

AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

THE HITCHCOCK INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN AMERICAN MUSIC
Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York

VOLUME LI, ISSUE 2

SPRING 2022

"Chaminade Has A Musical Influence Notable And Delightfully Excellent"¹: The Composer in Early 20th Century Brooklyn

Susan A. Davis

On Saturday, December 19, 1908, less than two miles from the land where Brooklyn College now stands, a crowd of ardent fans gathered at 144 Argyle Road to fête the namesake of the Chaminade Club, founded ten years prior.² Cécile Louise Stéphanie Chaminade (1857-1944) had just completed her much anticipated (and quite profitable) tour of the United States with a December 15th farewell concert at Carnegie Hall.³ Before departing for home, the composer honored the Chaminade Club of Brooklyn (hereafter, CC-B) with a personal visit to the home of CC-B conductor, Emma Richardson-Küster. Küster's Argyle Road residence was perfectly suited for a musical adventure. The *maestra*, a prominent Brooklyn piano teacher, had designed her home explicitly to include a large room for hosting recitals, and on that evening the designated music room must have overflowed with listeners hoping for one last chance to hear Chaminade perform in America.⁴

Any given Saturday leading up to the winter holidays in Ditmas Park involved festivities in homes bedecked with garlands, mistletoe, threads of gold tinsel, and bright holly berries.⁵ And thus appeared Küster's home on December 19th, 1908, adorned with "festoons of evergreen and Christmas bells"⁶ and awaiting a glamorous cohort of Brooklyn society. The national flags of both France and the US framed the doorway while the glittering gold harp of the club's emblem presided over the mantel. CC-B members excitedly welcomed Chaminade, even though she spoke no English and the members of the club reportedly spoke no French.⁷ But everyone understood Chaminade's exclamations of "*Très joli!*" and "*Brava!*" as the club's members first performed for their guest, and she graciously returned the favor. The event was so enthralling that Chaminade "stayed late into the evening until



Cécile Chaminade pictured in The Etude magazine.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Institute News by Stephanie Jensen-Moulton.....	9
Jerome Kern and Puccini's <i>Madama Butterfly</i> by Allan W. Atlas.....	12
Black Musical Heritage and Artificial Intelligence by Teo Blake Beauchamp.....	17
Interview with Brooklyn Raga Massive by Stephanie Jensen-Moulton.....	21

Chaminade in Early 20th-Century Brooklyn (cont.)

the affair became an impromptu musicale.⁸ Among the pieces delighting the crowd were "The Mariner's Christmas," "Summer," and "Scaramouche." As a parting gift, Chaminade bestowed upon her new friends autographed pictures of her home in Le Vésinet.⁹ The composer left for France shortly thereafter on Christmas Eve; during the course of her tour, she had drawn the largest audiences of any foreign artist in the United States that year.¹⁰

Cécile Chaminade: Beyond the Flute Concertino

Recent efforts to diversify concert programming have caused musicians to reconsider the oeuvre of Cécile Chaminade. Although her Flute Concertino in D major, reputed for its dreamy melody and melismatic virtuosity, has been widely performed with orchestra, very few of her more than 400 other works receive performances with any regularity. A brief glance through biographical sources reveals the limited treatment of Chaminade's career and legacy.¹¹ At the height of her popularity she concertized in dozens of cities throughout Europe and the United States, sold millions of copies of her piano music, made visits to Windsor Castle, and was so treasured among American women that over 200 Chaminade Clubs were founded in United States, yet Chaminade practically disappeared from musical memory by the time of her death in 1944. Her *New York Times* obituary, anything but a celebration of her multiple and varied accomplishments, diminishes Chaminade's career, claiming that her pieces "do not rise above the level of agreeable salon music."¹²

Feminist musicologist Marcia Citron has made note of this incongruity in answering the question "Who was Cécile Chaminade?" She was a woman composer who had achieved "extraordinary fame" at the start of the twentieth century, but whose profile diminished over the ensuing decades. Her sheet music graced pianos across the world, yet she died in relative obscurity, and "has been written out of musical history."¹³ As a result, the search for Cécile Chaminade and her musical legacy has been problematic. Items have been hidden from view, including music that has never been published or performed,¹⁴ and she herself requested her diary be destroyed upon her death.¹⁵ Citron¹⁶ and Cécile Tardif¹⁷ have pieced together important biographies and bibliographies through careful investigation. Recent theses and dissertations concentrate on various aspects of Chaminade's story and musical works,¹⁸ but a complete biography remains elusive. Trustworthy and comprehensive information about Chaminade's musical education is lacking;¹⁹ the true

motives around her marriage in 1901 to the older music publisher Louis-Mathieu Carbonel remain unknown;²⁰ and very little has been made public about her later years. Her last music publication was dated 1928, but in a 1942 letter to Irving Schwerké, Chaminade reported from Monte Carlo that she was writing "new religious works and chamber music."²¹

There is still much to be discovered about Chaminade's life and legacy. As a musician and teacher who has resided in Brooklyn over the years, I became intrigued by Chaminade's namesake club and its influence on the story of musical Brooklyn. Using the magical night of December 19th as a starting point, this article explores Chaminade's intersection with musical culture in Brooklyn.

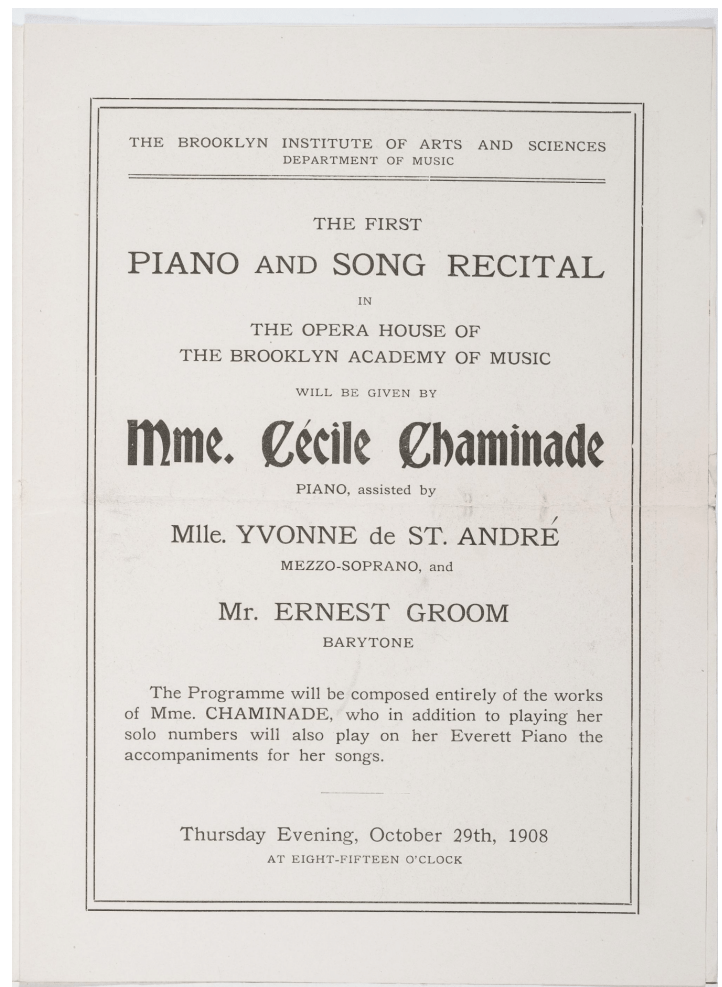


Figure 1. Chaminade Concert Program, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Archives

Contextualizing Chaminade's Visit to Brooklyn

The autumn of 1908 was an important time for burgeoning Brooklyn. The Williamsburg Bridge had been completed in 1903, the first subway line

Chaminade in Early 20th-Century Brooklyn (cont.)

connecting Manhattan to Brooklyn opened in 1908, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music was about to unveil its new location at 30 Lafayette Avenue with a Gala Metropolitan Opera performance headlined by Enrico Caruso on November 14, 1908.²² A roster of events, lectures, and concerts leading up to the grand opening took place beginning in September of 1908 and included the first Piano and Song Recital in the new hall, given by Chaminade (Figures 1 and 2).

Only a few days after her debut at Carnegie Hall, the composer's performance in Brooklyn was standing room only. The same held true for her Philadelphia Orchestra debut—in fact, everywhere she went, Chaminade was met with gratitude and excitement on behalf of her fans. The critics, however, were not as receptive to her work, largely dismissing her music and performances as “ice cream and cake,”²³ “sweets,”²⁴ “saccharine,”²⁵ and “superficial.”²⁶ Unsurprisingly, her harshest reviews came from men, and even positive commentary often focused more on her gender and persona than on her musical accomplishments.



Figure 2. Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1909

I wonder about this language in the context of First Wave Feminism—the women's suffrage movement in the US—which was escalating in New York at that time. What did Chaminade's considerable female fan base think of these scathing reviews? Could women see the misogyny? Did these reviews make women second guess their own expertise or doubt their understanding of Chaminade's music? Or did they see the critiques as just another facile attempt to diminish a woman's power and influence? I imagine many were more convinced of Chaminade's distinction, in seeing hostile comments like those of

the *Evening Post* reviewer who asserted “that while women may someday vote, they will never learn to compose anything worth while.”²⁷ Across New York and across the United States, “Women have been asleep; but now we are waking up...”²⁸ Women were waking up to the double standards. They were becoming aware of their individual and collective voices to influence and change their communities.

On 8 March 1908, New York saw thousands of women march for voting equality. Only six months later, between Chaminade's October 24th and December 16th concerts at Carnegie Hall, the Inter-Urban Suffrage Council of New York packed the hall, in what was “the biggest and most astonishing [event] ever held in New York.”²⁹ The participants, both women and men, heard multiple speakers frame the need for voting rights for women, leading one press reporter to remark, “Suffrage is in the air in New York.”³⁰ When the participants heard that “women need the vote to secure equal pay for equal work,”³¹ they responded with the loudest applause of the event.³²

The parallel enthusiasm for Chaminade and for women's rights was no coincidence. While society women did not fully galvanize in terms of suffragist activism with working class women until about 1914, a momentum was building.³³ As American women began to step out of the private sphere, they saw both resistance and promise for the future. In Chaminade, American women saw a model of the modern independent woman:³⁴ an entrepreneur headlining and selling out concerts, prolifically publishing her scores, and seeming to ignore or dismiss sexist reviews of her music such as “ice cream and soda water.”³⁵ These women then attended suffrage events with urgency and a heightened awareness of the need for political and economic equality. The urgency and awareness continue today.³⁶

Ripples of Influence

Between 1890 and 1925, Chaminade toured Britain, France, Austria, Germany, Greece, and eventually the United States, where her whirlwind tour of sixteen cities grossed \$120,000 (this would be nearly \$4 million by today's standards).³⁷ In addition to publishing hundreds of musical scores during this period, she recorded numerous pianola rolls. Queen Victoria adored her and gave her gifts; the US First Lady, Mrs. William Howard Taft, named her one of history's most influential women, joining the company of Joan of Arc and Susan B. Anthony;³⁸ Chaminade's

Chaminade in Early 20th-Century Brooklyn (cont.)

image was used to sell pianos, cigarettes, soap, and perfume. American women followed Chaminade's career in popular magazines such as *The Etude*, *The Musical Courier*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. Many gathered in Chaminade clubs to perform her music, commune together, and dialogue about matters related to music and education.³⁹

PARFUM
Chaminade

12/6 48/-
24/6 95/-

MORN Y

Parfum "C-aminade" is most happily named, its light and dainty odours, always fresh and harmonious, suggesting the melodic beauties of the "Air de Ballet"—a few bars of which, written and signed by Madame Chaminade, are used as the registered mark for this series of perfumery.

201 · REGENT STREET · W ·

1912 London advertisement for Morny "Chaminade" Perfume / Courtesy of painting in light at [flickr.com](https://www.flickr.com/photos/14811170@N00/10248111111/)

The women who read Chaminade's musings in *The Etude* magazine, *Ladies Home Journal*, and other periodicals, also purchased her musical scores and studied her lifestyle. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* noted in 1897:

Her income from her compositions is the largest of any composer of her sex, and few men, indeed, had received royalties equal to those paid her for her work. On the other hand, few are as industrious as Mlle. Chaminade. Not content with simply transferring her musical thoughts to paper, she sees that they are brought to the knowledge of the public after they are in print.⁴⁰

When the 1908 tour was announced, multiple clubs wrote to Chaminade requesting a visit.⁴¹ Her short tour would not allow for many diversions, but after meeting the members of the CC-B in the green room after her BAM performance, it seems that Chaminade arranged a return visit with the CC-B for December.⁴² They had received personal communication from Chaminade as early as 1899, in the form of a letter of thanks "wishing [the club] a successful career."⁴³ Their 1899 season took off and they immediately established a reputation as having "a high rank among the musical organizations of Brooklyn."⁴⁴ The club hosted multiple recitals, teas, and events each year, eventually growing to a membership of 400 in the 1920s, undoubtedly spurred on by the events of the fall of 1908.

This particular Chaminade Club shaped the smaller community of musical Brooklyn through its namesake's example and support. Mme. Küster, the founding conductor of the CC-B, widely known among the women of Flatbush, taught the composer Douglas Moore, famously known for *The Ballad of Baby Doe*. Moore's mother, Myra, was also active in the CC-B and through the Club connection arranged for Moore to take lessons with Küster (although he had limited interest in the piano at that time).⁴⁵ Küster led the CC-B to great acclaim in Brooklyn and developed a relationship with the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The CC-B performed multiple times at BAM and collaborated there with guest artists including Percy Grainger and violinist Inez Lauritano. Additionally, the CC-B gave many New York musicians their first performances. Richard Crooks, renowned Metropolitan Opera tenor, performed with the Club in an early career concert, and returned to perform in 1940, thanking the group for the early opportunity.⁴⁶ Through these performances, Küster's leadership became known and respected in musical Brooklyn. By 1915, she was publicly commenting in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* about proposed legislation regarding music teachers.⁴⁷ Figure 3 (on p.5) shows a poem by a community member that served as a tribute to her and to the CC-B.

Amelia Gray-Clarke, who took the conducting baton from Küster when she became visually impaired, continued to lead the CC-B's flourishing performances through the height of their success. She also became a prominent music teacher and leader in the community. When the (coed) Brooklyn Music Teachers' Guild was founded in the 1940s under the leadership of Carl Tollefson, Gray-Clarke served as a member and officer. That organization animated leading musicians and teachers in an

Chaminade in Early 20th-Century Brooklyn (cont.)

effort to improve music education in Brooklyn. Gray-Clarke guided this circle of leaders, including Peter Wilhousky,⁴⁸ the Tollefsons,⁴⁹ and many others. Her career as a conductor was so fruitful that it led Ken Johnston of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* to note that “[h]er record as conductor rivals that of Toscanini.”⁵⁰

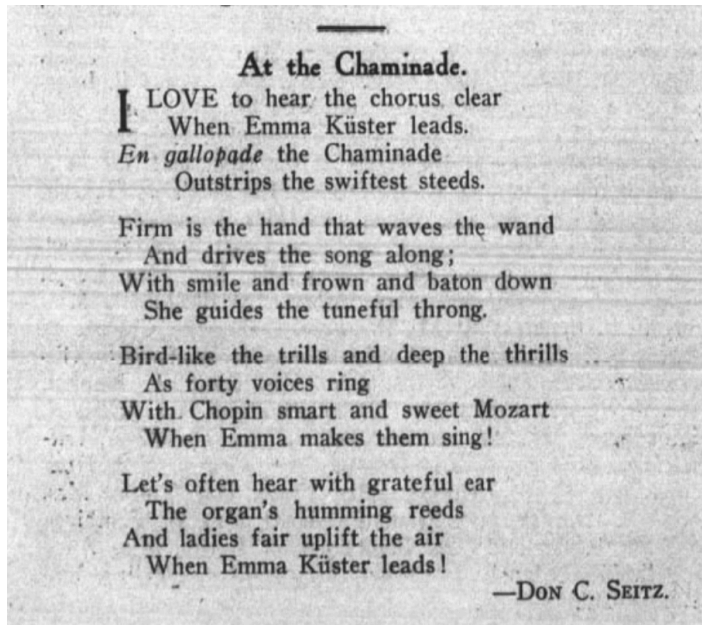


Figure 3. Poem in honor of Emma Richardson Küster and the Chaminade Club, *Brooklyn Life*, 6 May 1911, 18.

The CC-B also used their artistry and profile to benefit their Brooklyn community,⁵¹ often raising funds for people living in poverty or for children with disabilities. Some of the beneficiaries of their artistic citizenship included the Brooklyn Nursery and Infants Hospital, the Methodist Episcopal Hospital, the Trained Christian Helpers, and the Industrial Home for the Blind. These acts of service were likely inspired by Chaminade's own acts of care. Upon receiving the Legion of Honor, Chaminade hosted an event in an orphanage in order to draw attention to the needs of children. During World War I, American periodicals noted that she cared for ailing soldiers, and her fans would surely have read about this service.⁵² Thus, although Chaminade made but one trip to New York in 1908, remembrances of her visit, her music, and her communal spirit continued to inspire those who connected with her.

Inspiration, Ardor and Aspiration

Twenty-five years after its inception, the Chaminade Club of Brooklyn remained devoted to its namesake. Amelia Gray-Clarke sent the composer news of their silver anniversary in 1923 along with an acrostic constructed from Chaminade's surname. Figure 4

displays the acrostic, excerpted from a *Times Union* article.

The words paint a picture of indelible and persistent respect for the composer, recognizing her diligence (“concerted effort”), her creativity (“artistic ideals”), and her leadership (“inspiration,” “ardor,” “devotion”). Having composed an acrostic of our first names for my husband on our wedding day, I understand the care with which Gray-Clarke composed this for Chaminade. There is a process to creating an acrostic: you might call it an excavation of salient truths. The goal is to encapsulate, in the most concise format, the most important characteristics of the person being honored, and their most significant meanings for you. That process involves careful thought, consideration, inclusions, and exclusions. It is undertaken with attentiveness. So, we see here the deeper truths of the reverence the CC-B had for Chaminade and her work – a reverence going beyond praise for the composer and leading to activism. The members of the CC-B also imitated Chaminade's feminist ethic, fostering a musical culture in Brooklyn that extended outside of the parlor into public-facing events. For her part, Chaminade enjoyed the members of the CC-B as well, and wrote to Küster in 1923: “I often think of that memorable evening spent with you in Brooklyn in 1908! I can still see you conducting the chorus so majestically and the memory of my ‘Mariners Christmas’ is still on[e of] the best interpretations I have ever heard.”⁵³

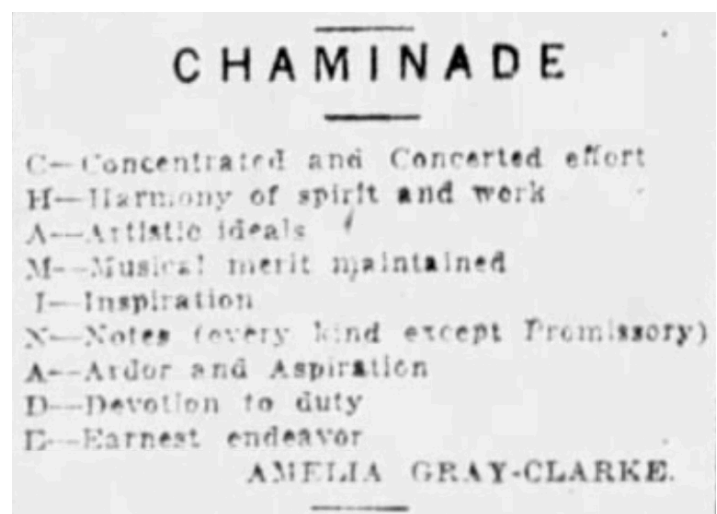


Figure 4. Chaminade Anagram from “Silver Anniversary Concert: The Chaminade Last Night,” *Brooklyn Times Union*, 24 April 1923, 8.

The mutual resonances between Chaminade and the Chaminade Club of Brooklyn established in her honor

Chaminade in Early 20th-Century Brooklyn (cont.)

have illuminated a handful of stories, but have also revealed the lacuna in histories of women creators and performers.⁵⁴ The suffragettes, the members of the Chaminade Club, and Chaminade herself would balk at the absence of comparative texts about her music, her life, and her brilliant entrepreneurship. "Not to be forgotten, to live in the heart and the memory of those who understand you, is the supreme consolation of the artist. My thanks to all those who remember, and to you with all my heart. C. C. Chaminade."⁵⁵



Figure 5. "A Chaminade Group at Mrs. Emma Richardson Kuster's Recent Reception," *Brooklyn Life*, 16 January 1909, 14.⁵⁶

Notes

1. The acrostic based on the letters of Chaminade's name was referenced in Ruth G. Davis, "Contemporary Comment: Chaminade's Luncheon Ends in Song Festival," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 23 March 1949, 25. One of the speakers at the event, Rev. Dr. Alfred Grant Walton, was the pastor of the Flatbush-Tompkins Congregational Church and he composed this acrostic.
2. For a substantial discussion of Chaminade's tour, see Jessica Stankis, "Rethinking Chaminade's Concert Tour of the United States, 1908" (Thesis, Arizona State University, 2006). Chaminade visited just a few Chaminade Clubs during her brief concert tour of the USA, including the Brooklyn club.
3. Marcia J. Citron, *Cécile Chaminade: A Bio-Bibliography* (Greenwood Press, 1988).
4. Herbert F. Gunnison, Ed., *Flatbush of Today* 2, no. 1 (1908), 160.
5. Mary McKinn Marriott, "Christmas Social Affairs," *Ladies Home Journal* 25 (1907), 52.
6. *Brooklyn Life*, 26 December 1908, 23.
7. "Mme. Chaminade at Club Reception: French Composer Guest of First Association Named in Her Honor," *New York Times*, 21 December 1908. Although the *NYT* states the Brooklyn Club was the first association named for Chaminade, others around the country claim to have been established earlier, including the Yonkers, NY club which dates their origin to 1895.
8. "Mme. Chaminade at Club Reception," 9.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Frank Moore Colby, Ed. *The New International Yearbook: A Compendium of the World's Progress for the Year 1908* (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1909), 469.
11. This stands in stark contrast to the multiple books about her contemporary, John Philip Sousa. Sousa's catalogue of works numbers much less than Chaminade. Whereas many critique Chaminade for focusing on salon music, the same level of criticism does not appear regarding Sousa's attention to marches.
12. "Cecile Chaminade, Composer, 86, Dies," *New York Times*, 19 April 1944. The quote referenced in the obituary was excerpted from *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* at the time.
13. Richard Langham Smith, "Sister of Perpetual Indulgence," *The Musical Times*, December 1994, 740.
14. Citron, *Cécile Chaminade*.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. Cécile Tardif, *Portrait de Cécile Chaminade* (Montréal: Louise Courteau, 1993).
18. Theses and dissertations include Heng X. Kreft, "A Study of Seven Mélodies by Cécile Chaminade," (DMA diss., Indiana University, 2013); Michele M. Aichele, "Cécile Chaminade as a Symbol for American Women, 1890-1920," (PhD diss., The University of Iowa, 2019); and Stankis, "Rethinking Chaminade's Concert Tour."
19. Citron, *Cécile Chaminade*.
20. *Ibid.* Citron explains that the choice to marry Carbonel, twenty years Chaminade's senior, mystified her family. Carbonel became ill with a lung disease in 1903 and died in 1907.

Chaminade in Early 20th-Century Brooklyn (cont.)

21. Irving Schwerké, "Chaminade Writes More Music Waiting for War to End," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 June 1942.
22. The 30 Lafayette Avenue location is the second for Brooklyn Academy of Music, which was established in 1861. The first location was destroyed by fire in 1903. www.bam.org.
23. *The Brooklyn Citizen*, 30 October 1908, 10.
24. Ibid.
25. Citron, *Cécile Chaminade*, 168.
26. This is from a particularly harsh review of Chaminade's Carnegie Hall concert. "Mme. Chaminade's Concert," *The Evening Post*, 26 October 1908, 7.
27. "Mme. Chaminade's Concert."
28. Celebrated abolitionist and suffragist Julia Ward Howe spoke these words in a speech from November 1908. See "Mrs. Howe's Latest Speech," *Woman's Journal*, 14 November 1908, 187.
29. Minnie J. Reynolds, "State Correspondence: New York," *Woman's Journal*, 4 December 1908. Retrieved from <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbcmil.scrp5013401/?sp=3>. It is also important to note that this had been building since 1894 when suffragists brought 600,000 signatures from New York State in a failed attempt to petition for a suffrage amendment. See <https://tarlton.law.utexas.edu/NY-woman-suffrage-association>.
30. Reynolds, "State Correspondence."
31. Ibid. The 19th amendment was years away from that 1908 meeting. Women finally got the right to vote, but equal pay has yet to be realized.
32. Suffrage had been pursued more by the less affluent, but this article noted that the participants at this event came from all socio-economic strata of the city. It is important to note that some supporters of Chaminade, especially those who were more affluent, may not have been as involved in the world of the suffrage movement, however as this report notes, "hundreds were there who were never at a suffrage meeting before."
33. See Stankis, "Rethinking Chaminade's Concert Tour" and Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, Eds., *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* (University of Illinois Press, 1986).
34. Chaminade spoke openly about the challenges women faced in the professional realm: "...I think that life has been hard on women....Woman has not been considered a working force in the world and the work that her sex and conditions impose upon her has not been so adjusted as to give her a little fuller scope for the development of her best self. She has been handicapped, and only the few, through force of circumstances or inherent strength, have overcome the handicap." See "Mme. Chaminade's Dreams: A Talk with the Greatest Woman Composer," *The Sun*, 1 November 1908, 2.
35. Sylvester Rawling, "Chaminade Charms House Full of Women at Carnegie Hall," *Evening World*, 26 October 1908, 5.
36. Women have secured the right to vote, but gender bias continues, equal pay remains elusive, and threats to *Roe v. Wade* make the future uncertain.
37. Value calculated at measuringworth.com.
38. "Mrs. Taft's List of Greatest Women," *New York Times*, 14 December 1911, 6.
39. Stankis, "Rethinking Chaminade's Concert Tour." Several Chaminade Clubs remain in existence today, including a chapter in Yonkers, New York which maintains an active performance schedule.
40. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 26 September 1897.
41. Stankis, "Rethinking Chaminade's Concert Tour." Also see Citron, *Cécile Chaminade*.
42. A visit to the Philadelphia club is also known to have happened. There may have been other encounters, but to date they have not been recorded.
43. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 2 October 1899. Information regarding Chaminade's language communications with American Clubs is incomplete. Some articles make reference to translators. In others, that information is notably absent. An article about the Winter Club of Bath Beach and Bensonhurst from 1899 refer to receiving "a graceful epistle in French" from Chaminade. It appears she wrote in French and American clubs were responsible for getting the texts translated. See also "Winter Club Meeting: An Autographed Letter Received from Mlle. Chaminade," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 22 October 1899, 37.
44. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 28 October 1900, 16.
45. Jerry L. McBride, *Douglas Moore: A Bio-Bibliography* (A-R Editions, Inc., 2011).

Chaminade in Early 20th-Century Brooklyn (cont.)

46. "Opera Star Repays Favors of Chaminade in Early Years," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 28 March 1940, 22.

47. "Brooklyn Music Teachers Discuss Question of State Registration Law," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 3 October 1915, 32.

48. See "Peter Wilhousky, Director of Music for Public Schools," *New York Times*, 6 January 1978, Section D, 13.

49. See "From the Annals of Brooklyn's Musical History: The Tollefsens." <https://www.bklynlibrary.org/blog/2011/04/12/annals-brooklyns-musical>.

50. Ken Johnston, "Her Record as Conductor Rivals that of Toscanini," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 8 April 1951, 25.

51. In 1920 (*New York Tribune*, 24 October 1920), conductor Herbert J. Braham chronicled the history of music in Brooklyn. Among those credited with its genesis to a thriving scene were the "women's organizations." Braham cites the Chaminade Club, among others, and states, "to our women belongs much of the credit for keeping the flame alive." That flame of "the borough's musical life" could be partially credited to Chaminade for inspiring many in Brooklyn Society to grow a musical community.

52. The CC-B fundraised to support Chaminade in her work, even as they supported organizations in Brooklyn. One article seems to reference the CC-B purchasing an ambulance to support Chaminade's hospital work in France. See "Chaminade, Pioneer of Brooklyn Choral Clubs, Draws Praise of Critics," *The Brooklyn Citizen*, 4 January 1925.

53. Referenced in Aichele, "Cécile Chaminade as a Symbol."

54. Many have acknowledged that, while progress has been made, more work needs to be done. Susan Wollenberg noted that in 2009, when giving a lecture on Chaminade's "Sonata for Piano Solo," hers was the only analysis treatment of a woman composer at the conference. See Susan Wollenberg, "Where are We Now? Teaching and Studying Women Composers Post-Citron" in Rhiannon Mathias, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Women's Work in Music*. Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021.

55. Schwerké, "Chaminade Writes More Music," 11. These words are how Chaminade concluded her April 23, 1942 letter to writer and music critic, Schwerké, as he references in his article.

56. "A Chaminade Group at Mrs. Emma Richardson

Kuster's Recent Reception," *Brooklyn Life*, 16 January 1909, 14. The available digitized photo online is almost black. I used an overexposure edit and reveal the women's faces more clearly. Cécile Chaminade is seated center with Emma Richardson Küster pictured on the left and Marguerite Liotard, President of the CC-B, pictured on the right.

Institute News

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

Spring 2022 has been one of the most challenging and rewarding semesters of my career, and judging from the reactions of my peers gleaned from various media outlets (from Instagram to NPR to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*), I know I'm not alone in feeling this way. For the first time since March 17th, 2020, I returned to the Brooklyn College campus and experienced that sense of "reentry" that so many of us have now felt. Although my schedule of classes included an in-person course followed hours later by an on-line class, I could feel my heart-rate increasing as I made my way towards Whitehead Hall, up the stairs, down the corridor, and fumbled for the keys to the HISAM office. What had I imagined? It was 8:00 AM, and no one but a new maintenance officer (*not Hakeem—where is he? Is he OK?*) singing along to an AI Green track. I opened the door with visibly shaking hands. Someone had cleaned and straightened things up. The trash had been emptied, the desks had been dusted off but not unburdened of their academic clutter. My irrational fear that a family of Brooklyn rats would have moved into my file drawer proved unfounded. Come 9:30 AM, the undergraduate students in my "Music of the US" course found some relief in the fact that I could barely remember how to operate that particular "Smart" classroom's podium. As it turns out, we're all in this reentry together.

Institute Events: A Hybrid Spring 2022

For the Hitchcock Institute, the Spring 2022 semester brought changes large and small, as well as our most elaborate and complex celebration to date. In March, our longtime College Assistant **Dr. Whitney George** moved on to bigger and better opportunities. Whitney has contributed immensely to the intellectual and artistic aspects of both AMR and the Music in Polycultural America speaker series over her ten year tenure working in various capacities at the Institute, from Managing Editor to College Assistant. Whitney began her career at Brooklyn College in the MM Composition program, and continued on to the CUNY Graduate Center where she recently completed the DMA in Composition. This year, she received commissions from New York Repertory Orchestra for a performance of "RUINS" in the 2022-23 season, and from the Patriot Brass Ensemble for "DISSENT" after the recent SCOTUS decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Thank you, Whitney. You will be missed.

Many of you had the opportunity to hear Whitney's chamber ensemble, The Curiosity Cabinet, playing works of **Tania León** at "Can You Imagine?" our April 15th celebration of the Pulitzer Prize winning composer's life and creativity. While we dedicated the entirety of the Fall 2021 issue of AMR to the burgeoning

field of Tania León Studies, this spring we focused on a hybrid conference that brought together scholars, performers, former students, and collaborators to honor León over the course of two days. On Thursday April 14th, I spoke with **Isaac Jean-François** about his work in and on León's archive and its significance to his life, as well as to the field. León joined us on the Zoom call, and it was a surprise to all when **Joan Tower** appeared as a guest!

Day Two of the symposium comprised a full menu of livestreamed performances, panel discussions, and responses from León, who was on the scene at the CUNY Graduate Center to connect with all of the performers and participants. **Roberto Bacalao**, a filmmaker from Cuba, had flown in from Germany to document the making of the event, and **Rossa Crean**, a composer-painter with synesthesia, would paint to the sounds of León's *Indígena* as the last performance on the program. More than 300 individuals participated in the symposium event, which concluded with a Korean dinner for the last of us who remained to break down the stage and sound equipment, plus a few special guests. We toasted our honoree for her illustrious career, on the publication of her biography by Alejandro Madrid titled *Tania León's Stride* after the piece that won her the Pulitzer, and for her immense capacity for humanity, warmth, and kindness.

Shortly after the symposium, our two other HISAM Spring Speaker Series events took place, broadening our view once again to the larger scope of American music scholarship. **Dr. Malcolm J. Merriweather** organized a collaboration between the



Post-symposium dinner in K-Town. From front left: D. Geers, M. Cerar, SJM, T. León, M. Conelli, K. Hartswick, E. Jensen-Moulton, D. Rodriguez, M. Çolak, J. Taylor, R.

Institute News (cont.)



Rossa Crean's remarkable "Indígena" painting.

Dessoff Choirs, one of the oldest community choral groups in New York City, and the Hitchcock Institute, to host a tripartite virtual talk between **Dr. Rollo Dilworth**, **Dr. Tammy Kernodle**, and himself. The topic the intersection of Margaret Bonds's choral music and Black radicalism, made this discussion not only timely to the Dessoff performances of Bonds's Cantatas with texts from Langston Hughes's *Credo*, but also relevant to discussions of decolonization in higher education music curricula.

In This Issue

The Spring 2022 *American Music Review* explores ideas of place and practice then and now. The articles in this issue consider methods of musicology that may soon disappear entirely (the rare beauty of **Allan Atlas's** hand-written musical examples) along with newer ethical questions such as who (or what) creates music when Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) interferes with the creative process and messaging (see **Teo Beauchamp-Blake's** piece on Travis Scott's "Travis Bott"). Begging its own ethical questions, Atlas's article digs into one of Puccini's asiaphilic operas, *Madama Butterfly*, in order to parse out connections with Jerome Kern songs. Two

articles explore Brooklyn's musical scene in the teens and twenties a century apart. As composer Cécile Chaminade's popularity reached its height in the early twentieth century, so too did the pace of activities for Brooklyn's Chapter of the Cécile Chaminade Club. In this issue, **Susan Davis** chronicles this East Coast Chaminade fever. In April of 2019, along with Brooklyn Raga Massive's Pawan Benjamin (bansuri flute) and Swaminathan Selvaganesh (percussion), Arun joined DD Jackson and Brooklyn College Jazz Band for an evening of Jazz and Hindustani improvised music as part of our ongoing Global Jazz series. Our interview in this issue with Brooklyn Raga Massive founders **Arun Ramamurthy** and **Trina Basu** delves into how the group has developed a practice of improvisation through incorporating many different national musical practices occurring right here in our home borough.

HISAM Staff Happenings

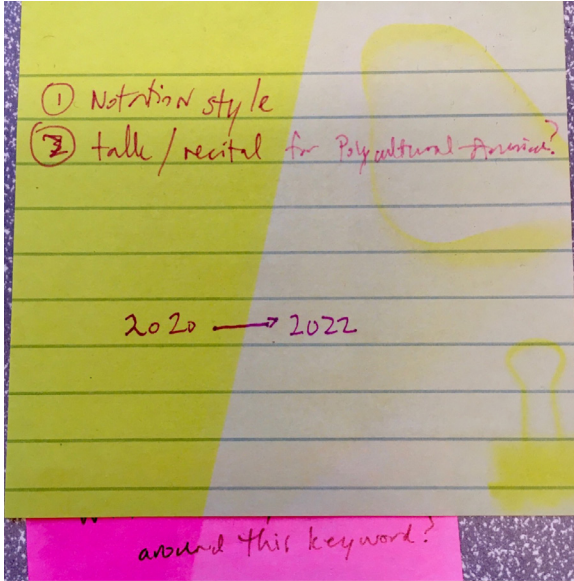
This past semester, HISAM Graduate Assistant **Kirsten Jermé** completed her coursework and second degree recital towards her DMA in cello performance at the Graduate Center while balancing a full schedule of teaching and concertizing throughout the region. She had the privilege of coaching with Mark Steinberg this term and continuing her studies with Marcy Rosen, and she looks forward to a summer full of string quartet playing and coaching chamber music - two of her greatest passions as a performer and teaching artist.

We couldn't be happier to welcome a new generation of musicologists to Brooklyn College this academic year, and among them, our new HISAM College Assistant, **Haley Garrick**, who joined us in April. In addition to her immediately busy calendar with the Institute, Garrick presented a conference paper at McGill's Music Graduate Symposium this spring titled, "With Laughter and With Fists: Colonization & Homosocial Practices of the Americas" discussing synergies between musics of Canadian and South American indigenous women. She's also just begun an internship with the AMS in June as Programs & Events Intern. Welcome to HISAM, Haley!

Jeffrey Taylor continues to lead the Jazz programs at BC with the help of **Ronnie Burrage** and **Kat Rodriguez**. Jazz performance at the Conservatory is thriving with Rodriguez as Big Band director. The Big Band's Spring 2022 concert featured incisive Afro-Cuban rhythms and sounds, performed skillfully under Rodriguez's direction, and featuring special guest trumpeter and composer **Stephen Oquendo**. We look forward to continued success from Rodriguez and the band as she takes up the baton previously held by **Dr. Salim Washington** and **D.D. Jackson**, among others.

Institute News (cont.)

As Small Jazz Ensemble director, Burrage composed most of this spring's new arrangements from his large catalog of recordings. In November 2022, Burrage and his Jazz Ensemble will collaborate with **Dr. Malcolm J. Merriweather** and the BC Symphonic Choir, as well as BC's Glee Club under the direction of Brooklyn College Alumna **Rebecca Martinez**. Look to the HISAM website



Reentry: Unintentional time capsule of a post-it note left on my desk over two years.

for an announcement! Burrage and Merriweather will collaborate on an additional project on September 14th in the Claire Tow Theater on "God's Only Black Man," scored for chorus, soloists, Jazz band, and orchestra, and in connection with Burrage's professional ensemble Holographic Principle, who gave a masterclass to BC students this past spring.

In the midst of a busy semester with HISAM, I've found myself presenting on antiracist topics at both the Society for American Music (with the Committee on Diversity and Inclusion) and the AMS Teaching Music History Conference's "Beyond Tokenism" panel. In addition, I look forward to presenting work from my forthcoming collection on popular music and domestic violence at the Feminist Theory & Music conference in Guelph, Ontario, marking my first in-person conference since 2019.

Wishing you all smooth reentries this spring and summer.

In solidarity,

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton

Become a sustaining donor today at hisam.org

THE HITCHCOCK INSTITUTE FOR STUDIES IN AMERICAN MUSIC

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Director
Jeffrey Taylor, Co-Director
Ray Allen, Senior Research Associate
Kirsten Jermé, Graduate Assistant
Haley Garrick, Administrative Assistant

ADVISORY BOARD

Ray Allen, Professor emeritus, Brooklyn College and CUNY Graduate Center
George Boziwick, Chief, Music Division, The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts (retired)
Richard Crawford, Distinguished Professor emeritus, University of Michigan
George Cunningham, Professor, Department of Africana Studies, Brooklyn College
Nancy Hager, Professor emerita, Conservatory of Music, Brooklyn College
Ellie M. Hisama, Dean, Faculty of Music, University of Toronto
Susan Tyler Hitchcock, Senior Books Editor, National Geographic Society
Tammy L. Kernodle, Distinguished Professor of Musicology, University of Miami of Ohio
Tania León, Distinguished Professor emerita, Brooklyn College
Carol J. Oja, William Powell Mason Professor of Music, Harvard University
Ursula Oppens, Distinguished Professor of Music, Brooklyn College and CUNY Graduate Center
Katherine Preston, David N. & Margaret C. Bottoms Professor of Music, The College of William and Mary
Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., Edmund J. and Louise W. Kahn Term Professor of Music emeritus, University of Pennsylvania
Judith Tick, Matthews Distinguished University Professor, Northeastern University
Judy Tsou, Head emeritus of the Music Library, Assistant Professor of Music History, University of Washington
Sherrie Tucker, Professor of American Studies, University of Kansas

American Music Review

ISSN 1943-9385

Volume LI, Issue 2

Spring 2022

Editors.....Stephanie Jensen-Moulton
Jeffrey Taylor
Contributing Editor.....Ray Allen
Managing Editor.....Michelle Yom
Production Assistant.....Haley Garrick

AMR is published in the Fall and Spring. Copyright 2022 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.

Email: hisam@brooklyn.cuny.edu | Website: www.hisam.org

Jerome Kern and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly**

Allan W. Atlas

Writing in the May 1947 issue of *Commentary*, the conductor/critic Kurt List had this to say about Jerome Kern (1885-1945) and Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924): "As a lyric melodist, Kern was strongly influenced by Italian *verismo* and its most perfumed champion, Puccini."¹ Here I wish to go beyond the notion of "influenced" and consider two occasions on which Kern quoted Puccini in a manner so immediately audible that both borrowing and intention are, I believe, beyond doubt. And both times it was *Madama Butterfly* (1904) upon which he drew.

We begin with the song "Dearly Beloved," which Kern wrote for the 1942 film *You Were Never Lovelier* (lyrics by Johnny Mercer),² and for which I am not the first to notice a relationship with *Butterfly*. Commenting about the song's possible reference to Puccini, Alec Wilder, Michael Freedland, and Gerald Bordman all circle around the target without ever hitting it squarely on the head. Wilder: "It has been stated that the source of *Dearly Beloved* is a duet from a Puccini opera";³ Freedland: "musicologists of the period" have suggested that "a section of the song . . . was very reminiscent of 'Madame Butterfly'";⁴ Bordman: "Claims that the song was suggested by a passage in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* are unprovable."⁵ (Sadly, none of the three tells us just who "stated," "suggested," or "claim[ed].")

To end the suspense: "Dearly Beloved" does indeed have roots in *Butterfly*, though the situation is a bit more complicated than I had thought, since, as Stephen Banfield has shown, the opening of "Dearly's" chorus/refrain (or, as Kern called it, the "burthen") is the fourth and final link in a chain of motivically related works that extends backwards through Ivor Novello's "Why Is There Ever Good Bye?" from his 1936 London musical *Careless Rapture* (lyrics by Christopher Hassall),⁶ *Butterfly* (1904), and the "substitute" finale (1893) that Gabriel Fauré wrote for his Piano Quartet no.1 in C minor, op.15 (1879).⁷



With respect to *Butterfly*, the "concordance" with "Dearly" is a motive that figures prominently in the expansive Act 1 love duet for Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton that begins at "Viene la sera" (RH 116/1/p.129) and continues to the end of the act.⁸ Altogether the motive appears five times (starting at RH 128/1/p.148), with the final statement underpinning Pinkerton's impassioned "Dammi ch'io baci le tue mani care."⁹ Example 1 compares the relevant passages in all four pieces, beginning with Kern and working backwards chronologically: (a) the opening phrase of "Dearly's" chorus; (b) the analogous phrase in Novello's song; (c) the last iteration of the motive in *Butterfly*; and (d) the melody in Fauré's finale.

Clearly, the melodic contours are virtually identical, and the motive always sits comfortably on the dominant of its prevailing tonal area. Moreover, "Dearly" and *Butterfly* are further related with respect to their dramatic situations: Pinkerton woos Cio-Cio-San, and Bob Davis tries to court Maria Acuña.

*For the "Musicology BYTES" gang at the CUNY Graduate Center, whose virtual company, social and intellectual, I've enjoyed immensely. My thanks to Stephen Banfield, John Graziano, and Helen Greenwald for their constructive comments on an early draft of this article.

Jerome Kern and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (cont.)

(a) *Andante cantabile, ma ben ritmato*
mp
Dear-ly be-lov-ed, how clear-ly I see,

This musical score shows the beginning of the song 'Dearly Beloved' by Jerome Kern. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'Andante cantabile, ma ben ritmato' and the dynamic is 'mp'. The lyrics are 'Dear-ly be-lov-ed, how clear-ly I see,'.

Example 1a: Kern, "Dearly Beloved," beginning of the "burthen" (*Jerome Kern Rediscovered* [Miami: Warner Bros., 2001], 29).

(b)
why is there ev-er good-bye? All

This musical score shows the beginning of the song 'Why Is There Ever Good Bye?' by Novello. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are 'why is there ev-er good-bye? All'.

Example 1b: Novello, "Why Is There Ever Good Bye?" (London: Chappell, 1936, 4).

(c) *con anima*
Pinkerton *incalzando sempre a cresc.*
orch. *f* *incalzando sempre a cresc.*
Dam-mi ch'io ba-ci le tue ma-ni ca-re.

This musical score shows the beginning of the song 'Dammi ch'io baci le tue mani care' by Puccini. It features a vocal line for Pinkerton and an orchestral accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'con anima' and the dynamic is 'f'. The lyrics are 'Dam-mi ch'io ba-ci le tue ma-ni ca-re.'.

Example 1c: Puccini, *Butterfly*, Act 1, Pinkerton's "Dammi ch'io baci le tue mani care" (RH 130/1/p.151).

(d)
dolce e espressivo

This musical score shows the beginning of the 'substitute' finale from Fauré's Piano Quartet no.1 in C minor, op.15. It features a piano accompaniment. The tempo is marked 'dolce e espressivo'.

Example 1d: Fauré, Piano Quartet no.1 in C minor, op.15, "substitute" finale, mm. 95-99 (Paris: J. Hamelle, 1884).

The obvious question: from whom (if anyone) is Kern cribbing? My hunch—and a strong one at that—is that it is from Puccini. First, as we will see in connection with *Show Boat*, there can be no doubt that Kern was familiar with *Butterfly*; and second, the musical quotation fits nicely in terms of the related dramatic contexts. We cannot be as confident about any other pairing; nor is there any evidence that Kern even knew Novello's song or Fauré's Piano Quartet. In all, I would argue that Kern is quoting Puccini and doing so in broad daylight.

One more point concerning "Dearly": as noted above, the film *You Were Never Lovelier* opened on 3 December 1942. Yet in his next-day review in the *New York Post*, Archer Winsten mentioned "the familiar [my emphasis] 'Dearly Beloved'..." The tantalizing word is "familiar." Given that the film was only a day old, was Winsten implying that the familiarity with the song derived from the audience's (or his) knowledge of *Butterfly*? Surely, the answer is *no*! Rather, as we learn from Kate Cameron's review in the *Daily News*: "... 'Dearly Beloved' has already made the airwaves' hit parade... [it is] familiar to most radio listeners."¹³ In fact, "Dearly" had been filling the airwaves for months, so much so that Bosley Crowther of *The New York Times* deemed it "currently inescapable."¹⁴ And the inescapable voice that listeners heard singing "Dearly" belonged to Fred Astaire, who had recorded the song that past summer, on 26 July 1942.¹⁵

We move on to *Show Boat* and to even firmer ground with respect to Kern's model. With book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II (the story is based on Edna Ferber's 1926 novel of that name), the show opened at the Ziegfeld Theatre on 27 December 1927 and ran for 572 performances.¹⁶ And among its many great and deservedly famous numbers,¹⁷ none is more Puccinian in character than "You Are Love," which appears twice during the course of the show: first as a duet for Magnolia and Ravenal near the end of Act 1 (scene 6, no. 13, p. 106), and then as a nostalgic reprise in Act 2 (scene 7, no. 32, p. 184), now for Ravenal alone (with the opening motive of the chorus now introduced in the low strings).¹⁸ For Todd Decker:

Kern's opening [in "You Are Love"] bears a more than casual resemblance to the start of "Some Day," the lovers' waltz from [Sigmund Romberg's] *Cherry Blossoms*... Both tunes begin near the bottom of the tenor range and ascend to successively

Jerome Kern and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (cont.)

higher top notes by way of leaps in the same direction.¹⁹

Example 2 provides the two melodies as they are juxtaposed in Decker.

(a) But some day Some fine day All this will be With a changed for me.

(b) You are love. Here in my arms Where you be long.

Example 2: (a) Romberg, "Some Day," *Cherry Blossoms*

Although the upward leaps—similar but not identical—catch one's ear,²⁰ that is where the similarity between the two songs begins and ends; and I believe that there is a much closer match for Kern's model.

One of the most haunting numbers in *Madama Butterfly* is the Pinkerton-Sharpless-Suzuki trio near the end of Act 2/pt. 2 (RH 22/1/p. 321), in which the two men, accompanied by Pinkerton's American wife, make it clear that they have returned in order to claim and take with them the child that Cio-Cio-San and Pinkerton had conceived a few years earlier. Example 3 compares the openings of "You Are Love" and the trio.

Here the melodies do more than just resemble one another: they are identical, now even down to aspects of the rhythm. Further, for me, the telltale clue to the relationship is the seventh scale degree that sounds poignantly against the sustained tonic in both passages (marked with asterisks in Ex. 3). This simply cannot be a coincidence; nor does Kern make the slightest attempt to hide or even disguise the "cardiac pang." In addition, *Butterfly's* trio and the Act 2 reprise of "You Are Love" are related dramatically: just as Pinkerton returns after having deserted Cio-Cio-San and their child, so Ravenal now reappears after having done the same to Magnolia.

To sum up: (1) despite some previous hemming and hawing and even skepticism (Bordman's "unprovable") about the "Dearly Beloved"/*Butterfly* connection, I have no doubt that the opening of "Dearly's" burthen draws upon the motive that, after four appearances, serves for Pinkerton's "Dammi ch'io baci le tue mani care" in *Butterfly's* Act 1 love duet; and (2) even more striking is the resemblance between "You Are Love" and the melody to which Sharpless sings "Io so....che alle sue pene" at the beginning of the Act2/pt. 2 trio in *Butterfly*.

(a) Ravenal Molto espress. You are love. Here in my arms

(b) Sharpless dolce 1° Tempo (Largo) ♩ = 54 Io so che alle sue pene non ci so- (no)

Example 3: (a) Kern, Ravenal, "You Are Love," *Show Boat*, Act 1, scene 6, no. 13 (*Show Boat* [New York: T.B. Harms, 1927], 109); (b) Puccini, Sharpless, "Io so....che alle sue pene," *Butterfly*, Act 2/pt. 2/RH 22/1/p.321.

Obviously, I would like to be able to offer some hard, documentary evidence to support my conclusions: perhaps a "confession" in the course of correspondence, or a report of a conversation, or a comment in a musical sketch (even a ticket stub from the Metropolitan Opera would do the trick), anything that would show that Kern was familiar with *Butterfly*. Unfortunately, I have nothing of the sort. And lacking such, we have to let the music and our ears do the talking and judging, respectively.

For the record: From 11 February 1907, when the Metropolitan Opera performed *Butterfly* for the first time (Puccini was in the audience), to 26 November 1927 (thus almost right up to the opening of *Show Boat*, and therefore too late to influence the show), the Met staged the opera 195 times.²¹ To be sure, some those performances were out of town (as close as Philadelphia or as distant as St. Paul, MN), and Kern may well have been away from home (he lived in suburban Bronxville, about fifteen miles north of Manhattan's Columbus Circle) during performances at the Met. The point, though, is simply this: he had many opportunities to hear the opera. Moreover, he might have had a copy of the 1924 recording by Eugene Goossens on HMV DB 893-906;²² and it is hard to imagine that he did not own a vocal score of the opera.²³

Jerome Kern and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (cont.)

Notes

1. Kurt List, "Jerome Kern and American Operetta: He Wedded Opera Lyrique and American Vaudeville," *Commentary* 3 (May 1947), 33-41; online at <https://www.commentary.org/articles/kurt-list/jerome-kern-and-american-operettahe-wedded-opera-lyrique-and-american-vaudeville/>; my thanks to Susan Forscher Weiss for drawing my attention to this article. On the Vienna-born List (1913-1970), who studied with Alban Berg and, after settling in the United States in 1938, became influential in the recording industry, see the obituary notice in *The New York Times*, 5 December 1970, 35.
2. The film opened at New York's Radio City Music Hall on 3 December 1942, and starred Rita Hayworth and Fred Astaire, along with Adolphe Menjou and, in a cameo appearance, the Cuban bandleader Xavier Cugat. There is a clip of Astaire (in the role of Bob Davis) singing the song at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DBVmPxQLKTg&ab_channel=PolinaFig%C5%82owska. Later in the film, Rita Hayworth (as Maria Acuña – though the voice is Nan Wynn's) reprises the song, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zyCYi-b-aEk&ab_channel=DragonBoss. Nicholas Tawa, *Supremely American. Popular Song in the 20th Century: Styles and Singers and What They Say about America* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2005), 14, notes that Kern had already performed the song privately in 1938. For an interesting look at various aspects of the film's music, see Todd Decker, *Music Makes Me: Fred Astaire and Jazz* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 130-35, 196-202.
3. Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 83; he adds, somewhat bizarrely: "I can see how this might be, and I might attempt to trace it if I thought the song worthy of further discussion." On Wilder, see especially Philip Lambert, *Alec Wilder. American Composers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).
4. Michael Freedland, *Jerome Kern* (London: Robson Books, 1978), 159.
5. Gerald Bordman, *Jerome Kern: His Life and Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 393.
6. On Novello (1893-1951, born David Ivor Davies), who was something of a theatrical Renaissance man—composer, lyricist, actor and director both in film (silent) and on stage—see Paul Webb, *Ivor Novello: A Portrait of a Star*, rev. ed. (London: Haus Books, 2005 – originally published 1999); James Harding, *Ivor Novello: A Biography* (London: W.H. Allen, 1987); Stewart Nicholls, "West End Royalty: Ivor Novello and English Operetta, 1917-1951," in *The Oxford Handbook of the British Musical*, ed. Robert Gordon & Olaf Jubin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 199-223.
7. Stephen Banfield, "Music, Stage and Text: The Tradition of Bourgeois Tonality to the Second World War," in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music*, ed., Nicholas Cook & Anthony Pople (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 111-14.
8. References to *Butterfly* are to the G. Ricordi vocal score, plate no. 110000 (Milan, 1907), and cite act/rehearsal number (RH)/measure (1 being that at which the RH appears)/page number.
9. Thomas S. Hirschak, *The Jerome Kern Encyclopedia* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2013), 49-50, associates "Dearly" with Cio-Cio-San's unrelated "Or son contenta," which comes a few measures before the motive with which we are concerned (Act 1/RH 127/11/p. 147).
10. Though "Dearly Beloved" is in C major, the burthen avoids landing there solidly until its final chord. The *Butterfly* motive first appears on B-flat within an E-flat-major context and eventually lands on a dominant F within B-flat for Pinkerton's "Dammi."
11. If Kern read *Musical America*, he might have come across a notice by the London critic Basil Maine, "New Fantasy by Davies Played," vol. 57, no. 10 (25 May 1937), 26, which calls attention to Novello's recently opened *Careless Rapture*.
12. Cited after Bordman, *Jerome Kern*, 393.
13. Kate Cameron, "Hayworth & Astaire Ideal Dancing Pair," in *Daily News*, 4 December 1942, 32; my thanks to Eric Matusewitch for providing me with a copy of the review.
14. Bosley Crowther, "The screen: 'You Were Never Lovelier' ...," in *The New York Times*, 4 December 1942, 31.
15. For the date, see *Discography of American Historical Records (DAHR)*, at https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/mastertalent/detail/101993/Astaire_Fred, which draws upon Michel Ruppli, *The Decca Labels: A Discography*, 6 vols. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).
16. Three excellent entry points into the literature on the show's genesis and complicated performance history—complicated because subsequent productions (whether stage or film) have varied, with some numbers being dropped, others added, and some going in and out or being moved around a bit—are Miles Kreuger's lavishly illustrated *Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Todd Decker, *Show Boat: Performing Race in an American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Decker, *Who Should Sing "Ol' Man River"? The Lives of an*

Jerome Kern and Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (cont.)

American Song (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). See also three important studies that deal with a wider range of issues: Stephen Banfield, *Jerome Kern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); and "Scholarship and the Musical: Reclaiming Jerome Kern," in *Proceedings of the British Academy: Lectures 2003* (2004), 183-210 (online at <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/2002/pba125p183.pdf>); Geoffrey Block, *Enchanted Evenings: The Broadway Musical from Show Boat to Sondheim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 19-40, and Appendix D (319-24), which outlines the comings and goings of various numbers from one production to another. Finally, there is the landmark 1988 recording that, with a few well-thought out exceptions, reconstructs what audiences heard on opening night (including Robert Russell Bennett's original orchestration): *Show Boat*, EMI/Angel CDS 7 49108 2, John McGlinn, cond., London Sinfonietta, the Ambrosian Chorus (John McCarthy, dir.), Teresa Stratas (Julie), Fredericka von Stade (Magnolia), Jerry Hadley (Ravenal), Bruce Hubbard (Joe), and Karla Burns (Queenie); in addition, the booklet that accompanies the recording provides the original libretto and informative notes by Miles Kreuger and John McGlinn. (To stick my uninvited two cents in: I find Bruce Hubbard's "Ol' Man River" far more riveting than Paul Robeson's famous rendition in Universal's 1936 film version directed by James Whale.)

17. For those who may have forgotten, no fewer than six of its songs have become "standards" and gained entry to the so-called "Great American Songbook: "Make Believe," "Ol' Man River," "Can't Help Lovin' dat Man," "You Are Love," "Bill," and "Why Do I Love You?" (in the order in which they appear in the show).

18. Acts, scenes, and numbers after the 1927 T.B. Harms vocal score, plate no. 939 (New York); note that the widely available Wise Publications vocal score (London, 1990) reorders things so that the duet appears in Act 1, scene 7, no. 16 (p. 137), with the reprise in Act 2, scene 6, no. 27 (p. 215).

19. Decker, *Show Boat*, 88; on *Cherry Blossoms*, see William A. Everett, *Sigmund Romberg* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), *passim*.

20. Kern may well have known Romberg's song; *Cherry Blossoms* opened in New York on 28 March 1927, nine months prior to—and while Kern was composing—*Show Boat*.

21. The Metropolitan Opera archives; *Metopera Database* at <http://archives.metoperafamily.org/archives/frame.htm>.

22. Listed at <https://www.operadis-opera-discography.org.uk/CLPUMADA.HTM#3>.

23. Note that the auction catalogue of Kern's library (at the Anderson Galleries, New York, January 1929) accounts for

1,842 items; and though rich in Byron, Samuel Johnson, Wordsworth *et alia*, there are no musical scores or even a single book about music; it seems that he held on to his "working library"; for the catalogue, see *The Library of Jerome Kern*, 2 vols., introduction by Mitchell Kennerley (New York: The Anderson Galleries, 1929).

Ownership, Authorship, and Entitlement: The Intersection of Black Musical Heritage and Artificial Intelligence

Teo Blake Beauchamp

Artificial Intelligence, like any technology, is a reflection of the people who create and utilize it. It does not exist independently of humanity but is entirely reliant upon it. This can make us feel at ease with the ever-evolving sophistication of the technology, but humanness is far more complex. AI has been integrated into the most intimate parts of our lives, and examining how AI is being utilized in lieu of and in conjunction with artists gives us a unique opportunity to reflect on the layers of our own humanity and our relationship to history.



An image of the rapper Travis Scott (top) alongside AI-generated Travis Bott (bottom)

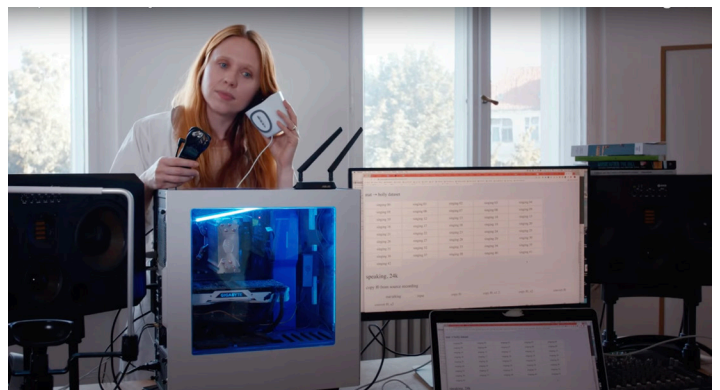
Credit: Angela Weiss/AFP via Getty Images (top), Space 150 (bottom)

Travis Bott, created by a “tech-driven creative agency” called Space 150, is an AI approximation of the rap superstar Travis Scott.¹ As Space 150 executive creative director Ned Lampert noted, “We chose Travis Scott just because he is just such a unique artist and he has an aesthetic... both audibly and visually.”² But it seems just as likely that the artist was chosen for the eponymous pun as much as anything else. The result, a song entitled “Jack Park Canny Dope Man,” sounds like an uncanny Travis Scott clone, the audio equivalent

of the film *Multiplicity*. This Dadaesque approach to music-making may reflect William Burroughs’ cut-up technique, but if the goal was to create a convincing replacement for the real article, the work is less successful. To call “Jack Park Canny Dope Man” an AI-generated composition may also be a bit misleading. The AI program behind the song was trained on MIDI data based on Travis Scott’s original compositions. Yet, notwithstanding often unintelligible lyrics such as “I know you talkin’ trippy on my plane / I just want your first lane,” the program has been sculpted with additional human supervision. What’s more, the voice of Travis Bott is provided by Dallas rapper So-So Topic,³ making the work AI-generated only in the broadest terms. Therefore, while it may seem like less of a technological marvel, this attempt to sample personhood still raises urgent creative and sociological questions.

The artist and composer Holly Herndon, who created an “AI baby” called “Spawn” to collaborate with on her 2019 album *Proto*, has contemplated some of the ethical implications of AI’s creative use. In an era of “deep fakes,” artists face serious questions of authorship, ownership, and entitlement. Herndon is understandably underwhelmed by the use of the technology, but she also highlights the troubling fact that a company such as Studio 150 feels it has the right to sample a living person’s likeness. She argues that this laissez-faire attitude goes hand-in-hand with parasitic streaming platforms, which at best undervalue music and at worst devalue it entirely.⁴

Travis Bott’s potential for the erasure of musical context is concerning. It is not simply a matter of a single person creating an artistic approach, feeding an AI program data sets and having it generate new pieces of work reflective of that person’s unique style.



Holly Herndon, from her YouTube video “Birthing PROTO”

Black Musical Heritage and Artificial Intelligence (cont.)

From field hollers to blackface minstrelsy to blues, jazz, rock, and rap, American music reflects ineffably painful and complex human histories, far beyond one individual's abstract creative perspective.

Herndon critiques ideas surrounding artistic ownership but does not specifically mention AI-facilitated cultural appropriation. Travis Scott's contemporary expression of Black cultural heritage is tied to the transatlantic slave trade, segregation, and post-industrialization. His music is not simply an expression of himself, but also of his history. And it is not clear what—if any—connection Space 150 has to that history.

From T.D. Rice to Vanilla Ice, the theft of Black musical aesthetics is an American tradition. As Margo Jefferson points out, "Elvis Presley was the greatest minstrel America ever spawned, and he appeared in bold whiteface."⁵ While Elvis derived much of his, especially early, artistic perspective from Black musical traditions, covering artists such as Arthur Crudup and Big Mama Thornton and singing songs written and demoed for him by Otis Blackwell,⁶ there is still, despite all of this, room to debate his relationship to the form. But AI-generated Black aesthetic values, independent of any connection to the Black community, is entirely unambiguous appropriation.

Space 150's AI venture was primarily experimental—an advertisement for the agency rather than an explicitly commercial venture. Several scholars, including computer scientist and activist Joy Buolamwini, have researched the weaponization of AI to further the exclusion of marginalized people.⁷ In the case of Travis Bott, however, Blackness is not excluded, it is extracted and manipulated. Studio 150 is, in effect, attempting to make Black art without the hassle of interacting with actual Black people. This is yet another iteration of a long history of cultural appropriation, which is in no way surprising because, with any new medium, it is not simply the content that is transformed, it is the scale. For instance, minstrelsy did not disappear when cinema overtook the stage as the central space for American entertainment in the early twentieth century, it simply found a new and grander platform to perpetuate noxious motifs. Similarly, it would be naive to think that AI-generated music would not contain the problems and complexities of the more purely human cultural forms that preceded it.

Travis Bott is an attempt at literally extracting the essence of a specific artist. But what about generating original work that is not tied to an existing entity? FN Meka is the "self-proclaimed" first robot

rapper. Signed to the label Factory New, FN Meka has a dynamic digitally-created persona that has garnered him over ten million followers on TikTok. Brandon Le is the creator behind the design of the FN Meka avatar, but little is known about how Factory New approaches and utilizes AI. Although Le has stated that Meka is a composite of the rappers Tekashi69, Trippie Redd, Lil Pump, and Icy Narco, FN Meka is a virtual human and the music and lyrics for his 2021 release "Speed Demon" were generated using AI. Like Travis Bott, however, the voice of FN Meka is human.⁸



Robot rapper FN Meka

A "Wizard of Oz" quality radiates from both Travis Bott and FN Meka. Perhaps this is because the illusion is more powerful than reality, and the reality of this human-AI relationship is too complex, layered, and messy for pop sensibilities. Three of the four rappers that inform the "identity" of Meka are light-skinned Latin Americans and the fourth, Trippie Redd, is a light-skinned African American. Meka, designed by an Asian American, has a complexion similar to that of Trippie Redd and is voiced by the African-American rapper Kyle the Hooligan, but the lyrics are generated from an AI program with unclear human facilitation. What, then, is the nature of this intersectionality? When Meka screams the N-word, what does it signify? Is it a term of endearment and solidarity, or is this all simply an artificially intelligent form of blackface minstrelsy?

Moreover, why are these four Soundcloud rappers the composite for the first robot rapper? With near-infinite possibilities, why take such a regressive

Black Musical Heritage and Artificial Intelligence (cont.)

approach? There are more perspectives represented in rap music and more sonic innovations occurring in the present than at any other point in the genre's history. In 2018 Kendrick Lamar won the Pulitzer Prize for Music for his album *DAMN*. This could be considered the most highly-lauded piece of rap music to date. Outside of conventional accolades, there are more high-profile women in rap and openly LGBTQ+ rappers than ever before. Any progressive fan of the genre would agree that we are in a golden age of rap music. So why, given this remarkable breadth, would the first inclination be to create a composite based on such a narrow scope? Of course, this is entirely reflective of the humans behind the technology. Factory New is essentially suggesting that the concept alone is sufficient. It does not have to be creative; no artistic innovation or insight is necessary. The medium is entirely and exclusively the message.

Holly Herndon has asserted: "At the end of the day AI is just us."⁹ And she has prioritized transparency in her work because without insight into the human perspectives governing AI, humans are at a profound disadvantage. The ability to grapple with the meaning and implications of both the technology and the art is contingent upon an understanding of who is producing it. In the case of FN Meka and Travis Bott, the listener receives a reflection of a particular human outlook and not necessarily one that has anything to do with what the art appears to be.

When So-So Topic was half-jokingly asked, "How do you feel contributing to the demise of human art by putting yourself as the medium for the machine takeover of modern music and culture?", Topic responded: "I feel great... there's already so many robots on the radio."¹⁰ This indifference, or perhaps celebration, of the artificial sampling of personhood stands in stark contrast to Herndon's critique. And yet, as Herndon says, "If human composers are acting like bots, then they will be replaced."¹¹ Thus the perennial question remains: What is uniquely and significantly human?

AI may never be able to generate work on par with *DAMN*. or Beethoven's 5th, but the capabilities of technology will increasingly move in that direction. In 1877, when Thomas Edison became the first person to record and play back sound, the results, by today's standards, were underwhelming.¹² But almost exactly 90 years later the Beatles released *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, a body of work and an approach to recording that would have been unimaginable for Edison and his contemporaries. Edison's phonograph appeared 12 years after the passing of the Thirteenth

Amendment just as Reconstruction was ending and *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* came out only three years after the passing of the Civil Rights Act, which ended the legalized apartheid system in the U.S. It is no surprise then that these are the quintessential examples of early innovations in music technology. It is not a question of the ideology behind great men and genius, it is simply an illustration of how the technology has evolved and who has had access. The point here is that we are still very much in the early days of AI-generated music. Our relationship to this technology is closer to the Edisonian relationship to recording than to that of the Beatles. We can only speculate as to the ways in which the technology will be utilized in the coming decades, let alone in the next century.

Whether AI assists or replaces artists, the question of who owns and profits from "machine-made" creations remains pertinent. The early backlash against digital sampling was not simply a matter of who created the original works, but who owned the intellectual property. For instance, Clyde Stubblefield, the drummer on James Brown's 1970 song "Funky Drummer," is responsible for one of the most heavily-sampled drum patterns in history. And yet he is not



Thomas Edison in 1878, courtesy of Library of Congress

Black Musical Heritage and Artificial Intelligence (cont.)

paid or credited when “Funky Drummer” is sampled because he doesn’t have ownership over the master recording or any of the publishing.¹³ This disconnection between creative authorship and ownership has been particularly common for Black musicians throughout history. And there is nothing in the current AI model that suggests that the exploitation will be any less extreme going forward.

It is difficult to find solutions when the nature of the problem is so expansive. But as Herndon and others have suggested, it is imperative that the people behind AI creations are transparent about who they are and the ethics of their methodology. Outside of the artistic ramifications, there are a plethora of safety concerns when people are able to convincingly misrepresent themselves. Travis Bott and FN Meka are fully-realized artistic entities, but they are far from the only examples of AI-generated media. With the progressive democratization of generative tools from Uberduck¹⁴ to Metahuman Creator,¹⁵ the possibility of deception and problematic representation is extensive.

AI technology will undoubtedly continue to develop despite its myriad issues, providing exciting opportunities for innovation. Herndon has been an early adapter, but in the future, many other artists will employ Artificial Intelligence in insightful and deeply human ways. AI is and will continue to be a reflection of who we are as humans, with radical power and responsibility. It can be guided to create work that reflects our deepest flaws or our highest ideals. The result of engagement with AI will be as interesting, inspiring, or unsettling as the parameters that are set.

Notes

1. space150.com, <https://www.space150.com/about>. Accessed 20 June 2022.

2. Patrick Kulp. “One Agency’s ‘Travis Bott’ Ai Makes Its Own Lyrics and Tunes.” *Adweek*, 10 Feb. 2020, <https://www.adweek.com/creativity/this-fake-travis-scott-song-was-created-with-ai-generated-lyrics-and-melodies/>.

3. Rodney Blu. “In House with Rodney Blu Ft. So-So Topic.” SoundCloud, <https://soundcloud.com/alreadyradio/in-house-with-rodney-blu-ft-so-so-topic#t=0:00>.

4. Jordan Darville. “Holly Herndon Explains the Ethical Implications of the A.I.-Generated Travis Scott Song.” *The FADER*, 26 Feb. 2020, <https://www.thefader.com/2020/02/25/holly-herndon-ai-generated-travis-scott-song-travisbott-jack-park-canny-dope-man-interview>.

5. Margo Jefferson. “Ripping Off Black Music.” Burnaway.org, <https://burnaway.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Margo-Jefferson-Ripping-Off-Black-Music-Harpers-1973.pdf>.

6. David Letterman. “Otis Blackwell on Letterman, January 10, 1984.” YouTube, 21 Sept. 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AgzzJ-eV8JY>.

7. For further information on the work of Joy Buolamwini, see her website, www.poetofcode.com.

8. Jacques Morel. “Can a Robot Rapper Make Better Music than 6ix9ine? | Genius News.” YouTube, 19 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYmfnfljvnM>.

9. Holly Herndon. “Holly Herndon - Birthing Proto.” YouTube, 10 Sept. 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_4UqpUmMkg.

10. Rodney Blu. “In House with Rodney Blu Ft. So-So Topic.” SoundCloud, <https://soundcloud.com/alreadyradio/in-house-with-rodney-blu-ft-so-so-topic#t=0:00>.

11. Jordan Darville. “Holly Herndon Explains the Ethical Implications of the A.I.-Generated Travis Scott Song.” *The FADER*, 26 Feb. 2020, <https://www.thefader.com/2020/02/25/holly-herndon-ai-generated-travis-scott-song-travisbott-jack-park-canny-dope-man-interview>.

12. Greg Milner. “‘Testing, Testing...’” In *Perfecting Sound Forever: An Aural History of Recorded Music* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 4–5.

13. Ben Sisario. “Living Legend Tries to Make a Living.” *New York Times*, 29 Mar. 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/30/arts/music/clyde-stubblefield-a-drummer-aims-for-royalties.html>.

14. Uberduck, <https://uberduck.ai/#mode=tts-basic>.

15. “Metahuman Creator.” Unreal Engine, <https://www.unrealengine.com/en-US/metahuman-creator>.

"A different kind of jam": A Conversation with Brooklyn Raga Massive

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton and Kirsten Jermé

On a fresh spring morning, I sat at my kitchen table and tuned into a Zoom with co-author, cellist Kirsten Jermé, and friends from her performance life, violinists Trina Basu and Arun Ramamurthy. Both Basu and Ramamurthy are founding members of the Brooklyn Raga Massive performance collective, an ensemble focused on cross-cultural collaboration, improvisation, and musics "indigenous to Brooklyn." The conversation began as I asked how Basu, Jermé, and Ramamurthy had met:

SJM:

[It] sounds like an interesting kind of origin story.

KJ:

Well, years ago in my first New York City phase... right after I finished my undergrad at Stony Brook, I was involved briefly with this amazing ensemble called the Go: Organic Orchestra. And the director does a system of conduction, [right] Trina? It's a system of conducting that's [outside] the Western classical style. He [often uses] graphic notation and the ensemble's particularly incredible because it's all of these international musicians coming from so many different styles of music and they're incredible improvisers... [and] musicians, including Trina. And this was... 2008, and we became friends... that's right.

Trina:

Yeah, that was a really fun time. We were playing at that small Roulette, the original New York City Roulette. It was this tiny, small little venue in SOHO, but we were a large orchestra... about forty people. So we were all crammed in there. And then there were... [I remember] two or three rows of audience members. And they were just immersed and glued [to the music]. It's a very captivating group... very improvisational, so it's always like you're at the edge of your seat...

KJ:

Yeah, and Trina has a really interesting musical background that's very eclectic and broad.

Trina:

Yeah. I think when we met was 2007... I had been studying. I'm a Western classically trained violinist. But when I got into college, I started really branching out and I had the opportunity to study Indian classical music... and jazz. And so that was my opening into improvisational music and learning music by ear, although I'm Suzuki trained.¹ So I'd already \



Arun Ramamurthy (left) and Trina Basu (right), Brooklyn Raga Massive, 2022.

developed my ear to a certain extent, but this was different. ... I was in New York for a year, and I also got to play in the Go: Organic Orchestra. And... Indian classical music was a big part of my evolution as an improviser and as a musician. So the director of Go is very much steeped in different traditions and he has a lot of background in Indian classical music.

SJM:

So how does that fit in with what you do with Brooklyn Raga Massive and... did that influence your desire to [form] a new ensemble?

Trina:

So Brooklyn Raga Massive... is a collective of musicians... Although all the founding members were playing music together in different contexts and iterations at various venues throughout New York City, the weekly jam session kind of started this movement in 2012 at Branded Saloon.

Arun:

It's like a country Western bar. It's a gay bar... and it's...

Trina:

Amazing.

SJM:

So it was like a gay bar that had a country Western vibe?

"A different kind of jam" (cont.)

Arun:

Yeah. And we started a raga jam session there!

Trina:

Yeah. [laughter]

SJM:

And Branded [Saloon] is in Brooklyn.

Arun:

Brooklyn. Yeah. In the beginning we didn't have large audiences. The people that were coming were primarily Indian classical musicians.... It was basically playing for our friends and there'd be ten people there... everybody knew each other in the beginning. That was kind of the point. I mean, even though it's Raga-based, the idea of Brooklyn Raga Massive was about opening up to all styles of music and collaborating. It's like half of us are rooted in Indian classical music, the other half in something else, and found Indian classical music later in life. So there is this middle point that is constantly being explored... at new borders, you know?

Trina:

And I think we were all kind of looking for spaces to play and to create together because there's been crossover music with South Asian genres and other styles of music before, but the idea of bringing more classical-based music to more casual venues in the city was not as common. Typically Indian classical music you'll find in temples or in high school auditoriums, you know. [laughter]

Arun:

Indian cultural centers were often spaces like high school auditoriums. It's like, well, where can we meet, all 300 of us? I grew up going to a lot of these types of venues. I didn't always want to go to the temple or go to a community center to see these concerts. I loved playing in a venue that I felt more connected to. So that was a part of starting [the series] and Cornelia Street being a great venue with a built-in audience, with people... who were curious about everything. It was so West Village and New York City... we would do two festivals every year at Cornelia Street. And so much of our audience was new to Indian classical music.

KJ:

[Tell us more] about your musical background, Arun, and how you... met Trina and came to collaborate in these ways.

Arun:

I was born here in New Jersey. My parents came from South India, my father from Bangalore [in Karnataka], my mother from a very small village in Andhra Pradesh, two neighboring states, in India. And my mother is a Carnatic singer, Carnatic music being South Indian classical music. My father always loved Carnatic music and took on a role as an organizer... of concerts in our home... setting up full concert tours for [visiting Indian] musicians.

When I came back from India [after college], primarily I was playing traditional Carnatic music. [But] I started to really get interested in other styles and I was trying to connect but didn't have the means or the people to play with.

So I met people like Trina and we... just started playing together and finding different ways to voice things. And then the music sort of just grew from there. I feel like in 2007 or 2008, there was this emergence of young South Asian artists that were exploring the musical connections with their identities. We're the first generation in a way... the big influx of people came in the seventies and we're kind of a product of that generation. So being American-born, we're all coming of age now.

SJM:

I see what you're saying about the first generation. And I wonder, how do you perceive that as manifesting in Brooklyn Raga Massive? A way for community to happen and... for people to improvise together?

Trina:

Yeah. [laughter] Actually, the Brooklyn Raga Massive started as a weekly jam session. So two of the other founders, Sameer Gupta and Neel Murgai were also very instrumental. Sameer Gupta is a jazz drummer, so he was really interested in creating a jazz jam vibe, but for Indian classical musicians, it's very different. So it manifests itself in a completely different kind of jam [laughter]. But it was a way to build the community and have people come out and play at this weekly session. So it would feature a band of some sort or a classical act for the first set. And then the second set would be a jam session. And from that jam session, a lot of projects started through people meeting each other at the jam and enjoying playing together. And then that would build into some sort of other band, so it was definitely a community-based initiative, and it always has been. And it's even become more than I think anybody ever imagined or dreamed it would be.

“A different kind of jam” (cont.)

Arun:

And I definitely think it was driven by trying to grow a community, but also by the diverse nature of that core group—people coming from different places that are open-minded, willing to explore and exchange ideas. I’m born in this country, but I’m trained traditionally in Indian classical music. Sameer is a jazz drummer and was born in this country. Then there’s Abhik Mukherjee, a sitarist who’s from Kolkata rooted in North Indian classic music and he hadn’t done much collaboration. And then other people who play only Western classical or only American styles of music. So we’re all learning from each other in those jam sessions: “Okay, let’s just go up there and not worry about a thing and just play.” And there are no mistakes here. I think what we’re doing at BRM is changing the landscape of the music a little bit.

KJ:

I remember hearing you guys at the Rubin Museum a few years ago and you were playing with Cuban musicians. I just remember this incredible dialogue happening between musical cultures that I had never heard together before. That was so incredible to me.

Trina:

The jam sessions have been really great for community building and meeting of new musicians and having new people become familiar with



Brooklyn Raga Massive In D Ensemble performing at the 2021 SHAG Music Festival in New Preston, CT. Photo by Adrien Tillman.

Indian classical music, getting to hear it for the first time, or sitting in on the jam. Any kind of musician who showed up and was interested could get involved. Projects came up like the Raga Cubana and Raga Maqam, and there’s a John and Alice Coltrane project. There’s a lot that goes into the collaborations..., rehearsals, arrangements,

compositions, research, and mutual learning in order to create these performances, you know?

And those are really special too, because if you think about traditional fusion music, like when you’re incorporating Indian classical in a fusion scenario, historically it’s very much like the meeting of two worlds. They just sandwich them together.... Here, there’s not much of that, it’s more of a merging of the sounds into one whole. And I think that that’s just an organic way we feel about music as New York City-based musicians, multicultural musicians coming from various genres and speaking multiple musical languages. And that’s why it sounds really good. [laughter] Yeah, we want to do more than just trade fours. [Laughter] That’s amazing until...

Arun:

You play each other’s music. Then you can’t actually bring yourself to their music. Like exactly. If I want to put my voice on a Cuban song, I have to understand how to play that Cuban song first. So that way I can let go and be authentically me. So that’s something I think about a lot in these projects, and what we often discuss as a group.

Trina:

And there have been some obstacles. It’s hard because you have to be very open. And sometimes, when you take yourself out of your comfort zone, we all know as musicians that [if] you just drop yourself somewhere [and start playing], you want it so badly in your mind, but then it’s really hard to open up. And maybe you don’t have the skills yet to do so. There’s a learning curve.

KJ:

Yeah. I think of what you’re doing musically as a model for how humans could actually learn to connect across cultures, get inside each other’s worlds and mindsets and views. I’m curious if there’s a component of education work that you’re doing using this as a model for building more empathic, connective relationships across cultures?

Trina:

Definitely.

Arun:

Yes. I think that it translates into our education. We did something with Pioneer Works recently with some educational outreach and one of the videos was about listening. We did a free improvisation with four of us where we literally had no plan and we just recorded ourselves. But the idea was “How do you

"A different kind of jam" (cont.)

connect with someone you don't know?" First, you have to listen to what they're saying and respond in a way that like they can understand, and so musically, that happens.

Trina:

And Indian classical music is steeped in improvisation and while it's a very soloistic tradition, there are often duos and trios. There's typically a melodic instrument for a vocalist and a percussionist. Sometimes there are two melodic instruments and a dialogue happening. The level of improvisation is very high, and that's a big part of the training. I've always felt that improvisation is a great way to connect to the tradition with kids in educational settings, a way we can use music to express ourselves as a metaphor for life. Within improvisation, there are so many opportunities to connect by way of listening to others. [For example,] you have to listen to somebody else in order to respond to them and work with them, and not play or talk over them. Actually I worked at a school last year in Queens with this great organization called City Lore, based in Manhattan. We worked in a neighborhood that was primarily Bangladeshi and South American communities. They have a wonderful music department, great music teachers, and a lot of the kids played their instruments very well. So I was able to work with them on a higher level of improv and raga, and there was a guitar player who was also half Indian and half Jewish. It was really cool to see him connect with his culture, and then connect with being like a rock star guitarist and actually enjoy saying, "I want to improvise and I like ragas." And I thought, this is amazing.

SJM:

He could be amazing. Oh my gosh! I want to circle back to something because it was blowing my mind. You mentioned before that it was difficult to enter into an improvisation fully until you were able to play the other person's music, or their style. And it struck me that that is like the ultimate crossover, and how vulnerable you have to make yourself in order to do that and make those kind of mistakes in front of people. What experiences did you have when you were learning to play that enabled you to do this at such a high level?

Trina:

Hmm. That's a good...

Arun:

Question. That's a good question. [laughter] I've always been playing either Carnatic music or Western classical music. Both are really rigid. [laughter]

Culturally.

SJM:

For sure.

Arun:

Really tough on people. You don't want to be vulnerable.

SJM:

And you live with your guru. That's gotta be intense.

Arun:

Yeah. But I will say this: it's about connecting with yourself. I'm Indian American, and I loved hip hop and jazz, so then that's part of who I am. Getting in touch with that means that my style might just go in that direction. And for me, my experience is with my brother who plays guitar but not professionally, and was into rock and heavy stuff. He would always egg me on to jam. Those were really safe spaces. And that's all I needed to enter that world of trying stuff out and knowing that you're not going to be judged.

SJM:

Yeah. A nonjudgmental space is huge.

Trina:

Yeah, that safe and nonjudgmental space is so important. I also grew up in the Western classical tradition, but from a mixed cultural background. I'm half Indian/Bengali and half Canadian, Scottish Irish. And, I grew up in Miami, so a very diverse upbringing. But still, I was learning Western classical music and I wasn't improvising as a kid, but I was exposed to a lot of different styles of music. When I got to college, that's when I really realized I wanted to connect my music to who I was, whether that be culturally or creatively. I've always been a very creative person and expressive in playing Western music. Music had always been a safe space for me, but I didn't necessarily always feel that way [laughter] in master classes [laughter] or in lessons. [laughter]

SJM:

Because you feel in a masterclass, like, "I want to know who you are and why you're here!"

Trina:

Terrifying, terrifying. Oh my God, I got crushed. But yeah, [laughter] in college, I was able to connect with a wonderful teacher. Her name was Nalini Vinayak and she was from India. She played the sitar and was a very warm person, and had just started teaching at Florida State University in their Ethnomusicology

“A different kind of jam” (cont.)

Department. And so I joined her ensemble. I knew it was a great opportunity, and she made that space safe for me to learn at my own pace. I remember our first concert where I was going to get the opportunity to improvise something super simple. It was not a big deal and it was like eight bars [laughter] but I had a nervous breakdown that day.

SJM:
Oh my...

Trina:
Gosh. Believe it or not, just coming from a classical background, [I remember] how terrified I was to improvise, even though I’m a very expressive musician. I think we rely on that, you know? Whatever kind of music it is, you put yourself out there emotionally. You’re vulnerable on the stage. You share something deep about yourself. But then I felt like the idea of improvisation was going even deeper. It was like sharing something original that was mine. And, I don’t know, it was weird. I just broke down. And that was a really important moment for me as a musician who was embarking on this path to improvisation, which I absolutely love. Now I feel even more comfortable improvising than playing set music. But that was 23 years ago. So, after that moment, I think I loosened up a little bit. Every concert got easier and easier, but that safe space that my teacher Nalini created for me was really important.

SJM:
She made it safe for you to walk through that fire so that you could get used to feeling vulnerable.

Trina:
The power of a teacher, you know—she had such a big impact on me and I’m grateful for that short period. It was like five years of my life, but the rest is history...

SJM:
But what an impact! That’s incredible. Thank you for sharing because your narrative will be so impactful for others, hopefully, who read this.

Trina:
Yeah! And BRM has really opened up during the pandemic in terms of educational workshops online, because that was the one way that we could reach people. Performances online were cool, but the workshops seemed to be better—they’ve employed a lot of musicians through the pandemic.

Arun:
We [offered] about 60 workshops in 2020, and then in 2021, we did over a hundred. And we paid about 120 unique musicians in 2021.

SJM:
Well, congratulations. And thank you!

KJ:
Thank you. That’s incredible—what an impact on all fronts. Because we’ve been talking about centering this issue of *American Music Review* around Brooklyn, I’m curious about how the Brooklyn community plays into your identity now and going forward?

Arun:
In a big way. I mean, Brooklyn is the center and the spirit of this organization, and the people within it [make it] as diverse as a place can be. And the amount of musicians that are here is amazing. So I think we will always be centered around this area regardless. I know we play in Manhattan and we’re touring more outside of New York City and we’re trying to get work in other places. But Brooklyn will always, I think, be our home.

Trina:
Yeah, definitely. I agree with you. [laughter]

Trina:
And in March we have a women’s festival, which I started in 2017 with a couple of other members of the group. It features women, women-identifying, and non-binary folks and their creative projects. Every March since then, which is women’s history month, we feature all woman-led projects and it’s become very multidisciplinary. We’ve had dancers, filmmakers, visual artists, poets, and musicians. And it’s literally one of the best months out of the year. Last year it was virtual, and this year, I’m not sure what’s happening. It’s been called Rāginī Festival, a massive March fest.² [laughter] It’s been a journey, a collective in Brooklyn of friends, musicians, coworkers, collaborators.

SJM:
Your kids participate. Do they do the music with you?

Trina:
Yeah. Our kids come to many concerts. So those of us who have kids up at the venue, they’re around. [laughter] Yeah.

SJM:
Are they musicking? Or maybe they are the

“A different kind of jam” (cont.)

instruments?

Trina:

They’re singing and playing violin. Yeah. Beautiful—it’s amazing.

KJ:

So I’m also curious if, in certain collaborations across cultures that maybe you were not trained in or didn’t know of before, do you find some unexpected commonalities across these musics that you can lean into?

Trina:

Yeah, absolutely. You have to lean into your strengths whatever your background is in music. I mean, in Indian classical music, the ear is the strength... it’s like everybody can play everything by ear instantly [laughter], because the training is all based in a vocalization of the music and improvisation. So the ear is developed to such a high level. That is the strength. So being able to jump into different scenarios is easy, but then, the mindset has to be there. You have to be open.

Notes

1. The Suzuki String Method utilizes extensive listening, repetition, and learning by ear so that children as young as age two can acquire “music as language,” beginning to play classical violin and piano at precociously early ages. <https://suzukiassociation.org/about/suzuki-method/> Accessed 4 August 2022.

2. Formerly known as the Women’s Raga Massive Festival.

