figure this out, by the way, and I'm still figuring it out. But it seems to be working!

SJM: So you said you teach—do you do it locally?

HB: So in addition to doing solo masterclasses at colleges, while on tour with the American Spiritual Ensemble, I did group masterclasses in tandem with our concert performances. I teach privately and right now; I'm originating this position as a resident artist for a private school here on the Upper East Side. That has been very fulfilling. I'm so happy for the students to see a working performer who is unusual in so many respects—should I go in depth on that one? [laughs] I'm unusual in that I'm a person of color, I'm tall, I'm not thin, I have a very large voice, I have a very colorful voice. People compare me to Jessye Norman but I am not her, and that's fine—I have my own name [laughs].

SJM: Call me something other than Jessye please?

HB: That's gonna take a while. [laughs]

SJM: That's both a compliment and oddly insulting.

HB: Yeah. And so... it's good for the students to see me. I can really answer their questions with a bit more knowledge and relevance than some other teachers can. That's just the way it is. I'm in the trenches every day, so of course I can answer those questions. Plus, I'm accessible. I don't want to be pegged with this diva persona that people assume about opera singers. That's just not me. OK, in some respects it is me! [laughs] I like fashion, I am very particular about certain things—but I am still accessible. I can compromise. I can just be there as a real person, not someone who is so far away that you should idolize them. That's not what I'm going for.

SJM: So was there a moment when you realized you didn't have to think about your next move, or got management? Or are you even considering management?

HB: OK that's a lot. [laughs] I am trying to secure management—someone who can help me come up with a plan—and by a plan, I mean an approach. Really, I am starting to think that I should go outside the traditional New York geography and over to LA to work within a different framework of marketing. I want to develop a team that is going to approach my brand in the way that young people know and respond. Maybe I need a kind of social media overhaul with some viral videos. I need people who have concepts that are not antiquated. This is the problem with management now, especially with companies that follow the old guard, for instance, you only get hired if you worked in Europe for years until someone went over the pond and grabbed you. It's that old precept of waiting for the right moment. But, I don't have the luxury of just waiting. Being a cancer survivor, I know I'm not just going to sit around, wait, and then say "Thank you." I'm going to make it happen for myself. So, I need someone on my team who's willing to take risks, especially since I'm a bigger voice. My dance card isn't empty, but it's also not completely full.

I am of the opinion that we should have more American dramatic sopranos coming up through American opera companies. I shouldn't have to go to Europe in order to make it happen, and then have America say, "Oh, please come back, we've heard this about you and we'd love to offer you this role." I'm not opposed to Europe—in fact, I love it there. But I should be able to stay in my country and have my art as my livelihood. Over the pond, it's kind of right time, right place, right manager. You must have a manager going in. In the U.S., that is changing. There is this new thing that is happening: casting from websites and promotional videos. Opera has not defaulted to this method, but we are starting to see it take root for some smaller houses with less money/time to hold auditions in New York. Virtual casting is already happening for actors and within the musical theater community. Then, there is the controversial way of casting, in which some of the hiring decision is based on whether or not the artist has clout—whether they are "Hollywood ready," whatever that means. I mean, you could consider me Hollywood ready—there's Lizzo out there, right? [SJM: I love her!] But I shouldn't have to embody a person who already

## Helena Brown (cont.)

took those risks! Here I am willing to do it for myself. I'm working it out. I'm at the Met right now, doing *Porgy and Bess*, I'm a soloist in the ensemble and I'm making waves. People are noticing me. And I'm having a fabulous time doing it!

SJM: Tell me about the trajectory of *Porgy and Bess*. Did they have an open call? Did you get an invitation to audition?

HB: Did they have an open call? I'm not sure—I didn't get in quite that way. It's more like I knew someone who knew someone. I knew Maestro Donald Palumbo from Glimmerglass when I was there as a young artist. While in residence, I got to work with Maestro on my individual repertoire and received a lot of encouragement from him, as well as some discouragement because I had expressed interest in being part of the regular full time chorus. He said, "I'm not comfortable with you not pursuing this career as fully as you can... you should really try the solo career first."

SJM: So he was envisioning you not as a member of the ensemble but rather as a member of the cast.

HB: Yes. In a way. I did continue pursuing solo work and I was getting hired. But *Porgy and Bess* is different from a full time chorus show. It's an ensemble show and those in the ensemble tend to be soloists. Plus, it's a show that I know intimately. I had done over sixty performances of *Porgy and Bess* before I came to the Met. They were different productions, one of which was on tour throughout Europe with New York Harlem Productions. That's when I did my first leading role, Serena. I think that really put a feather in my cap. We were on the standard theater working schedule of eight shows a week, and I was fine. I don't know—I was warned that it would be rough to do so many back-to-back performances for a show of this magnitude. But I had built up a technique, so it wasn't rough for me. I mean, when we think to the times of yore with singers such as Flagstad, they had back-to-back shows all the time, and they would travel on top of that. It was much more than what we do now. If they were able to build the endurance to do that, why can't I do this? So I did!

It made me a wiser singer, because I learned what was expected, how to grow into a role, and how to consistently be a good colleague.

So, knowing Maestro Palumbo already, and hearing from a number of people that the Met hadn't quite filled out the chorus, I contacted him. But I didn't take it as a given that they wanted me. I really sold myself. I said, "OK, Maestro Palumbo, you heard me during these years... I'd really like you to hear my progress and see what I now have to offer." And thank goodness it went well. I got hired!

SJM: And after you got hired, how long was the rehearsal process?

HB: We had a lot of time. We had the pre-season in August that stretched on into September until our season opening on the 23rd. So it was an ample rehearsal time, but it was absolutely needed. I think some of us even wished it was longer. They did this production at ENO [English National Opera] and in Amsterdam at the Dutch National Opera. So, this is a co-production between the Met and English National Opera. The director came in already knowing the show but opened himself to the different dynamics of an almost entirely new cast. Many of us come from different walks of life and are veterans from different productions of *Porgy*. We arrived with differing concepts but worked together beautifully to create a unique community for this production, being careful not to fall into the habits some of us naturally developed doing eight-show weeks.

SJM: Were there people in the ensemble who had never done the piece before?

HB: Yes. I think that Maestro Palumbo really designed a stellar cast. He got to choose the ensemble members and it really shows what he had in mind to bring us all together. All of these distinctive timbres and diverse approaches to the shaping of a line. All beautiful.

SJM: Was there anything you disagreed with in the show as you rehearsed? Artistic decisions?

HB: It's hard to say because I've enjoyed the process

## Helena Brown (cont.)

so much. I've really relished the different perspectives that have come into the show. For example: the Met firmly, firmly decided to focus on natural hair, which is not something most opera companies do—I just... Even in the wigs, imitating my natural hair texture—I mean, there are so many different hair textures and different types [of natural hair], but type 4A, B and C are very rarely represented.<sup>2</sup> We did a mix of using our own hair, adding pieces, or just making wigs that were handtied and designed to look exactly like the kinky curly 4A–4C hair type. And it didn't come without some struggle and mishaps, tripping over each other a little bit. That revealed our desperate need to have a dialogue with each other. Thankfully, as an AGMA [American Guild of Musical Artists] delegate for this production, I was able to help facilitate that conversation, as in, "Here is how I would do my hair, here is how I grew up in this culture with this sort of hairstyle," or "This sort of thing is not something we would do because of X." It's not textbook knowledge.

SJM: That's a remarkable amount of care towards the performer's viewpoint about something that the performers really care about!

HB: Yes! It's something I've been very proud of, and I'm glad I could contribute to that. I do remember talking to the wig department and one of the artists saying that she wished someone from the press would acknowledge this.

SJM: Right! I saw that Christian Mark Gibbs and some others from the ensemble were excited about the choreography in the opera. What are people's thoughts on that?

HB: It's mixed. We have some scenes such as the funeral scene, where Serena is mourning her husband Robbins and the community has come to mourn with her, supporting the family during this very tragic time, and just figuring out, what do we do now? How do we keep our brother who has just passed by the hands of one of our own? How do we keep him from ending up in the hands of the medical community and being defiled? This is still relevant today...

So, in that scene, the Met has incorporated the dancers in ways that seem to push people's buttons. I don't personally have a problem with it. If one is to say, "this is not appropriate, this is not done, you wouldn't dance like that at a funeral," I would say perhaps not at yours [laughs]. Let's remember what time period this is and where people were coming from and the fact that this is a community that's so very insular, with so many different personalities. There may have been people who would dance and praise God in an outward way. It is not the same Christianity that we know today. Further, it may not be the same faith that we know and recognize, saying, "Oh, that's from the Baptist church," etc. So, who am I to judge? The expression of movement comes from a very real and genuine place, embodying the voice of the community, via the unique people who are on stage and who have been in that rehearsal process for weeks and weeks. That's something very special. And also, I need to note that the choreography is done by a prominent black artist [Camille A. Brown]; that's very special on the Met stage. I'm going to take extra care to understand that perspective. There's nothing with which I fundamentally disagree.

SJM: So as a cast member, when you were getting direction, did they discuss Porgy's disability at all? I'm interested in different ways you may have seen his mobility portrayed.

HB: Oh yeah. Absolutely. Porgy's disability has been expressed in very different ways. I've been in productions where in the score, Porgy says, "bring my cart," and the stage direction specifies that Porgy is either in a cart or has a goat. I've seen a low, dolly cart used on stage, which could be very hard for the singer when combined with the already sizable vocal demand. But this is not the only way for a Porgy to get around. When I was with Glimmerglass for their production of *Porgy and Bess*, I remember him having one crutch. That is a way. With our production at the Met, Eric Owens, as Porgy, has been using a leg brace in addition to a walking stick and crutch. He has been very careful in how he expresses Porgy's disability, but I also think that the leg brace makes it easier to do so. I speak from experience as I was in leg braces

## Helena Brown (cont.)



*Residents of Catfish Row shelter from the hurricane  
from Met's production of Porgy and Bess (2019)*

growing up. I've had leg surgeries and everything, so I can identify with this type of disability. I think Eric Owens' approach is very delicate. He really leaned into the device and chose to use it for the majority of rehearsals. I think this attention to detail is coming across well on the stage.

SJM: How did he do navigating the stage? Did they seem to make any alterations to the set given his need to use this device?

HB: Well, it's a large open house set, and it's a rotating set. But if we're being real, I think it would be dangerous to alter the set to favor Porgy's disability. That's not being honest to how Porgy had to function in society, in a time when there were few such considerations. But there is one consideration that is realistic: There are two levels in the house and Porgy's room is on the first level. Perhaps because the community wanted to save him the trouble of the stairs?

SJM: Is there anyone in the ensemble with a disability?

HB: No. And that would be an interesting choice.

SJM: I'm always curious because it seems that more people during that time would have had mobility disabilities due to polio, etc. And I wonder if directors are ever thinking that way.

HB: Wow, I'm glad you said that. But then how do you portray the character without making it a caricature? One thing I would really love is to invite people who have acknowledged disabilities onstage to be part of the production, to more naturally have

that authenticity, rather than trying to model it. For example (though in no way does it compare), are you going to do blackface in order to represent what it's like to be a black person? I know how I felt as a young kid watching operas on television and then seeing someone painted to look like me, or going to see *Aida* at the Met and seeing the same thing. It alienated me. I think that is what made it harder for me to approach singing until someone really put it in front of me, later in life.

SJM: I was thinking about a production of Lera Auerbach's *The Blind*, where the audience was led into the hall wearing blindfolds to simulate the experience of being blind, and how, like blackface, it's a wrongheaded representation. And further, would it be better then, to only hire a Japanese singer for *Butterfly*, etc. etc., writing in a program note that we acknowledge the racist history of this opera? Or is it better to remove these troubled pieces from performance entirely? The great piece with the ugly colonialist past? It's a problem for all of us. And I think *Porgy and Bess* has this history, too.

## Helena Brown (cont.)

HB: That's a really difficult one. We cannot escape that it was written by someone with white skin, portraying the struggles and stories of people with darker skin who still don't get a fair shake in society. To this day we are working on it. We talk about diversity in opera, and how *Porgy* either helps or hurts that. I'm talking about the "*Porgy* trap." I was warned about it years ago when I was considering the European tour in 2015. I was warned by my coaches and countless others. I decided not to listen to them. I don't understand why I can't honor this piece and still sing an array of repertoire. I do understand that, as a big voice and as a person of color, I need to play with a certain deck, and in order to be in the game I need to play the game. Well, I decided to play it differently. I can't say that the *Porgy* trap doesn't exist. I have observed that there are people who frequent roles in *Porgy and Bess*, and do not get many role opportunities in different operas, whether it's Strauss, Wagner, or Puccini. But I don't think that's going to be me. I won't affirm it. I can do all of it.

SJM: It implies that you don't have self-determinism to say that you'll be trapped in this way, but then there's the larger institutional racism to consider.

HB: It's an important part of self-actualization. We have to work within and outside the system to change it. And as we approach a new decade, those who say, "That's just the way it is," are retiring from this industry.

SJM: Do you think that being in this production has given you something that will move you forward?

HB: It's only been a few months, and we're remounting the production in January and February, but luckily, I do have another contract. I'm going to take part in a more intimate opera by Ricky Ian Gordon that's literally called *Intimate Apparel*. When I received the offer to audition, I said to myself, "Oh wow, it's happening and I've only been here for three days!" [laughs]. The naysayers may say, "It's only because you're a woman of color," but I am still very excited.

SJM: It's happening because you have a glorious voice and that certain quality.

HB: Well, I believe so, and I am covering one of the lead roles over seventy-six shows. So I think I have a strong chance of singing one of those seventy-six.

Read more about dramatic soprano Helena Brown and hear her sing at her website, <https://www.helena-brown.com/>. And you can still catch her in *Porgy and Bess* at the Metropolitan Opera through February.

### Notes

1. *Zwischen-fach* [between categories] typically signifies a female opera singer who can sing either mezzo or soprano roles.
2. Types 4A–4C refers to a typology of black natural hair types created by hairstylist Andre Walker in 1997.



## Global Jazz Connections: Haitian Jazz in Brooklyn

Ray Allen

Jazz scholars have long acknowledged a “Latin Tinge” in early American jazz, attributing its source to the musics of Cuba, Argentina, and other Spanish speaking countries of the Caribbean and South America. The musical interchange between the French-speaking Caribbean Islands and US is less well understood. This, despite a well-documented in-migration by Black and Creole Haitians to New Orleans during the nineteenth century, and the fact that two of the Crescent City’s early jazz icons, Ferdinand “Jelly Roll” Morton and Sidney Bechet, were French Creoles of possible Caribbean ancestry.

jazz styles? And finally, what exactly constitutes Haitian jazz, perhaps better termed Haitian “Creole” jazz, in the twenty-first century?

These were among the issues debated in a lively symposium titled “Haitian Jazz and American Jazz: Historical Connections and Specificities,” held at Brooklyn College on 20 September 2019. Organized by Professor Jean Eddy Saint Paul of the CUNY Haitian Studies Institute, in collaboration with the Hitchcock Institute, the gathering brought together noted Haitian scholars and musicians for an evening of discussion and music. Musicologist



*Alix “Buyu” Ambroise, Jr. (saxophone) and Jean Chardavoine (guitar) heading an evening of Haitian Jazz*

This history, coupled with the ongoing musical interchange between Haiti and the US over the last century, raises a number of significant questions. What, for example, were the influences of Afro-Haitian *Vodou, rara*, and other traditional rhythms on New Orleans’ incipient jazz scene of the early twentieth century? How did swing and post-war styles of US jazz shape Haitian dance and popular styles such as *Vodou-jazz* of the 1940s and 1950s, *kompa* of the 1960s, and *mizik rasin* (roots music) of the 1970s and 1980s? How do contemporary Haitian jazz musicians, networking between Haiti and diasporic communities in New York, Miami, and Paris, continue to dialogue with modern US

Melvin Butler of the University of Miami, journalist Vania Andre of the *Haitian Times*, and renowned jazz musicians Jean Chardavoine (guitar), Alix “Buyu” Ambroise, Jr. (saxophone), Joel Widmaier (percussion), and Pauline Jean (vocals) were among those who spoke and performed for a sold-out audience at Brooklyn College’s Buchwald Theater.

The event was so successful that three of the musicians, Chardavoine, Ambroise,

and Jean, were invited back to play with the Brooklyn College Global Jazz Ensemble on 26 November. Director D.D. Jackson and Global Jazz Masters student Julian Velasco created big band arrangements of compositions by Chardavoine and Ambroise that featured the guitarist, saxophonist, and vocalist Jean, all backed by the Brooklyn College band. Especially memorable was Velasco’s arrangement of *Kote Mon Yo*, an original piece by Ambroise that fronted singers Jean and Brooklyn College student Joelle Leslie Lewis.

The November Haitian Jazz concert was the latest partnership between Brooklyn College’s Global Jazz Ensemble and local Brooklyn

## Haitian Jazz in Brooklyn (cont.)

musicians. Previous projects have featured West Indian, Yiddish, and South Indian jazz hybrids. These mini-residencies and performances, the foundation of our Global Jazz Masters program, aim to explore connections between contemporary jazz and world music. Stay tuned for a West African jazz collaboration in the Spring of 2020.



*D. D. Jackson (piano), Pauline Jean (vocals), and Joelle Leslie Lewis (vocals) perform Kote Mon Yo with the Brooklyn College Global Jazz Ensemble*

## “My Soul is Satisfied”: *Amazing Grace*, At Last

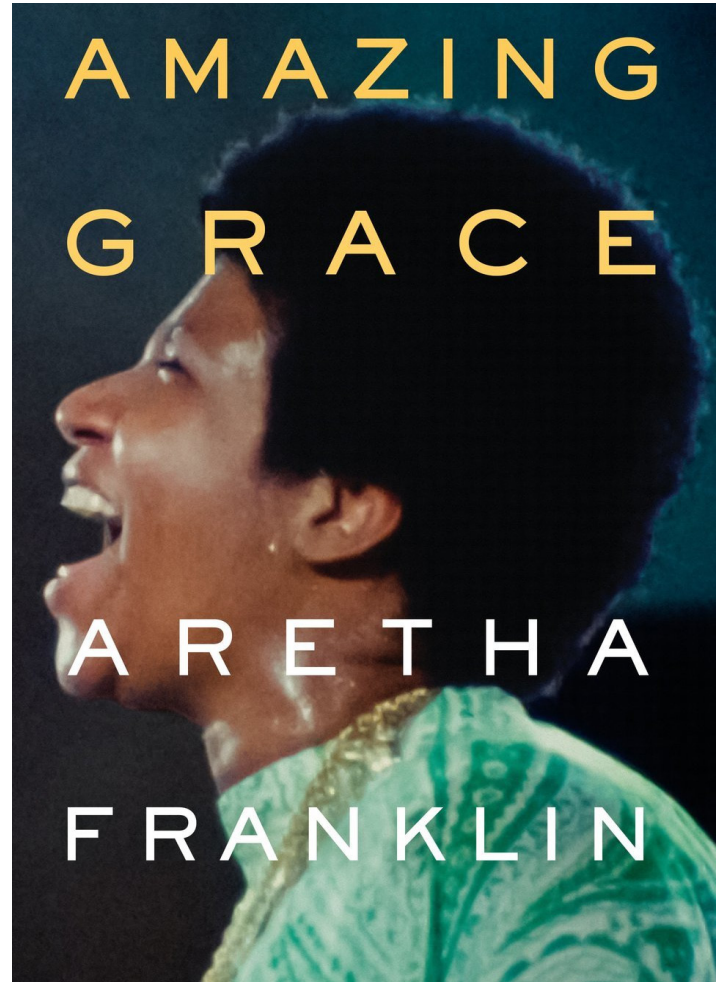
Mark Burford

A project promised for years by Atlantic Records producer Jerry Wexler, Aretha Franklin’s double LP *Amazing Grace* garnered instantaneous acclaim upon its release in June 1972. Notable for being Franklin’s first gospel album, *Amazing Grace* generated extra buzz for being recorded live over the course of two nights (13–14 January 1972) at New Temple Missionary Baptist Church in Los Angeles with the backing of the Southern California Community Choir, founded in 1969 by the kingpin of black gospel Reverend James Cleveland.

*Amazing Grace* was a smash both commercially—going double platinum and becoming the best-selling album of Franklin’s career—and critically, receiving the 1973 Grammy for Best Gospel Soul Album.

Despite, and perhaps because of, the rapturous response to the album, longtime African American staff writer for the *Washington Post* Hollie I. West pumped the brakes on anointing Franklin a banner gospel artist. “As a contemporary pop singer, Miss Franklin is unequalled,” West wrote in his review of *Amazing Grace*. “But when she sings the gospel classics, she must stand in comparison with the great gospel performers, and in that she comes off a distant second” (9 July 1972). Franklin’s delivery of gospel standards on the album “pales when next to those of Mahalia Jackson or Marion Williams” and she too often “seems to be just performing just another song rather than recounting her personal deliverance.” He concluded: “This celebrated album is good but not great gospel.” West’s exceptional view may very well have been intended as less a curmudgeonly smackdown of Franklin than a genuine effort to re-direct the singer’s global legion of fans to black gospel’s underrecognized master practitioners who charted the path to soul. Wherever one might stand regarding the letter of West’s skeptical reception of the album, the spirit of reading Franklin’s performance in relation to the black gospel field is a good place to start in assessing *Amazing Grace* (2018), a ninety-minute film directed by Sydney Pollack that documents those two historic nights at New Temple.

The beleaguered *Amazing Grace* was put on ice for decades, first because of the difficulty synching the images and the sound and then because of



Franklin’s reluctance to have the film released. Viewed nearly a half-century later, the documentary is extraordinary for the number of story lines it offers, one of which is how we might rethink the original album. Two months shy of her thirtieth birthday, Franklin was a megastar with twenty albums, five Grammys, and eleven consecutive number one hits to her credit. Complementing the choir and Cleveland on piano is Franklin’s own band, with Cornell Dupree on guitar, Kenny Lupper on organ, Chuck Rainey on bass, Poncho Morales on congas and percussion, and Bernard Purdie on drums.

Pollack opens with aerial and street-level shots that immediately situate the viewer in urban Los Angeles. It is difficult not to feel *Amazing Grace* in counterpoint with *Wattstax*, the remarkable documentary chronicling a massive benefit concert at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum commemorating the seventh anniversary of the

## “My Soul is Satisfied” (cont.)

Watts Rebellion. Wattstax took place on 20 August 1972, just seven months after and four miles north of Franklin’s sessions at New Temple. Both films tap and showcase the rituals and cultural-political energies of soul-era South L.A., *Wattstax* extrovertedly in an open-air stadium and *Amazing Grace* with more intimacy in the pews and at the pulpit.

The fourth wall is by definition broken at a live gospel performance, but *Amazing Grace* dissolves a fifth by making its production so explicitly a part of the film. Pollack, the Oscar-winning director whose subsequent résumé would include *The Way We Were*, *Tootsie*, and *Out of Africa*, is seen repeatedly throughout *Amazing Grace*, conferring with his crew, gesturing toward promising shots, and stalking the sanctuary aisles. The give-and-take of process and product emerges from footage ranging from musicians tuning up, rehearsal flubs and in-performance do-overs, camera operators hustling into position during performances, and Cleveland playfully admonishing the audience to deliver when the tape recorder and camera are rolling, to mesmerizing moments that can make the viewer forget that they are watching a film. Cleveland is often the gatekeeper between these two worlds. At one point, a cup of water spills on a bundle of microphone wires, bringing things to a halt. “Everybody say ‘Amen’ for the technical difficulties,” a puckish Cleveland tells the audience from the piano as he resumes the program. “Alright, let’s go back to church.”

Over the course of the two nights, Franklin sang fourteen songs, four of which she repeated both nights and two of which were performed as a mashup. The documentary includes eleven of these, which can be sorted into three categories: venerable Christian hymns (“Precious Memories,” “What A Friend We Have in Jesus,” “Never Grow Old,” and “Amazing Grace”); black gospel standards (“Take My Hand, Precious Lord,” “Let Us Go Back to the Old Landmark,” “How I Got Over,” “Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep,” and “Climbing Higher Mountains”); and recent pop hits (Marvin Gaye’s “Wholy Holy,” with Franklin singing from the piano, and Carole King’s “You’ve Got a Friend”).

Franklin is undoubtedly the star of the show, but in many ways Cleveland, who lived at the Franklin

home for a time during their youth, is the beating heart of *Amazing Grace*. Gospel programs typically have a non-performing emcee who pilots the proceedings and manages the tone, finding a sweet spot between spiritual nourishment and satisfying entertainment. A pianist, singer, prolific composer, ordained minister, and creator of the Gospel Music Workshop of America, Cleveland fills this role, but on this evening he is also the principal pianist and logistical liaison between Franklin, the musicians, Pollack’s crew, and the audience. Cleveland would have been the first to tell you that his voice was not in Franklin’s class, but his conviction, timing, and complete idiomatic mastery make his vocals irresistibly compelling. He begins the program singing lead as the choir marches in from the back of the church to their processional song, Cleveland’s own composition “We Are On Our Way.” One of the most captivating performances in the entire film is the hymn “Precious Memories,” sung during Night One at an inexorably deliberate tempo with Cleveland, for the only time, occupying the main solo space. Especially for those who grew up knowing the song—surely most of the audience—this rendition of “Precious Memories” casts a spell of intense, bone-deep, shared familiarity that is only heightened by the extraordinary chemistry between Franklin’s celestial fire and Cleveland’s ministerial gravitas.

Two other Baptist hymns mark powerful centers of gravity in the film. Night One culminates with “Amazing Grace,” taken in the exaggeratedly slow, unmetred manner indebted to the style of lined-out congregational hymnody known as Dr. Watts singing. Franklin renders “Amazing Grace” mostly without the choir, opening a space for the singers to respond freely to her performance. The camera zooms in on one visibly moved member of the choir who wipes tears from his eyes. Meanwhile, Cleveland, overcome with emotion, hands off the piano mid-song and buries his face in a towel, but then recovers enough to take over direction of the choir for the song’s conclusion. In a poignant moment, Cleveland moves beside Franklin, clutching the back of her robe as if to steady her as she reaches an emotional climax. The film ends where Franklin’s recording career first began, with her singing “Never Grow Old,” accompanying

## “My Soul is Satisfied” (cont.)

herself on piano. Franklin recorded the song as a fourteen-year-old at Detroit’s New Bethel Baptist Church, where her father, Reverend C. L. Franklin, was its illustrious pastor, and her deep connection to the song is palpable. In a brief and slightly bizarre scene toward the end of “Never Grow Old,” Ward Singers founder Gertrude “Mother” Ward, feeling the spirit, appears to be trying to get to Franklin, but is physically restrained by her daughter Clara and other audience members. The juxtaposition of the slightly chaotic struggle, filmed from below, and the unperturbed Franklin at the piano provides a taste of the unpredictability and equilibrium of a gospel program.

The gospel songs offer something old and something new. Beginning Night Two, Franklin’s performance of “Oh Mary, Don’t You Weep,” kicked off by the choir’s tramping chant, is directly modeled on the famous 1958 double-sided single by

March on Washington, is more of an update, set to a driving seventies funk bass groove and the choir’s shifty interpolated responses. The next song mates a pair of unlikely bedfellows: Thomas A. Dorsey’s “Take My Hand, Precious Lord” and Carole King’s “You’ve Got a Friend.” If the former was canonic, the latter was hot off the presses, recorded the previous year by King and more famously by James Taylor but also by Barbra Streisand and Dusty Springfield. There must be something about a tune that is amenable to bohemia, Britpop, blue-eyed soul, Broadway, and the Baptist treatment. At first, combining the two songs—Franklin sings “You’ve Got a Friend” while the choir sings the words of “Precious Lord,” then they switch—feels slightly gimmicky (the performance does not appear on the LP), and yet it works, especially during the concluding vamp. These numbers and the documentary as a whole demonstrate Franklin’s

utter fluency with the gospel-specific craft of verbal improvisation in performance.

Among the most outstanding benefits the documentary offers that the LP cannot are visuals that add aesthetic and emotional texture to the sound of the record. Even West may have been struck by how strongly Franklin appears to identify with her repertory, as the camera often shows her continuing to sing to herself after she takes



*Aretha Franklin, Reverend James Cleveland, and the Southern California Community Choir  
screenshot from Amazing Grace (Sydney Pollack, 2018)*

the Caravans with Inez Andrews on lead. Franklin seems to offer a shoutout to gospel connoisseurs when she begins the song’s lyrically improvisatory section by singing “We’re going to review the story of two sisters called Mary and Martha,” a clear reference to the opening of Andrews’s own sermonic vamp (“Mary and Martha were two sisters...”). Franklin’s reading of “How I Got Over,” written by Clara Ward but most closely associated with Mahalia Jackson who sang it at the

her seat during the applause. The on-screen images reveal the incongruity between the magnificence of Franklin’s voice and her unimaginably demure onstage presence. Notably, Franklin leaves all of the between-song commentary to Cleveland and hardly cracks a smile—that is, until her father shows up. Reverend Franklin was in attendance the second night and, along with Clara Ward, is given a grand entrance from the back of the church. Toward the end of the evening he is asked to address the

## “My Soul is Satisfied” (cont.)

audience. Franklin praises his daughter as “just a stone singer” who, whatever others may think, “has never left to church.” The shots of Aretha beaming with obvious pleasure at her father’s words, staring at him adoringly as he speaks, and of C. L. coming to the piano to mop her brow with a towel while she sings “Never Grow Old” bring some of the dynamics of their father-daughter relationship to life.

One figure who is undetectable on vinyl but who the documentary makes an indispensable focal point is Alexander Hamilton. Though organized by Cleveland, the Southern California Community Choir on these two nights is directed by Hamilton, who demonstrates how a gospel choir conductor operates, mobilizing set pieces worked out in advance in a way that preserves and supports extemporaneous, in-the-moment inspiration. Hamilton is the center of attention for not only the choir, but also for Cleveland at the piano and the band, all the while taking his cues from Franklin. In this respect, *Amazing Grace* unfurls the making of an album, the making of a documentary, and the making of gospel music itself. The film augments the presence of the choir—the shots down rows of singers’ faces in profile are particularly effective—and the audience, which on the second night includes the Rolling Stones’ Mick Jagger, who the camera seems to keep finding, or vice versa. Right after Aretha’s performance of one of her father’s signature songs, “Climbing Higher Mountains,” we are given a glimpse of worship performance practice indebted to the Sanctified church. The musicians launch into a driving groove that signals that it is time for a praise break to the sound of tambourine, wailing organ chords, and double-time walking bass. A visibly eager white photographer scrambling to capture shots of the Holy Ghost dancers is a reminder of the doubleness of the entire film project, which, more than the LP, is both about black gospel music in situ and insatiable white spectatorship of black folk doing church.

During his spoken remarks, Reverend Franklin reminds us, as if any reminder is needed, that his daughter’s voice is inconceivable without black gospel music, that she was “influenced greatly by James, greatly by Mahalia Jackson, greatly by Clara Ward.” Coincidentally, Jackson died just two weeks

after the *Amazing Grace* sessions, and Ward, seen prominently in the front row, also passed suddenly one year later, making the film in some ways a paean, perhaps even a eulogy, for a Golden Age of Gospel that for critic West was the standard against which Franklin should be judged. By the conclusion of the film we see Franklin rise again after singing “Never Grow Old” to lead the choir herself, totally absorbed in a spontaneously improvised coda: “I’m so glad I’ve got religion/My soul is satisfied.” Here we recognize that the impact of *Amazing Grace* lies not in matching exemplary performances but in seeing and hearing what is made anew when one of the greatest voices of the twentieth century—a gospel voice—goes home again. And how sweet the sound.

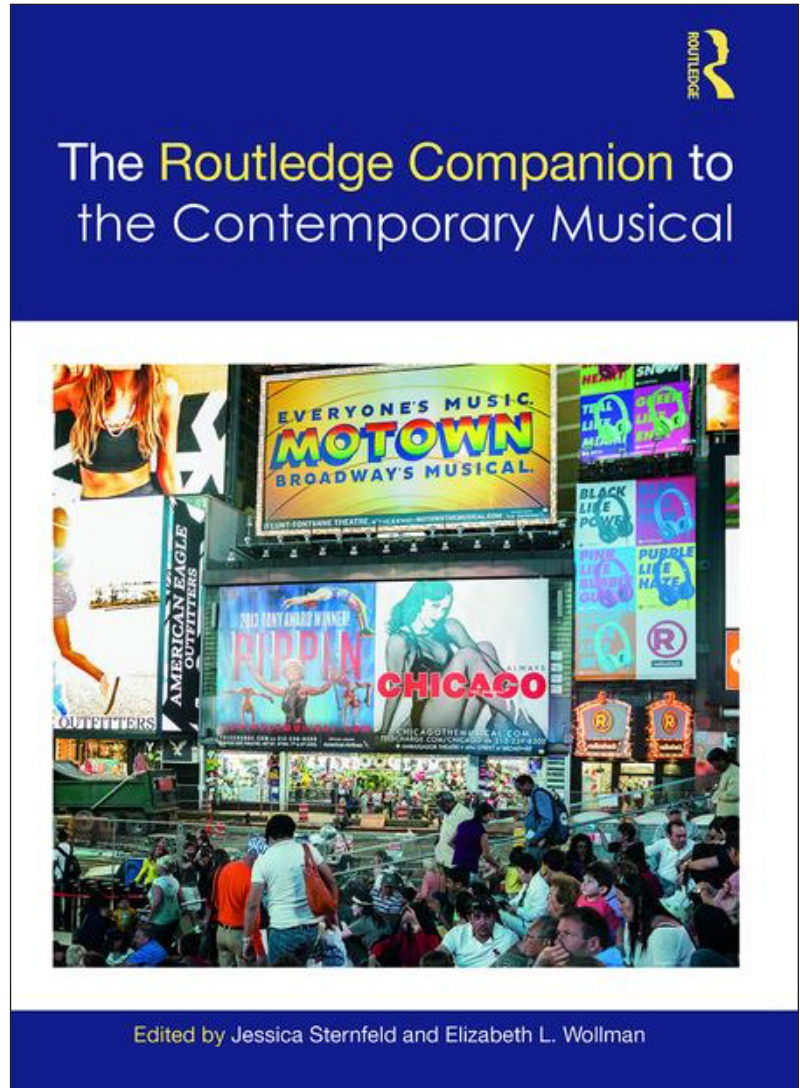
# Turning Attention to the Contemporary Musical

Alison Walls

*The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* (New York: Routledge, 2020), edited by Jessica Sternfeld and Elizabeth Wollman, brings together forty-four essays that examine the American musical in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries from a range of perspectives and disciplines. As the editors point out in their introduction, it is only relatively recently that the musical has been recognized as worthy of scholarship, thanks in large part to the work of several scholars who contribute chapters here, and that scholarship has primarily focused on the so-called (and still contested) “Golden Age,” varyingly considered to begin either around 1927 with *Showboat* or in 1943 with *Oklahoma!* and ending somewhere between the mid-1950s and early 1970s. This collection therefore helps correct the misconception of the contemporary musical as “the less artistically exacting, more crassly commercialized, less intelligently conceived stepchildren of comparatively brilliant, inspired works by the Gershwins, Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hammerstein, or Stephen Sondheim” (3).

As a whole, this companion examines the contemporary musical as both formed by and formative of an ever-changing culture. The editors providing a framing introduction for each of the nine sections that often implicitly reiterates their case for the value in scholarly consideration of the contemporary musical. “Setting the Stage: An Introduction to Analyzing the Musical Theater” opens the volume with “Musical Theater Reception Theory, Or What Happens When You See a Show?” by Katie Welsh and Stacy Wolf and “[Title of Chapter]” by Millie Taylor—both written in an anecdotal style that offsets their heavyweight theoretical groundings in reception theory, sociology, anthropology, and postmodernism. The open subjectivity of these essays offers a more lively descriptive entrée than traditional academic fare by acknowledging the importance of the scholar’s own experience of their subject matter.

“Starting with the ‘70s” focuses on the decade “often dismissed as dark, dirty, and depressing”



(27). These pieces observe the musicals and/or trends born in the 1970s that continue to shape current musical theater. Bryan Vandevender examines how “the me-decade” influenced Broadway, drawing on case studies that feature relatively cynical, isolated protagonists in search of self-actualization. In a related vein, Ryan Bunch looks at adolescence and coming of age in the musicals of Stephen Schwartz. In “Style as Star: Bob Fosse and Sixty Seconds That Changed Broadway,” Ryan Donovan argues compellingly that the choreographer/director exerted a transformative influence on Broadway through his artful and unprecedented use of television advertising, which in turn played a significant role in establishing the Fosse style as recognizable and profitable. James Lovensheimer breaks down Broadway revivals

## Turning Attention to the Contemporary Musical (cont.)

since 1970 that “relate to or exploit” nostalgia into six types, including a final category he names “hybrids” (60, 64).

The title of the third section, “Aesthetic Transformations,” is self-explanatory, though as the editors point out, the rapid evolution of technology in recent years renders its aesthetic value a more hotly contested issue than the seemingly straightforward practical advantages of technological innovations of yore. The essays avoid puritanical complaint or zealous advocacy, and generally offer thoughtful analysis of major transformations. Ben Macpherson, Arreanna Rostosky, and Dominic Symonds consider the reciprocal effect of microphones and amplification on vocal aesthetics and audience reception, making space for a reevaluation of sometimes derided features of the contemporary musical (for instance, in megamusicals like *Starlight Express* and *Phantom of the Opera*, explored by Symonds). Alex Bádue’s essay is an outlier in this section, dedicated to Michael John LaChiusa’s signature aesthetic that “nods to the past and leans to the future” (104). Matthew Lockitt and Christin Essin move away from aesthetics to consider the industry. Lockitt debates the increasing commercial pressure for stage musicals to collaborate with the “chart-toppers” of pop music and the question of authenticity such collaborations prompt on both sides. Essin extends the conversation of the impact of automated technologies on scenic and sonic design to consider the labor, economics, and accessibility of stagecraft.

The next few sections are explicitly organized around different interpretive lenses. “Reading the Musical through Gender” and “Reading the Musical through Race and Ethnicity” center on questions of identity that establish key concerns in musical theater studies. The musical holds a multivalent relationship to gender and sexuality—on the one hand, a celebration of heteronormativity is deeply embedded in the musical’s genealogy, while on the other, the female heroine (and the diva who embodies her) holds an unusually dominant position, despite the fact that female creators continue to be outnumbered by men on Broadway. As D.A. Miller has famously explored in *A Place for Us*, the musical has also long held a special

place for gay men, ambivalently expressing and obscuring sexuality and gay male identification with the heroine. The essays by Mary Jo Lodge and Trudi Wright shift the conversation on gender into the eras of #metoo, the Bechdel Test, and second wave feminism. Aaron Thomas focuses on casting and sexuality in an essay that reflects the heightened—and necessary—awareness of casting in both artistic and academic circles, homing in on the particularly complex dilemma of less visible identities. John Clum analyzes the visible representations of homosexuality and contested masculinity through costuming and drag.

Casting is also the core question of two essays centered on race and ethnicity: Todd Decker’s exploration of “multiracial” musicals; and Sissi Liu’s piece on the industry and societal impact of all-black and all-Asian productions of *Hello, Dolly!*. Stefanie A. Jones and Elizabeth Craft respectively challenge the racial politics of the purportedly progressive musicals, *Avenue Q* and *Hamilton*. Raymond and Zelda Knapp turn to scripted characters and narratives examining the weighty legacy of *Fiddler on the Roof* in *Falsettos*’ treatment of Jewish characters and stories.

As the editors rightly note, “dancing is often undervalued as a key factor in musical theater meaning and history” (235). “Reading the Musical through Dance” seeks to redress that omission with three essays: Joanna Dee Das’s exploration of the controversy surrounding *Contact*—a 2000 dance musical that prioritized dance to the extent that it destabilized the definition of a musical; Liza Gennaro’s examination of how choreographers approach revivals; and Phoebe Rumsey’s look at *Hamilton* that presents an especially strong case for the consideration of dance as meaning-making. Rumsey considers choreographer Andy Blankenbuehler’s “nearly perpetual movement vocabulary” and purposeful inclusion and hybridization of dance styles, which include not only its celebrated hip hop, but historic social dances, jazz, and contemporary dance (235). She concludes these factors play an indispensable role in the storytelling, reinforcing and commenting upon the musical’s self-aware historicity.

Although the entire volume—like its subject matter—is essentially interdisciplinary, “Reading



## Turning Attention to the Contemporary Musical (cont.)

the Musical through Interdisciplinary Lenses” groups essays that look to fields not ordinarily associated with musical theater. Jake Johnson offers a provocative discussion of religion and secular idealism in the Broadway musical (though his conflation of “post-truth” and utopian fantasy worlds is slightly questionable). Sarah Taylor Ellis dips into speculative fiction to explore the non-linear—“warped”—time in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog*.

Aleksei Grinenko’s “The Eye of the Storm: Reading *Next to Normal* with Psychoanalysis” is one of several compelling essays from newer scholars that trace the roots and evolution of “golden age” models as they play out in contemporary musicals. In this case, Grinenko focuses on “the presentation of interiority in fantasy sequences and dream ballets around an increasingly explicit focus on psychoanalytic formulations of subjectivity” that took root in the 1940s and finds itself embedded in the topical 2009 musical through its bipolar heroine. The result is a reciprocal illumination of both the historical and contemporary material through insightful analysis. Paul Laird and James Leve both choose to focus their discussions on the evolution of a single creator’s work, with Laird examining the recurrent theme of parent/child relationships in Stephen Schwartz’s musicals, and Leve expounding on the “late style” of John Kander. Elissa Harbert considers the particularity of “history musicals” and the distinctive expectations with which critics receive them.

The contributors to “Beyond Broadway: New Media and Fan Studies,” have a unique opportunity not afforded in scholarship of early musicals. Not only are the fans currently active and available for study, but new media has shifted fans’ “parasocial interaction” with the subject of their adoration into something more truly intimate and influential. Jessica Hillman-McCord delves into this phenomenon in her piece on Lin-Manuel Miranda’s mobilization of social media, while also providing a record of fandom, open to analysis. Kelly Kessler discusses fandom in the form of live tweets (325), tying Linda Williams’s concept of bodily excess to the seemingly contrasting digital interactions of fans with protest musicals, as well as to the new phenomenon of hate-watching. Holley Replogle-

Wong examines the influence exerted by fans on film adaptations of stage musicals. James Deaville provides an exposition of superfandom, using the first-hand accounts of superfans themselves.

Renée Camus considers how Joss Whedon’s “geek musicals” have drawn musical fans and “geeks” (here defined as obsessives with some outsider status) into the same cultish sphere. Similarly, Aya Esther Hayashi demonstrates how the young production teams Team StarKid and AVbyte use YouTube to distribute their parodic musicals, taking advantage of the platform’s more immediate connection to their viewers, and have thus succeeded in tapping into younger, dedicated fans and niche subcultures, neglected by mainstream Broadway. Robynn Stilwell applies film scholar Rick Altman’s notion of “dual-focus narrative” to argue that it is the dramaturgical key to fitting musical numbers into the serial narrative of the TV shows *Nashville* and *Smash*.<sup>2</sup>

The volume concludes with “Growth and Expansion: Across the Country and Around the World,” combatting the assumptions perpetuated in the historiography of the musical that Broadway, Off and Off-Off Broadway, regional theaters, and the West End operate in sequestered spheres, with Broadway largely and justifiably indifferent to all the rest. The first three essays tackle regional theater. Amanda McQueen examines the strategies and struggles of the regional musical theater scene in Milwaukee, while Jeffrey Ullom explores the increasingly significant and influential role of regional theater, particularly as a testing ground for pre-Broadway productions and as a potential pipeline for increased equity and diversity in the theater. Steven Adler discusses the development of hit musical *Big River* at La Jolla Playhouse and its role in shaping producing practices and boosting the acclaim of La Jolla.

Frédéric Döhl and Hyunjung Lee both look further back than the asserted starting point of the volume in order to trace how the current state of musical theater came to be in Germany and South Korea respectively. Döhl provides a clear overview of the third largest musical theater market in the world, while Lee digs into how Broadway functioned “as a mode of reconstructing the ‘Korean self’ through an American system,” reconciling

## Turning Attention to the Contemporary Musical (cont.)

the urge to replicate American popular culture as a potent symbol of affluence and modernity with the conflicting objective of preserving and expressing South Korea's own cultural pride and heritage (443). Finally, Susan Bennett's essay on *The Lion King* explains how that mega-production came to be the site of theatrical innovation not merely on stage, but also in the marketing and export of Disney musicals as a global concern. Some of the most interesting parts of her clear-sighted essay center on Disney's problematic ancillary strategies to market itself as "a good corporate citizen" (450).

Musical theater is a subject especially well-suited to the essay collection format, since it is inherently multidisciplinary. The inclusion, therefore, of voices from musicology, theater studies, and dance studies, as well as feminist and gender studies, cultural history, and other disciplines, opens the subject up to more probing consideration. The collection is a satisfying mix of well-established and emerging scholars. Some do the necessary work of documenting, categorizing, and providing a vocabulary for reading this comparatively neglected area of recent performance history. The most successful chapters accord serious attention to those elements distinct to the contemporary musical yet little analyzed—a neglect initially attributable to their newness, but now more likely due to negative connotations with crass commercialism or globalization (like many of the musicals themselves). Others build on such taxonomies, with the most exciting essays offering engaging new perspectives on sometimes familiar material. The editors appear to have envisaged a readership that—like the contributors—may specialize in one facet of musical theater and wish to engage perspectives from other fields. The authors write with an eye towards this accessibility and several of the essays will be effective as teaching texts. Specialists seeking a deep dive into their particular field may find the essays lacking in technical or theoretical rigor, but they are not this book's audience. As with any such collection, researchers may have to seek out those contributions that will further the conversation for them. *The Routledge Companion to the Contemporary Musical* is varied and expansive. Not each piece will hit its mark, but the collection fills

a significant gap in scholarship bringing different disciplinary voices together as a foundation for further serious consideration of the contemporary musical.

### Notes

1. D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essays on the Broadway Musical* (Harvard University Press, 1998).
2. Although it doesn't fit the dual-focus narrative, the omission of *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* from the small-screen musicals referenced in the *Companion* is surprising, as this TV series adheres closely to musical theater convention without being a backstage musical or a one-off musical episode.

## Contributor Bios

**Max Alper** is a composer, music technologist, writer, and educator living in San Juan, Puerto Rico. He is Professor of Audio Production and Sound Studies at Atlantic University College in Guaynabo, Puerto Rico, as well as founder of Sonic Arts For All!, a 501c3 non-profit whose mission is to provide access to music technology education to K-12 and special needs students throughout the country. He is a graduate of the first class of the Sonic Arts MFA program at the Conservatory of Music at Brooklyn College, where he studied with David Grubbs, Marina Rosenfeld, and Ben Vida, among others. He has a dog named Bronxy and a couple of cats named Jojo and Pluto.

**Mark Burford** is Associate Professor of Music and chair of the American Studies program at Reed College. His research and teaching focuses on late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Austro-German concert music and twentieth-century popular music in the United States, with particular focus on African American music after World War II. He is the author of *Mahalia Jackson and the Black Gospel Field*, released in 2019 by Oxford University Press, and editor of the forthcoming *Mahalia Jackson Reader*, an anthology of writings on Jackson for Oxford's Readers on American Musicians series.

Composer, performer, and scholar **David Grubbs** is professor of music at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, and co-director of the former's M.F.A. programs in Performance and Interactive Media Arts (PIMA). His writings on modern American music include *Records Ruin the Landscape: John Cage, the Sixties, and Sound Recording* (Duke University Press, 2014), *Now That the Audience is Assembled* (Duke University Press, 2018), and the forthcoming *The Voice in the Headphones* (Duke University Press, 2020).

**Alison Walls** is a Ph.D. candidate in theatre at The Graduate Center, CUNY, New York. An actor and director from New Zealand, she holds an MA in French from Victoria University of Wellington and an MFA from Sarah Lawrence College. Her

publications include a monograph on nineteenth-century French literature with Peter Lang, articles in *The New Zealand Journal of French Studies*, *Language and Literature*, *Studies in Musical Theatre*, and *The Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, as well as a chapter in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performances*. Her current project examines the "surrogate mother" character in U.S. popular theatre and film from 1939 to 1963.