LET FREEDOM SING!
FOUR AFRICAN-AMERICAN CONCERT SINGERS
IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

By

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Sonya R. Gable-Wilson
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The purpose of this research is to examine the lives and careers of four nineteenth-century African-American concert singers: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Nellie Brown Mitchell, Marie Selika Williams, and Matilda Sissieretta Jones. Due to their gender and race, these women were forced to overcome many difficulties in order to be heard from the concert stage. Chapters 1 and 2 outline the necessity and challenges of the research and the various primary and secondary resources used. Chapter 3 discusses the narratives of these four singers, management obtained, touring cities, repertoire, training, the audience and critics’ response, and their individual struggles. Chapter 4 is devoted to the history and unparalleled importance of the black church and the role this institution played in the lives of these four women.

Chapter 5 focuses on several prominent nineteenth-century European and American prima donnas with an in-depth look into the disparity of salaries, training, touring cities,
management, repertoire, and career lengths in comparison to the four singers. Chapter 6 covers each singer’s efforts at establishing and managing her own traveling opera company with a brief historical overview of blackface minstrelsy. Lastly, Chapter 7 offers a summary of the research with a comparison between the nineteenth and twentieth-century black concert singer and the need for further research. Though various sources have discussed these noteworthy women, this research remains unique in that it compiles previously scattered information into one source and identifies published inaccuracies and works to restore the facts.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

“A race, no less than a nation, is prosperous in proportion to the intelligence of its women;” a poignant quote by M. A. Majors, author and critic of one of the few existing sources pertaining to African-American classical singers.¹ In a post-Civil War culture where all African-Americans were considered free, very few women, regardless of their race, were able to find adequate employment. A small handful of women did manage to achieve a musical career, both in the States and abroad.²

The last decade of the nineteenth-century brought about a period of unprecedented opportunity for African-Americans, although many barriers were erected in an attempt to prevent their advance. From black leaders to educators, influential men and women such as Booker T. Washington, William E. B. DuBois, and Sojourner Truth pioneered the way for African-American achievements. In the field of music, the African-American not only made an enormous impact on western music, but also helped to define a truly nationalistic American sound heard in ragtime, blues, and jazz.

Though the experiences of pre- and post-civil war African-Americans were very different, by the turn of the twentieth-century all blacks were considered free in the eyes of the government. Freed black women, however, were faced with an overwhelming lack of education and employment. Yet, many nineteenth-century black women persevered in


² Although there were free blacks living in the United States prior to the Civil War, many African-Americans were sold into slavery in the early to mid-1800s, and their owners often viewed them as property.
a culture in which the female, regardless of color, was denied the same rights of her white male counterparts. Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Nellie Brown Mitchell, Selika Williams, and Sissieretta Jones were just a few of the outstanding women who flourished during the mid-to-last half of the nineteenth-century. These four women, in particular, became key contributors in the evolution of the American concert stage.

The initial attraction of the black classical singer, both at home and abroad, appeared to have been nothing more than the sheer curiosity and novelty of witnessing African-Americans singing European operatic arias and art songs. The nineteenth-century European prima donna experienced longevity of careers (usually twenty to thirty years), and was typically trained by some of the most prestigious and world renowned teachers, while the African-American singer of the same period received very little training and maintained a career usually spanning no more than ten years.

This vogue of curiosity and novelty that swept America during the mid-to-late 1800s appeared to be short lived. By 1880, blackface minstrelsy and vaudeville emerged as America’s popular form of entertainment. By the close of the nineteenth-century, the concert stage offered little hope for full, extended employment for the African-American concert singer. In fact, the operatic stage remained closed to the black classical singer until Marian Anderson sang at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1955.

**Need for the Study**

Until now, with the exception of a limited amount of research, the achievements of Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones have remained virtually unknown. Indeed, this foursome played a major role in opening the doors for all African-American musicians who followed, both men and women alike. Due to the rise of interest in African-Americans in the last half of the twentieth-century, a rich historiography of the social,
cultural, and political environment surrounding nineteenth-century black culture was easily obtained. From autobiographies, narratives of former slaves, travel diaries of both white Americans and Europeans, and miscellaneous nonfiction works, ample data for the study of the musical activities of African-Americans during the antebellum and post-antebellum period were readily available. Similarly, information regarding genres of American music (such as jazz and ragtime), where blacks have excelled, was found in abundance. Paradoxically, however, in regard to African-Americans in classical music, with the exception of a few leading musicologists in the twentieth-century, and even fewer preceding this period, little secondary information was available. Sadly, few books on African-Americans have more than a passing mention of African-American concert singers. Furthermore, the direct correlation between the African-American singer and her social, political, and cultural environment has remained obscure.

**Purpose and Summary of the Study**

The very existence of Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams and Jones should have alerted all disbelievers to the fact that some blacks really could sing opera. Yet, to many Americans, such honor given to black artists in nineteenth-century America would have been contradictory. Today, the most notable African-American singers are Bessie Smith, Mahalia Jackson, or Aretha Franklin, not Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield. Perhaps the nineteenth-century American public found it too difficult to associate the newly released slave with anything other than a “slave’s music.” Indeed, the concept of a skilled black classical artist strained many of those in the nineteenth-century North, not to mention the South.

A summary of the research begins with Chapter 2 and covers a review of the literature used for this project, which consists of references, narratives, dictionaries,
diaries, and other miscellaneous material. The bulk of the research is discussed in
Chapter 3 with detailed biographies of the singers and an examination of the obstacles
each encountered due to their race and gender. Additionally, a summary of their
repertoires, critical reviews, and programs is provided to substantiate their career
credentials. The role each played as an educator and entrepreneur also offers interesting
material.

Chapter 4 gives an historical background on the nineteenth-century black church.
Black congregations all over America gained momentum, separated themselves from
their white mother church, and quickly produced a template for a black church service
that became more than a worship experience for the community. In fact, many blacks
found the church a complete way of life. This chapter focuses on this institution and its
ability to foster and develop many young, talented black musicians, including the singers
discussed in the dissertation.

Several questions concerning the African-American worship, in the North and
South, surfaced during this project. For example, why did Southern blacks closely
associate the ideas of spiritual and political freedom with their worship experience, while
simultaneously the Northern blacks, freed and educated, became more careful to present
their views as traditional white Protestant? What did it mean in practical terms to be
spiritually free, yet still owned as property?

It became apparent throughout the research that evangelical religion was ultimately
a haven for the African-American, both Southern and Northern. More than likely this
conversion only helped to inculcate obedience in the face of white oppression. What role
did the church play in the lives of Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones and has this
continued for those African-American singers of the twenty-first century? Did the average black church member know of these four singers and were they allowed or did they choose to attend the concerts? If so, were the expectations of the singing style based solely on the style they had become familiar with in the church?³

Chapter 5 provides the pre-requisites for being labeled a “prima donna” in the nineteenth-century and is accompanied by a startling chart which displays the differences in training, salaries, management, venues, and available touring cities between the nineteenth-century European and the African-American singers. Likewise, this chapter shows briefly the difficulty encountered by an American classical singer in trying to acquire training and management, regardless of race.

Because most of these women’s careers were relatively short, by the last quarter of the nineteenth century most of these women had turned to organizing, managing, and performing in their own minstrel/operatic touring companies. These touring companies are analyzed in Chapter 6 with a detailed history of their origin, blackface minstrelsy. Through the use of interviews, journals, articles, and many secondary sources, Chapter 7 provides a correlation between the nineteenth- and twentieth-century black singers and focuses mainly on the conclusions drawn from this research.

In the nineteenth-century at the beginning of the country’s newly established art-form of opera, competition from abroad arose and became fierce. The difficulty of the language, the ridiculous plots, and the outlandish scenery and costumes made this genre difficult for some Europeans to grasp. Yet, in Italy, France, Germany, and later in the

nineteenth-century, Russia and Bohemia, opera maintained a place of distinction among the wealthy and privileged. In contrast, however, in the United States, practically everyone struggled with this new kind of theater. Thus, America produced even fewer native singers of the art. If society frowned upon women performing in the arts, then what kind of woman excelled under such adversity? In the midst of a world in which business was becoming the foundation of the country, women played virtually no public role in the establishment and rapid expansion of the economy. And yet, some women were so driven and ambitious that they considered the possibility of choosing a profession outside of the home. Since singing in the parlor was encouraged as a maidenly accomplishment, only the few who demonstrated aggressive, spirited personalities, combined with vocal talent, entertained the idea of becoming an opera singer.

Lastly, one would think that the black press and community would have been supportive of these individuals. Rather, criticism for accommodating the white audience was often more negative in the black press and community than among the white critics and public. Did these black women knowingly cater to the white audience, placing a barrier between them and their own community? Did the black community and black press see these women as “selling out” in order to have operatic careers?

As the research for this project blossomed, questions materialized pertaining to the achievements of these four women. For example, how did these singers achieve any type of career in a culture where women, not to mention African-Americans, were given few opportunities for education or employment? Additionally, what methods of self-promotion and accommodation did these women have to employ in order to attract the
white public, and were they looked upon by their own race as “selling out” in order to have an operatic career? What level of difficulty was involved for these singers in obtaining training, management and venues in a world that was dominated by the European prima donna? To what extent were these black singers instrumental in the racial uplift and black women’s activist movements? Lastly, has the twenty-first century brought about a renewed interest and open-mindedness from the American public, to connect African-Americans with operatic repertoire?

**Challenges of the Study**

The challenge in researching the detailed narratives of these women was that, although today an interest in African-American women in music has become something of a vogue, in the first half of the twentieth-century most writers did not attempt original research, but simply reported already published and sometimes incorrectly published, and dispersed information. Additionally, only a few musicologists, namely Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, who exerted immeasurable influence within the musicological community in the mid to last half of the twentieth-century, have challenged the myths and stereotypes of African-American women and have uncovered the hidden treasures regarding not just black women in music, but black music in general.

Additionally, the researcher must be open to a variety of key words when searching for information on African-American musicians. For example, this subject was derived from an assortment of words: Black, Afro-American (with and/or without the hyphen), African-American (with and/or without the hyphen), Colored, and Negro. Likewise, the classical singers researched for this work were indexed under a variety of titles, whether their sobriquet given by the press, e.g., “Black Patti,” or their legal name, which for many included several surnames, such as Matilda Ssieretta Joyner Jones. When researching
these women, all the names should be entered to achieve the most extensive lists of sources.

**Definitions of Terms**

**Afro-American**—A noun dating from 1853 and is defined as an American of African descent, especially that of black African descent.

**Colored**—The term ‘color’ referred to the division of population into two groups, white and nonwhite. The color group designated as ‘nonwhite’ included African-Americans, American Indians, Japanese, Chinese, Filipinos, Koreans, Asian Indians, Malayans, Eskimos, etc.. Persons of Mexican birth or ancestry who were not definitely of Indian or other nonwhite races were classified as white since the census of 1930. The term ‘Negro,’ according to instructions to census enumerators, included persons of mixed American Indian and Negro descent, unless the Indian ancestry very definitely predominated or unless the individual was regarded as an Indian in the community. The significance of changing racial categories throughout the nineteenth-century provided many sociologists, including DuBois, with the proof that race is more about social construction and power than genetics or biology.

**Coon Songs**—“Coon” was a derogatory term for African-Americans and was given its name by music that used the rhythmic and harmonic style associated with blacks. It was often set with broad dialect lyrics that caricatured the slave’s life. In reality, the title of the genre simply paraded the social ignorance of the white composers and lyricists. By the turn of the century, African-Americans themselves were writing, staging, and performing these so-called “Coon Songs.” African-American Ernest Hogan used the terms coon and darkey in his song “I Loves Ma Honey” (1898), as well as others
such as Irving Berlin and George M. Cohan. The genre typically displayed a verse-
chorus structure suitable for the minstrel stage.

**Ethiopian Songs**—Interchangeably used with the terms “Coon Songs” and “Negro
Songs,” Ethiopian Songs signified any melody with lyrics pertaining to the slave’s life
and sung in a black dialect. The leading composers of this genre were Stephen Foster
and James Bland, among many others.

**Mulatto**—From the Latin word *mulus* dating from 1593, this term implies the first
generation offspring of a black person and a white person; a person of mixed white and
black ancestry.⁴

**Negro**—There is no general legal definition of the term ‘Negro’ in the United
States. The general conception of a Negro in the United States was a person with enough
African blood to be identified on sight as being not white, or one, who, although light
skinned enough to be thought white, identified himself as a Negro.⁵

**Plantation Songs**—Similar in concept to the “Ethiopian Songs,” however the term
implied a more gentle and nostalgic nature in the text with music that hinted at Irish or
Italian ancestry. During Stephen Foster’s compositional years, the composer moved from
writing more harsh and offensive songs to those more suitable for the refined upper class.
He soon dropped the dialect altogether from his texts and eventually referred to his songs
as “American Melodies.” One of the most famous “Plantation Songs” was Stephen

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Foster’s “Old Folks at Home.” This song was written in a typical verse-chorus song structure and has remained one of the most popular songs of the early twentieth-century.\(^6\)

**Prima donna**—Though one usually finds the term *prima donna* or “first lady” used in conjunction with the opera singer, that is, the woman performing in a full-opera with an opera company, the women represented in this project frequently performed operatic arias on their programs and often spoke of their desire to perform in a full-length opera. Unlike the situation in the twentieth-century, when the connotations surrounding this sobriquet were negative, the nineteenth-century viewed the label of “prima donna” as an achievement in the classical world. Thus, one must assume that had these four African-American singers been white, the sobriquet of “prima donna” would have applied.

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A range of primary sources was consulted for this chapter, which included materials such as newspaper reviews, personal letters, autobiographies, and first hand accounts written by nineteenth-century authors. Materials that focused on Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and Sissieretta Jones were most accessible, as both women were found in various sources including two nineteenth-century works by Monroe Majors entitled *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities* (Chicago: 1893; reprint New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1971) and *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (New York: 1880; reprint Chicago, IL: Afro-American Press, 1969) by James M. Trotter. Though problematic at times due to incorrect information being spread, the bulk of this material was beneficial in giving a first-hand glimpse into nineteenth-century America. In addition, Major’s *Noted Negro Women: Their Triumphs and Activities* was one of the few that included information on the Hyers Sisters.

An excellent primary source was found in the nineteenth-century pamphlet, “A Brief Memoir, The Black Swan” Miss E. T. Greenfield, An American Vocalist, (London, 1853), consisted of a collection of newspaper articles, reviews, and comments from the States and London. This source provided a rich account of Greenfield’s life and early career, though it was clearly used as a marketing tool and thus omitted, de-emphasized, and even, at times, exaggerated some of the details. A substantial amount of the information found in Arthur LaBrew’s *The Black Swan: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield* was taken from this pamphlet. Additionally, an account of the singer’s activities in London
was also found in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Diary, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands* (Boston: Philips & Sampson, 1854).

Of interest was a privately published sixty-four page work from the nineteenth-century entitled *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad or, A Biographical Sketch of Miss Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the American Vocalist* (Chicago; privately published, 1855). The original copy was held in The Library Company of Philadelphia while a secondary copy existed in the Music Collection of the Boston Public Library. Most historians believed the author was Greenfield herself; thus, this primary source offered excellent insight. The bulk of LaBrew’s narrative text was found in *The Black Swan: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield* (Detroit, Michigan: Author, 1969) was derived from this source. The majority of Greenfield’s papers, which included newspaper reviews and various clippings, were held in a special collection at the Pennsylvania Historical Society (Leon Gardiner Collection, Boxes IG, 13G).

Greenfield received extensive coverage in a variety of white newspapers (all included as primary sources) including the *Cleveland Plain Dealer, Buffalo Daily Express, Buffalo Commercial Advertiser, Detroit Daily Express, Cincinnati Enquirer, Rochester Daily Paper, Auburn Daily Advertiser, Albany Express* and *Albany Evening Journal, Springfield Daily Post, Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, and the Canadian paper, *Provincial Freeman*. Significant was Greenfield’s coverage in the large white newspapers such as *The New York Times, The New York Herald, and the London Times*. Reviews from the black press were only found in two papers, the *Voice of the Fugitive* and the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*. The singer’s obituary notice was printed in *The
New York Times and Philadelphia Public Ledger. For musicians of the nineteenth-century, reviews offered one of the few viable resources for proving career credentials.

In regards to primary sources which covered Mitchell, two were black newspapers, the Cleveland Gazette (Boston) and the Indianapolis Freeman. The New York Globe and the Boston Advocate, both representing the white press, also mentioned Mitchell.

Original material on Sissieretta Jones was found at the Boston Public Library and the Detroit Public Library in a special collection entitled E. Azalia Hackley Collection. The largest collection of primary material on Jones, however, was held at Howard University in Washington D.C. in the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. The singer’s personal scrapbook, photos, medals, and biography were deposited in the Research Center under the Carl R. Gross Collection, 1856 - 1966 (Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-1, Folder 3).

A majority of Jones's newspaper clippings revealed that the Indianapolis Freeman reviewed her from 1889 - 1902. The white press, The Boston Chronicle, Detroit Tribune, Detroit Free Press, Athens Banner, Morning Advertiser, and The New York Herald, offered a variety of reviews. Jones's reviews among the black press were limited to the Colored American, Indianapolis Freeman, and James Weldon Johnson’s New York Age.

The 1893 work by author Lawson Scruggs, Women of Distinction: Remarkable in Works and Invincible in Character (Raleigh, North Carolina: Author, 1893), discussed the careers of Williams, Greenfield, and Jones. Additionally, Williams was mentioned in a variety of black newspapers including the Cleveland Gazette, Indianapolis Freeman, New York Age, and the Colored American. The white-owned newspapers the New York
*Globe, The New York Times,* and *The Musical Record* reviewed the singer's concerts throughout the entirety of her career.

A variety of papers, meetings, memoirs, and observations were retrieved concerning the city of Philadelphia and the Quakers, such as Benjamin Franklin’s *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (April 12, 1750: No. III; reprint New Haven: Yale University, 1959), Frederick Douglass’s *The Papers of Frederick Douglass* (reprint New Haven: Yale University, 1979 - 92) and his autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York: Miller, Orton, & Mulligan, 1855). Several lectures presented at the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends and the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society (1835 - 1870) was obtained. Additionally, one of the earliest advocates for emancipation, Richard Allen’s *The Life Experiences and Gospel Labours of the Right Reverend Richard Allen* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Philadelphia Press, 1887), and the travel diaries of Anthony Benezet regarding slave trade (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Historical Society of Philadelphia, 1817) were all held at the Historical Society of Philadelphia.

Additionally, the Library of Congress website listed various topics including “The Development of an African-American Musical Theater,” as well as playbills, sheet music, and advertisements of the minstrel companies. There were also various websites, particularly relating to blacks in American music, which the writer found helpful in researching black traveling companies. In regards to newspaper reviews, the white theatrical journals *Folio* and *Clipper,* offered insightful information into the musical scene of New York between 1875 and 1896.


Though some would expect sources on American music to have information pertaining to the African-American concert singer, most of these sources usually focused either on white American or European prima donnas; for example, Peter G. Davis’s *The American Opera Singer: The Lives and Adventures of America’s Great Singers in Opera and Concert, from 1825 to the Present* (New York: Doubleday Publishing, 1979) covered a wide array of white American prima donnas who emerged in the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries. Only one small chapter entitled “Black Gold” briefly mentioned Greenfield,

Williams and Jones. The chapter was mostly dedicated to Marian Anderson and Roland Hayes, two twentieth-century African-American performers.

Although a few sources extended to encompass both the white American and the European singer, such as Henry C. Lahee’s *Famous Singers of Today and Yesterday* (Boston, Massachusetts: L. C. Page and Co., 1914), the majority of these works focused on one or the other, as in Henry Pleasants’s *The Great Singers: From the Dawn of Opera to our Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), Gladys Davidson’s *A Treasury of Opera Biography* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1935), and John Sullivan Dwight’s various entries in *Dwight’s Journal of Music* (February 5, 1859; reprint, New York: Johnson, 1967). In contrast, an abundance of information was obtained on the individual white European singers mentioned in Chapter 5, such as Howard Bushnell’s work, *Maria Malibran: A Biography of the Singer* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979) or Herman Klein’s *The Reign of Patti* (Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company Publishing, 1920).

Sources concerned solely with African-American women such as Ernestine Walker’s “The Black Woman,” from *The Black American Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1976) and works pertaining to black women in classical music, for example Eleanora Tate’s *Black Stars: African-American Musicians* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2000), completely omitted or only partially mentioned nineteenth-century black singers. Articles such as “Black Musicians in


The only source that contained complete biographical information on all of the singers discussed herein was the *New Grove Dictionary of American Music*. Aside from this extensive work, the most easily found information pertains to the first and last singers of the century, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and Sissieretta Jones. An excellent and informative bibliographic source that also mentions all the singers is John Gray’s *Blacks in Classical Music: Bibliographical Guide to Composers, Performers, and Ensembles* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988). Eileen Southern offers the most extensive research on the singers in her numerous collections, books, and articles.

Biographical entries for Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Nellie Brown Mitchell, and Sissieretta Jones were found in the two volume *Black Women in America* (New York:

articles by him, *Studies in 19th Century Afro-American Music* (Detroit, Michigan: Author, 1973) and *Afro-American Music Review* (Vo. 1., No. 2, 1984). LaBrew was noted as one of the first to do extensive research on Greenfield. His book gave a full length account of the singer’s life and career up to 1853. The 1973 publication offered additional information of the singer’s life after 1853. Although there were some published inaccuracies, LaBrew uncovered a large amount of information on the singer including a vast number of newspaper reviews. His article in *Afro-American Music Review* was a short summarization of his book.

York: Garland Publishing, 1998) and remarkably have just begun to consider
Greenfield’s role and impact on the American music scene.

Sissieretta Jones surfaced in more sources than any of the other singers, including
the African-American Registry and AfroCentric Voice in Classical Music websites. Of
particular importance was that the former site was one of only two sources to mention the
Black Patti Troubadours and the World’s Fair Colored Opera Company, both significant
to the singer’s career. The latter site offered a selected, but quite detailed, bibliography
of African-American musicians. Periodicals, articles, and journals were found in
abundance with regard to the singer, including an article in The Providence Journal
(1907) entitled “Black Women Then & Now, Are We Making Any Progress?” by Ellen
Liberman and an article in Essence, “Pulse: Diva Feature Story: Timeline of Black Opera
Divas.”

Jones was also found in the secondary source by Josephine Wright and Eileen
Southern, Women in Music: An Anthology of Source Readings from the Middle Ages to
the Present (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), although this was a reprint from a July
1976 article found in The Black Perspective in Music. Also, of interest was an article
entitled “Black Women and Classical Music” from Women’s Studies Quarterly (Vol. 12,
No. 3, Fall 1984) by Josephine Wright and a new article by John Graziano, “The Early
Life and Career of the ‘Black Patti’: The Odyssey of an African-American Singer in the
Late Nineteenth-Century,” from Journal of the American Musicological Society (Fall,
2004).

According to the research, a video entitled “Leap into Literature: Part 1 - Ida Lewis
to the Rescue: Sing Out, Sissieretta Jones,” based on the screenplay of characters from
the book *Puritans, Pioneers, and Pacesetters: Eight People Who Shaped Rhode Island*, written by Marie Fontaine and Janice O’Donnell (Providence, Rhode Island: Old Stone Bank, 1987), mentioned Jones several times throughout the work. The video was released by the Rhode Island Department of State Library Services in Providence, Rhode Island, but is not obtainable at this time. Information concerning the video was obtained from the head librarian at the Rhode Island Department of State Library Services.

Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 1971) was an extensive bibliography based upon interviews with family members as well as other written sources.

Although very popular in her day, Selika Williams was mentioned only in a few sources (usually by her first name) including Carolyn Lamar Jordan’s *African-American Female Concert Singers of the Nineteenth-Century* (New York: Greenwood, Press, 1982). Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright offered the most information in “Black Prima Donnas of the Nineteenth-Century,” printed in *The Black Perspective in Music* (6, 1979). Though no more than a reprint of Southern’s article, Williams was covered in one page of the previously mentioned Peter Davis’s *The American Opera Singer*.

One of the few dissertations on the subject of African-American singers was Ann H. Estill’s *The Contributions of Selected Afro-American Women Classical Singers 1850 - 1955* (New York State University: Dissertation, D. A., 1982). Estill’s research included narratives regarding Greenfield, Williams, and Jones. Similarly, Rosalyn Story’s *And So I Sing: African-American Divas of Opera and Concert* (New York: Amistad, 1990), and Elise K. Kirk’s article “Nightingales at the White House” in *Opera News* (Vol. 45, No. 5, November 1, 1980), all covered the careers of Williams, Greenfield and Jones.

In order to fully understand the struggles these women encountered during their careers, preliminary research was done on the African women and her role as a mother, wife, and musician while in Africa and her shift in roles when she came to the United States. Sources used for this chapter included the *Encyclopedia of Afro-American Culture and History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), *The African-American Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc, 1976). John Hope Franklin’s *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans* (New York: A. A.
Knopf, 2000), the three previously mentioned works, Benjamin Brawley’s *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States*, Sylvia Dannett’s *Profiles of Negro Womanhood* (1964) and *The Afro-American in Music and Art* (1976), and Thomas Gossett’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin and American Culture* (Texas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1985).


Sources pertinent to the musical scene of the city were Louis C. Madeira’s *Annals of Music in Philadelphia and the Musical Fund Society from its Organization in 1820 to


The information regarding the building and managing of black opera companies of the nineteenth-century was derived from a variety of sources. Those sources pertaining solely to the Hyers Sisters and their traveling troupe were Henry T. Sampson’s article in the New Grove Dictionary of American Music (New York: Macmillan Press, 1984) and Blacks in Blackface: A Source Book on Early Black Musical Shows (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1980), by the same author.

In addition, Chapter 9 of Eileen Southern’s An Early Black Concert Company and the article “An Early African-American Concert Company: The Hyers Sisters Combination,” located in A Celebration of American Music: Words and Music in Honor of H. Wiley Hitchcock (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan, 1990), were utilized. Also helpful was Jonathan Gill’s article located in the fourth volume Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History, edited by Jack Salzman, David Smith, and Cornel West (Farmington Hills, Michigan: Gale Group, 1996). Chapter 17 in
Delilah L. Beasley’s *The Negro Trailblazers of California* (Los Angeles: Author, 1919) mentioned the Hyers, although the chapter contained no new information directly pertaining to the group.


Weldon Johnson’s *Black Manhattan* (New York, 1930; reprint New York: Da Capo Press, 1991) were very helpful in supplying an overview of African-American culture.

CHAPTER 3
NOT ALL NIGHTINGALES ARE WHITE:
PROFILES OF FOUR AFRICAN-AMERICAN CLASSICAL SINGERS
OF THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY

Keeping with American tradition, women, whether black or white, were not well
thought of if music was their goal. Yet, in spite of this tradition, the role of the African
woman, as a storyteller, healer, and song leader, laid the foundation for the black concert
singer in the nineteenth-century. Their perseverance and ability to adapt to a new culture
marked the black woman in nineteenth-century America.

The initial attraction of the African-American concert singer to mostly elite white
audiences seemed to be the novelty of witnessing African-Americans sing operatic arias
and classical art songs. Given that the white divas of the day had years of classical
training and most African-Americans received little or none, it is amazing that Elizabeth
Taylor Greenfield, Nellie Brown Mitchell, Marie Selika Williams, and Matilda Sissieretta
Jones achieved active and impressive stage careers. Though at the time these women
were considered some of the most popular entertainment in the States, this vogue was
short lived. By the late 1800s, musical theater and vaudevilles performed by black
entertainers were becoming more popular, and the white American public grew apathetic
toward the black concert singer. By the turn of the twentieth-century, the legitimate
concert stage offered the African-American singer little hope of employment.¹

No longer intrigued by a self-taught black singing operatic repertoire, most of the white public simply stopped patronizing the opera houses forcing many talented African-American musicians to perform within their own community, mostly at the local black church. Because of the degree of racial prejudice each encountered, a lack of respectable training, and the inability to find adequate management or even venues, most African-American classical singers were unable to achieve what many of their white colleagues accomplished; nonetheless, a few did excel as concert artists.\textsuperscript{2}

The first generation of African-American singers emerged in America in the mid-1800s. In addition to the four singers of this project, there were many more African-American women singing throughout the United States and abroad during the nineteenth-century. Mezzo Soprano Flora Batson Bergen, “Double-Voiced Queen of Song” (1864 - 1906), wife of James Bergen, white impresario, was credited with making three global concert tours before her retirement in the early 1900s, Rachel Walker (aka Lucie Lenoir), “Creole Nightingale” (1873 - 192?), Anita Patti Brown “Globe-Trotting Prima Donna” (ca. 1870 - ca. 1950), and Lillian Evanti (1890 - 1967), and many more.

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (c.1819 - 1876),\textsuperscript{3} noted as the first African-American concert singer, played an unprecedented role in paving the way for other African-Americans to enter the concert stage.\textsuperscript{4} Though most of the sources containing

\begin{footnotes}
\item[3] See [Figure 3 - 1] for a photograph of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield.
\end{footnotes}
information about Greenfield, including newspaper reviews, biographic sources, African-American internet sources, and even the world-wide-web homepage for the city of Natchez, stated that she was born in Natchez, Mississippi, her death certificate certified that she was born in the state of Virginia. A few newspapers, such as the Cleveland Plain Dealer, claimed that Greenfield was born in Virginia as a slave. Due to a lack of further evidence to prove otherwise, most sources have used Natchez as Greenfield’s birthplace.

In addition to the mystery surrounding her birthplace, sources stated no less than seven different birth dates between 1807 and 1831. Similar to other African-Americans born into slavery in the early nineteenth-century, and those whose births were either not recorded correctly or not at all, Greenfield’s birth certificate does not exist. Therefore, like her birthplace, her actual birth date remains a mystery. If the death certificate was correct in stating that Greenfield was fifty-seven years old when she deceased in 1876, one can assume her birth date to be around 1819. Arthur LaBrew, author of The Black Swan: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield Songtress, also added that the city directories of Philadelphia showed Greenfield’s mistress arriving in the city around 1822. The singer was reputed to have been slightly more than a year old, thus confirming her birth between 1819 and 1820.

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5 Death Records for Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, City of Philadelphia Archives, August 2003. Court records stated that Mrs. Holliday Greenfield, owner of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, owned property in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Pennsylvania, but not in Virginia. Further records of the estate surfaced which confirmed the singer was born in the home of Mrs. Holliday Greenfield; the specific location was not recorded.

6 Cleveland Plain Dealer, February 25, 1852.

Various reviews during the singer’s career indicated information concerning the ethnicity of her parents. The *Tauton Gazette* on February 12, 1852 indicated that Greenfield was a “child of a Seminole woman,” while the *Ohio State Journal* on March 3, 1852 stated that the “father was a Seminole Indian.” The obituary notice in *The New York Times* dated April 3, 1876 quoted that the father was a full-blooded African and the mother a half-breed Indian. Many more reviews, including the singer herself, referred to Greenfield as a mulatto and, although not in the complete definition of the term, these reviews indicated that only one parent was African.

Only the father’s last name, Taylor, was mentioned in any of the sources while the mother, Anna Greenfield (surname taken from her benefactress) was noted in several sources, including in the estate of Mrs. Holliday Greenfield, an active member of the Society of Friends, following the death of her husband.\(^8\) The actual date of manumission for Anna or the husband was not found. Although research did not reveal whether the parents were allowed to be legally married, as many slaves were not, an Indenture to Mrs. Holliday Greenfield’s Will and Testament dated December 15, 1834 proved that the parents were manumitted and sent to Liberia, seen in Item 28 below.

**Item 28** - To pay to Thomas Shipley, of Philadelphia $1,500 to be held by him in trust for Anna Greenfield, a black woman who was formerly manumitted by her and sent to Africa: to be used and applied for the benefit of the said Anna, either to bring her back to America, or in some other manner that the said Thomas Shipley shall think proper.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) Since Quakers believed strongly in the manumission of slaves, it is possible that Mr. Holliday Greenfield, not his wife, purchased the slaves before his death. After the death of Mr. Greenfield, evidence shows that Mrs. Greenfield moved to Philadelphia, became active in the Society and began to take steps to manumit her slaves.

\(^9\) Register of Wills In and For the County of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the matter of the Estate of Mrs. Elizabeth Holliday Greenfield, Will No. 221-1845.
The estate of Mrs. Holliday Greenfield was turned over to four trustees and listed the following interesting item from the Will and Testament:

Item VII - And it is further declared that in case of the death of any of the persons for whose use the above trusts are declared should die before the said Elizabeth Greenfield, that the money of property above appropriated for the use of such person, shall be delivered or paid to their respective heirs, executors, or administrators. And that in the case of the death of Anna Greenfield before the death of the said Elizabeth Greenfield, or before the said Thomas Shipley shall have appropriated the sum of $1,500 above given to him for the said Anna Greenfield, the said Thomas Shipley shall appropriate the same, or so much thereof as he shall deem proper, to

the use of Elizabeth, daughter of the said Anna Greenfield, and the remainder for the use of such black person as he may think fit.\(^{10}\)

Though Item 28 indicated that Anna Greenfield was to return from Liberia at some point, no evidence was available to prove or disprove this statement. However, since Greenfield never spoke of her mother in any connection other than that she was of mixed blood, one can only conclude that her parents never returned from Liberia and therefore never took part in the singer’s stage career. Understanding the strains often found between the slave owner and the slave, it is interesting to note the close relationship Anna must have had with Mrs. Holliday Greenfield to have been provided for in such a manner.

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield’s Will and Testament [Figure 3 - 2] dated March 30, 1866 mentioned a Mary Parker as her sister, as well as one nephew and three nieces.\(^{11}\) LaBrew noted that after moving to Philadelphia, Mrs. Holliday Greenfield released other slaves in addition to the singer’s parents, possibly Mary Parker. Oddly, though none of

\(^{10}\) Ibid., W-221-1845.

\(^{11}\) Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield’s Will and Testament is held in the City of Philadelphia, recorded under the name *Eliza Taylor, Will No. 278, 1876 (Book 86, p. 596)* not Will No. 286, 1866 as previously listed by several sources. Although Greenfield retained her owner’s name throughout her career, she used her father’s surname “Taylor” for this document.
the newspaper reviews used for this research indicated that Greenfield had any family in Philadelphia, her Last Will and Testament mentioned several family members, including Mary Parker.

Mrs. Holliday Greenfield was noted in the community as a Quaker woman strongly convinced of the wrongs of slavery. In fact, not only did she disapprove of slavery but she was also charitable with her wealth in supporting abolition groups and widow groups with several endorsements: $100.00 yearly for life to the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting of Friends, and $300.00 yearly for life to The Indigent Widows and Single Women’s Society of Philadelphia. Though many of her slaves were manumitted, for reasons unknown, Mrs. Holliday Greenfield decided to keep the young singer and moved the household to Philadelphia. One might speculate that the delay in manumitting her was directly related to either community or family pressures. Also, since Liberia was simply an experiment, it was feasible that both the owner and the parents believed the child would have been better off remaining in the States. As seen in the historical review of the Philadelphia Quakers, although the religious group deeply disapproved of slavery, there was a definite lack of expediency (due in part to community pressures) in an effort to abolish this money-making institution. Of course, the Society of Friends alone did not have the power to abolish slavery, but many individuals like Mrs. Holliday Greenfield took obvious steps toward this effort when she released the singer at eight years old to go and live with her sister, Mary Parker, in Philadelphia.

Around 1836, the singer returned as a companion and nurse for the elderly and ill Mrs. Holliday Greenfield. Mrs. Greenfield passed away in 1845 and at the time of her

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death, an Indentured Statement was revealed which indicated she had left the singer $100.00 a year for the remainder of her life. Greenfield received a total of $40.00.\textsuperscript{13}

Among other items concerning Mrs. Holliday Greenfield, the following testimony of Elizabeth Greenfield, before the court of Philadelphia, is of interest:

I is 30 years of age. Lived with Elizabeth Greenfield- was born in her house-lived with her until 7 or 8 years of age. I lived with her also, 8 or 9 years preceding the time of her death, except two months before she died. Lived there whilst Mary Richards was there. . . .she was house keeper; assisted me to nurse her. Miss Mary did not sleep with her the last two years; I did, and was with her night and day. She always required one of us there.\textsuperscript{14}

Family members at the court hearing stated that the wealthy mistress was not only mentally ill during her late years, but was also showing signs of deafness. In spite of Greenfield’s strong statements of an obvious fondness and mother-daughter-like-relationship with her previous owner, statements by the immediate family persuaded the court to rule otherwise.

The above court statement offered additional useful insight into the relationship between the singer and Mrs. Holliday Greenfield. First, the two were obviously very close since Greenfield stayed with the elder woman night and day as if this was her mother. Secondly, Greenfield noted that she was born in the mistress’ home which proved that her parents were already slaves and living with Mrs. Greenfield at the time of her birth. Thirdly, Greenfield testified that she spent eight to nine years as a nurse and

\textsuperscript{13}“Indenture Statement,” December 15, 1834, from the Will and Testament of Mrs. Elizabeth Holliday Greenfield. A huge family fuss was created over the use and distribution of Greenfield’s wealth. Several years prior to her death she put more than $140,000.00 into the hands of four trustees who were hired to assist her in managing her affairs. Unfortunately, the widow’s family members contested the will, including Item 29, which state the singer should inherit $100.00 for life. The inheritance was exhausted in lawyer’s fees. Also, before the death of Mrs. Greenfield, a codicil to her Will indicated that she had bequeathed $500.00 to the young singer, of which public records indicated only $40.00 was paid out on various days over a four-year period.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 81.
companion, with the exception of the two months prior to Mrs. Greenfield’s death. Where Greenfield was living during this time period, the year of 1845, is unknown. According to her biography, the singer spent the years from 1845 - 1850 traveling the northeast in search of a voice teacher.

The actual age of Greenfield when her musical abilities were discovered was not recorded. LaBrew speculated that the singer began singing in church in the early 1830s, which would have placed her at about eleven years old. Although no records indicated that Greenfield was attending church while in the home of Mrs. Holliday Greenfield, who was a member of the Quaker congregation, it is feasible that the young singer attended Sunday services with her owner. The Quaker’s meetings, however, did not consist of singing hymns, but instead the members prayed and waited in silence. If Greenfield did partake in a church choir, it was not the local Quaker church of her owner.

The Buffalo Express, October 18, 1861 noted that the singer was nearly twenty years old before her vocal abilities were noticed. In contrast, however, The Black Swan at Home and Abroad or, A Biographical Sketch of Miss Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, the American Vocalist stated that at an “early age” a neighbor and amateur voice teacher, a Miss Price (probably the daughter of Dr. Philip Price, a local physician) gave the singer private musical instruction for a small fee, and taught her to accompany herself on the guitar, harp, and piano. Upon realizing the singer’s talents, Mrs. Greenfield encouraged

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15 Various sources have given the incorrect date of 1844 as the death date of Mrs. Holliday Greenfield.


17 No sources indicated whether the owner or the singer paid the fees for music lessons. Although the guitar was not a typical concert instrument of the nineteenth-century, it was easily accessible to the public.
the young singer to continue her musical training. Though no records were found, it is probable that Mrs. Greenfield was willing to pay for the singer’s music instruction.

Greenfield’s efforts to find professional training in Philadelphia were unsuccessful due mainly to one reason: no white teachers were willing to risk his or her reputation by teaching an African-American. Even in the liberal and free city of Philadelphia, the excessive ridicule the teacher and student would have received was too much for most. The average rate for a music teacher in Philadelphia was $10.00 per quarter. Based on the racial milieu of the day, it was speculated by many, including LaBrew, that even the offer of $30.00 per quarter would not have been enough to induce a teacher to include the young, black singer among his or her pupils.¹⁸

African-American bandsman Frank Johnson was noted to have received professional training in Philadelphia; probably his gender and choice of genre allowed him this opportunity. Nevertheless, in spite of her adversities, Greenfield taught herself the guitar and piano and by the mid 1840s she was performing widely at private parties.¹⁹ In 1849, Greenfield was hired by one of Philadelphia’s leading black musicians, William Appo, to perform in Baltimore.²⁰ Despite her lack of training, Greenfield advertised in the Baltimore directory as a music teacher and, later that year, advertised in the

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¹⁹ Although Johnson never employed women of any race, he did employ African-American males in his band.

Philadelphia directory as “E. T. Greenfield, music teacher, OY road, bel Coates.”

Eventually as she became better known, the simple entry of “Black Swan” in the Philadelphia Directory was enough to build a small studio.

According to earlier sources, Greenfield eventually managed to save enough money from teaching to take a boat across Lake Seneca to resettle in Buffalo, New York. With the exception of a few known pupils such as Thomas J. Bowers (1826 - 1885), an actual student list was not found; however, given the racism of the day, one can assume that Greenfield’s students in both cities were African-American. Although pure speculation, for the same reasons that a white music teacher did not accept a black student, more than likely a similar rationale was given for the white student not studying under the tutelage of a black teacher. In addition, since many African-Americans had difficulty finding employment and probably did not have the extra cash needed for voice lessons, it is unlikely that Greenfield had many students and probably made very little money from teaching.

The question, however, still remained. If Philadelphia was such a vibrant musical city, why did the singer leave the area for Buffalo, New York? What did Buffalo offer that Philadelphia did not? Greenfield indicated that she was aware of the Buffalo Music Association which was more than willing to sponsor the young singer. Likewise, the Buffalo Express, October 17, 1851, noted that Mr. M. P. L. Thompson (a member of the Buffalo Music Association) heard the singer at a private family gathering in Philadelphia and was more than ready to endorse her debut in Buffalo.

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21 LaBrew, The Black Swan: Elizabeth T. Greenfield Songtress, 18. No records were found to indicate the profits Greenfield received from teaching.

22 Buffalo Express, October 17, 1851.
James Monroe Trotter (1842 - 92), author of *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, noted that while on her route to New York, the singer attended a concert by Jenny Lind. Also, in 1852, Greenfield told Martin Delany, critic and author of *The Condition, Elevation, Emigration, and Destiny of the Colored People of the United States*, that Jenny Lind’s concerts had first made her “aware of the high character of [her] own talents.”

Since few halls in the nineteenth-century accepted black patrons, when or how Greenfield heard the Swedish Nightingale sing is unknown.

After hearing the “Swan” sing at a private party, and impressed by her “natural talent,” Mrs. Potter invited Greenfield to her mansion. The Potter’s support and introductions to Buffalo’s most cultured citizens, led to the singer’s Buffalo debut on October 22, 1851, at Townsend Hall sponsored by the Buffalo Music Association. Greenfield’s debut program, [Figure 3 - 3], was set to begin at the usual hour of 7:30 p.m. and the tickets were priced at fifty cents. Greenfield’s monetary portion received from this performance was not found; however, one might conclude from the minimal ticket price that most, if not all, of the profits went toward the use of the hall. The appended note to the program stated “The gallery will be expressly reserved for the accommodation

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25 According to Eileen Southern in *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd edition. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997), “although the African heritage gave them a natural talent for and inclination toward making music, they came to the New World empty-handed.” The use of the phrase “a natural talent,” in regards to the African-American musical talent, has been debated by many as to whether it is commenting on racial stereotype or true praise of the talent. Southern’s point remains sound, however, that the culture in which this race emerged, so drenched in rich musical activities, no doubt helped to flourish their musical talents.

26 Greenfield’s contract with Manager J. H. Wood was not drawn until 1853 and no other contract exists.
of persons of Color, who may wish to attend the Concert.” The number in attendance from the black community was not reported, though the understanding that all blacks would enter on the opposite side of the building from the white patron, and stand or sit in a separate location, was assumed.

The new singer was praised by Buffalo newspapers and several reviewers of her debut. Many compared her favorably to Jenny Lind by quickly dubbing her the “African Nightingale.” An additional review in the Buffalo Commercial Advertiser compared her voice type to the “Irish Swan,” Catherine Hayes (1818 - 1861) who had debuted in New York City on September 23, and once again gave her the nickname the “Black Swan.” This sobriquet remained with Greenfield throughout her career. Of interest was the comparison drawn with Hayes, since, aside from the African-Americans, the Irish were treated worse than any group in the United States in the mid-nineteenth-century. Later in her career, Manager Colonel J. H. Wood, a savvy manager much like the well-known P. T. Barnum, continued to note on Greenfield’s recital programs that the black singer was performing a similar repertoire of the famous Jenny Lind.

The Philadelphia Public Ledger wrote on October 21, 1851 that the Buffalo papers praised the “new musical wonder” and noted she was self-taught on the guitar and

27 Townsend Hall program, October 22, 1851, found in the Buffalo Daily Express, October 18, 1851.

28 Jenny Lind (1820 -1857), “The Swedish Nightingale” was one of the first European divas to tour the states. In the nineteenth-century, singers were often given nicknames relating to various breeds of birds in order to distinguish them from one another.

29 Trotter, Music and Some Highly Musical People, 71.

30 James Wood, proprietor of Wood’s Museum in Cincinnati, was a promoter of mixed repute who sometimes was involved with the popular P. T. Barnum, manager for Jenny Lind. In 1876, the year of Greenfield’s death, Wood leased the Merced Theater in Los Angeles, which in its day subsisted on minstrel shows and melodrama including Uncle Tom’s Cabin. After Wood purchased the theater he changed the name to the deceiving title of Wood’s Opera House. The “Opera House” held everything from boxing matches to circus events. Wood closed the theater and went bankrupt in 1878. Various authors, “James Wood,” 1999, www.history.operahouse/wood.com, accessed August 2000.
keyboard. The Ledger also stated that it appeared as though the singer was “at service” in Philadelphia until the age of twenty when she decided to pursue a musical career. The reference to “at service” establishes the theory that after her manumission at eight years old, Greenfield returned to her previous owner’s home to become a domestic servant.31

The reviews of Greenfield throughout this period were mostly favorable. On October 20, 1851 Teresa Parodi, accompanied by Adelina Patti and Maurice Strakosh, gave a concert at Townsend Hall, but still the newspapers continued their coverage of the “Black Swan.” This should not be discounted. At a time when Buffalonians had an excellent chance to make striking comparisons between the European divas and the “Black Swan,” the newspapers focused greatly on the “Swan’s” debut. Furthermore, Greenfield’s management was certainly taking advantage of America’s newly found interest in a slave singing classical music by making sure the local newspapers frequently advertised concert programs of a newly freed slave.

Yes, novelty was no doubt part of the interest. Many press reviews concerning this single performance noted particularly the lack of training in comparison to Lind and Patti, and yet, still complimented Greenfield for her “natural ability.” Does this remark, “natural ability” cater to a racial stereotype or was it meant instead as a praise of Greenfield’s talent, in spite of her lack of training? Of interest, was a critic’s remark which spoke of this natural musical talent and mentioned the singer’s lack of training, while simultaneously maintaining the skill of an Italian singer.32

31 Philadelphia Public Ledger, October 21, 1851.

The *Buffalo Daily Express* wrote on October 23, 1851 that though some may believe the success of Greenfield resulted from abolition or “higher law fanaticism,” she was patronized by all of the elite class. The critic continued with assurance to the public that the Union would not be periled by her success, but instead would soften the hearts of the free and “lighten the shackles of her race enslaved.”

The voice of hostility so frequently encountered in remarks dealing with African-Americans was almost completely absent, with the exception of a few remarks which appeared in the racist *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 18, 1851 and referred to the singer as “The African Crow.” Since, most prima donnas were given lovely and cheerful bird breeds as a sobriquet, the fact that this column used an unattractive bird indicated the tone of racism. Additional racist comments appeared in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* who stated “Some people say ‘geese are all swans,’ and this seems to be the case with those foolish individuals who have been lauding the vocal powers of Elizabeth Greenfield in the Jenny Lind style, and christening her “the Black Swan.” The review advertised tickets were sold at $1.00 each, yet the concert was nothing more than a failure. Later, the *Washington Bee* said Greenfield’s unattractive appearance, stout-build, and very dark skin were disheartening. After mentioning the singer’s proposed visit to Europe, the critic completed his negative comments stating he was at a loss as to why she had such a following.

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33 *Buffalo Daily Express*, October 3, 1851.

34 *Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 18, 1851.


In contrast, most reviews from the press, including both black and white, were complimentary. These positive remarks combined with the effective advertising and promotion by Buffalo merchant Hiram Howard, led to additional performances in Rochester and Lockport and a three year contractual agreement with impresario Colonel James H. Wood. Dated February 1853, the contract stated that Greenfield agreed to perform a musical tour throughout England, Scotland, and Ireland, as well as the free states of the United States. Greenfield was expected to deliver concerts, public and private, at such times and places - when her health would permit- as directed by her manager, Colonel Wood. The second paragraph recorded that Wood was to advance money to Greenfield as needed for her own individual expenses and to treat her respectfully, and provide suitable board, lodging, and traveling accommodations for her and an attendant. Under the contract, Greenfield received the privilege of selecting her own maid, whose services and expenses were paid from the proceeds of the concerts, such wages not to exceed $6.00 a month. The expenses of the wardrobes, musical instruction, traveling expenses, and any over plus were to be divided between Greenfield and Wood. Additionally, Wood received four-fifths of the proceeds while Greenfield received one-fifth. Taking into consideration that the event reviewed at Metropolitan Hall sold 2,000 tickets at fifty cents each, the profits would have been $1,000.00. After expenses, including the hall and Wood’s four-fifths, Greenfield would have been left with less than $100.00.37

Wood aggressively set up a first tour for the “Black Swan” engaging her in over thirty cities from Boston, New York, and Providence to mid-western cities such as

37 Contract between Elizabeth T. Greenfield and James H. Wood, 1853, as quoted in LaBrew, The Black Swan, 48.
Chicago and Milwaukee. She also traveled to Ontario and to smaller abolitionist strongholds such as Niles, Michigan. Within just a few years, Greenfield had sung in all of the free states. Though many white prima donnas such as Catherine Hayes frequently toured southern cities, in her four tours of the United States, Greenfield never attempted a tour of the South.

The *Buffalo Express* of December 6, 1851 noted the following. The *Providence Post* facetiously says: “We have heard Jenny Lind, and Parodi, Kate Hayes, and Biscaccianti, and we are tired of screeching and screaming. . . . We want now to hear somebody SING. Bring on the cullud pusson.” The article also notified the public that Greenfield was residing in the city with a prestigious family who was paying for her musical training.\(^38\) Who taught the “Black Swan” while she resided in Buffalo was never indicated; however, more than likely Buffalo’s well-known attorney Herman Potter paid for the lessons. Due to this patron’s prominence in society, Greenfield was probably given the opportunity to study in one of the more prestigious studios in Buffalo.

Greenfield performed in Rochester, New York on December 11, 1851 at the Corinthian Hall, where she was accompanied by Jenny Lind’s personal pianist, Mr. Hobson.\(^39\) When and where she met Mr. Hobson is not known, although James Wood seemed to have the unique ability of getting exactly what he asked for. For example, previous concert tickets for Greenfield were sold at fifty cents and within just a few months ticket prices had raised to a dollar, which indicated that Wood was doing an adequate job at managing Greenfield. Yet, these prices did not come close to the ticket

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\(^{38}\) *Buffalo Express*, December 6, 1851.

\(^{39}\) See [Figure 3 - 4] for program at Corinthian Hall.
prices for the European singers of the day. For example, Jenny Lind’s tickets ranged from $3.00 - $5.00, depending on the city. According to the *Daily Advertiser*, eight hundred guests attended the Rochester concert; (blacks were not permitted) of which six hundred or so were paying patrons.\(^\text{40}\) At one dollar per ticket this event would have made a profit of at least $600.00.

Greenfield’s programs typically copied Jenny Lind with the exception of the finales. Whereas Lind used folksongs for her finales, Greenfield typically employed Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home” or “Old Hundredth” winning ovations by singing them once in a low register with a masculine roar and then again in a clear high soprano.\(^\text{41}\) The *Rochester Daily Democrat* commented on the “Swan’s” ability to sing correct pitches in spite of her lack of training. According to the article, her choice of repertoire seemed to offer a glimpse of the American public’s lack of understanding or possibly even interest in opera.\(^\text{42}\) The *Rochester Daily American* added that “it was a bold attempt for the “Black Swan” to sing “Do Not Mingle” after Jenny Lind and Parodi; but she succeeded in rendering its difficult passages with considerable taste.” The critic noted Greenfield’s lack of training was in direct competition with the European trained divas.\(^\text{43}\)

In regard to the encores, one might conclude that Greenfield was accommodating her

\(^{40}\) *Daily Advertiser*, December 13, 1851.

\(^{41}\) Alain Locke, “The Age of Minstrelsy,” *The Afro-American in Music and Art* (Cornwell Heights, Pennsylvania: The Publishers Agency, Inc., 1976), 25 - 37. Stephen Foster, called “America’s Troubadour” is recognized as the greatest American songwriter of the nineteenth-century. Foster began writing “Ethiopian songs” about 1845 and from the beginning was successful, although he was only paid $10.00 for one of his most popular works, “Old Dog Tray.”

\(^{42}\) *Rochester Daily Democrat*, December 13, 1851.

\(^{43}\) *Rochester Daily American*, December 13, 1851.
white audiences’ preconceived notions by singing European art music in a performance style indicative of spirituals.

A comparison of the Buffalo program to the one in Rochester revealed that Greenfield added several more arias possibly due to her brief professional training. Her repertoire typically included operatic arias and popular art songs that exploited her unusual tessitura of three and a one-half octaves; unusual considering the average untrained singer has a range of one to one and one-half octaves.

Greenfield continued her tour throughout New York, in cities such as Utica, Albany, Lockport and Troy. She left New York arriving in Springfield, Massachusetts where the *Springfield Daily Post* advertised that the “Black Swan,” accompanied by her agent Mr. Dunn, would perform, provided she could obtain a suitable venue.⁴⁴ This was the first indication that someone other than Colonel Wood was acting as agent for the “Swan.” On the playbill for Detroit’s Firemen’s Hall, dated April 5, 1852, Colonel Wood reappeared as the acting manager.⁴⁵

From Springfield, Greenfield toured Boston, Salem, New Bedford, Taunton, Worcester, and Lowell, Massachusetts, Providence, Rhode Island, and then immediately on to Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati, Ohio. The *Boston Evening Transcript* dated February 4, 1852 noted not only that ticket prices were fifty cents (half the price of Rochester tickets), but that the singer’s pronunciation was ‘very correct’ and her intonation excellent.⁴⁶ From this remark one might presume that Greenfield received

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⁴⁵ Detroit Firemen’s Hall Program, April 5, 1852, found in the Detroit Public Library, Burton Historical Collection.

⁴⁶ *Boston Evening Transcript*, February 4, 1852.
additional professional training outside of Buffalo; or, perhaps this remark was no more
than a different critic’s opinion of her merit.

A notice in the *Mercury* of New Bedford, Massachusetts, dated February 10, 1852,
was the first to draw a correlation between Greenfield and the popular minstrels that were
touring the country: “this wonderful vocalist, who seems to be asserting for the African
race a position in the musical world, a good deal above the “Dandy Jim” and “Lucy
Long” school.”

Just a few days following, this amusing anecdote entitled “Too Good to be Lost,”
appeared in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*:

A man purchased a ticket for the Black Swan concert, which occurs to-morrow
evening, called on Mr. Stacey and told him he had been informed that the concert
would be a humbug, and wanted his money back, and give up his ticket. His
request was unhesitatingly complied with- When done, Mr. Stacey inquired of him
wherein was the humbug? Well, says the man, I have been told that this woman
you call the Black Swan, ain’t anybody but Jenny Lind blacked up. We opine the
surrender of the ticket will not be enlightened on this subject by the Swan, for we
believe it is her intention to keep dark!

The program for the Cleveland performance was modified from the Rochester
concert. Wood added several artists which included Professor H. C. Becht, from the city
of Mentz, Germany and his female pupil, S. Emilie Kook, a ten year old musical prodigy.
The program was split between the three with the “Swan” singing every other piece. Her
usual repertoire was included with the addition of “John Anderson, my Jo John” of which
no composer was listed.

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47 *New Bedford Mercury*, February 10, 1852, as quoted in *The Black Swan at Home and Abroad*, 18.

48 *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, February 25, 1852.
Following the performance, the Cleveland Plain Dealer reported: “She looks confidently to the audience as if trusting to their unbiased judgment.” 49 This remark indicated that at some point the “Swan” emerged from her previous timid stage presence and had begun to realize her musical talent in relationship to the great prima donnas. Subsequently, Ohio papers frequently mentioned that the “Swan” was staying in the same hotels as had been occupied by Jenny Lind and others, indicating that perhaps Cleveland was more open to the possibility of an African-American prima donna; although, along with Cincinnati and Columbus, all three Ohio cities continued to deny admittance for the black community into the local theaters.

Once again, a review that mixed racism with compliments appeared in the Cincinnati Enquirer which informed the audience that they should not expect to find an artist, but instead someone “entirely original.” In due time, the critic continued, the “Swan made her appearance not very swanlike, weighing about 275 or 300 pounds. Very unlike the “Swan” she succeeded in reaching the middle of the stage by an effort which certainly suggested to our minds the idea that she carried too much weight.” 50 The Enquirer did have some pleasant remarks, but the sheer rudeness and lack of sensitivity in regard to her weight must have been detrimental to Greenfield’s stage presence as well as her reputation. Paradoxically, three days following the above review, the same newspaper raved over the singer’s “extraordinary range of twenty-seven notes” adding that Greenfield emerged as one of the first singers of her race. 51

49 Cleveland Plain Dealer, February 26, 1852.

50 Cincinnati Enquirer, March 11, 1852.

51 Cincinnati Enquirer, March 14, 1852.
Found in the Burton Historical Collection in the Detroit Public Library, Greenfield’s concert program [Figure 3 - 5] for Detroit resulted in a Mr. Schmittroth, violinist, being added to the program. Especially interesting was Wood’s continual references to the similarities of the singer’s repertoire and that of Jenny Lind.\textsuperscript{52}

Greenfield’s concerts in Detroit did not go unnoticed among the Black population, both in the city and neighboring areas. Due to the Northwest Territory Act of 1787, slavery and involuntary servitude was foreign to this area of the country. The African-American population, though small in this mid-western city, played an important role in this city. It was noted in various Detroit newspapers that the African-American patron was welcomed into the venue to hear the concerts of Greenfield. The \emph{Voice of the Fugitive}, a weekly black newspaper, edited by Henry Bibb, a former slave, reported in the April 8th issue after visiting Cincinnati:

My friends and I had a curbstone sofa notwithstanding there were hundreds of seats unoccupied. . . . And why could we not have seats? Had we committed a crime, or violated any rule of propriety? No. But our skin is colored, and this was enough in itself to damn us. . . . Our company consisted of eleven respectable, well dressed persons, nine gentlemen and two ladies, and it would be extremely difficult to tell whether the ladies are white or colored. On entering the hall which leads to the concert room, we were met by officers who informed us that there was no admission for colored people. We showed our tickets and demanded our rights. . . . We told them that we had been permitted to hear Jenny Lind on her first and last visit to Cincinnati, and could see no reason why we should not hear Miss Elizabeth Greenfield but it was of no avail. We desire to simply draw attention to the matter, for the idea of excluding a man from a musical or intellectual entertainment on account of his color is really a relic of Barbarism--not known in Europe, and I trust will soon be among the bygones of our native land. We desire to draw Miss Greenfield’s attention to it for we cannot make ourselves believe that she will travel as a cantrice (sic) with a man who will use her to insult her race, and perpetuate the most barbaric custom that ever obtained a foothold in society.

Signed, J. I. Gaines

\textsuperscript{52} Detroit Program, found in the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library. Greenfield’s program remained almost identical throughout the tour.
An editorial note followed which stated the group’s disbelief that Greenfield would be an “exhibit” of pro-slavery camps while admitting aloud that her own people were insulted and abused.\(^{53}\)

In addition, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* of New York wrote on February 19, 1852 an article entitled *Coloured Prima Donnas* where it noted that Greenfield was not the only colored “prima donna.” It seemed as though, simultaneously to Greenfield’s tour, a Cuban singer, Marguerita Martinez, was also touring France and Spain. Additionally, the article spoke of a second colored singer from Tahiti.\(^{54}\)

Immediately following this report, on March 31, 1853, Greenfield announced her intention to tour England. A fundraising concert was arranged by enthusiastic supporters to help the singer with expenses.\(^{55}\) A review noted that the proceeds of the performance were to be appropriated to the completion of her musical education in Paris, under the world renowned Manuel Garcia. Although no evidence surfaced proving this training took place, various sources, including the *Toronto Globe* as late as May 12, 1852 mentioned this same intent.\(^{56}\)

Greenfield’s tour continued throughout the mid-west into Jackson, and Niles Michigan followed by Chicago, Milwaukee and Toronto. It was noted that Colonel Wood frequently reduced the ticket price from one dollar to fifty cents so that “all may

\(^{53}\) *Voice of the Fugitive*, April 8, 1852.

\(^{54}\) *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, February 19, 1852, as quoted in LaBrew, *The Black Swan*, 51.


\(^{56}\) *Toronto Globe*, May 12, 1852.
attend” as quoted from the *Rochester Daily American*. Unfortunately, throughout the tour and all over the northeast, “all” were not allowed to attend.

Dozens of reviews found in various newspapers, recorded in the biography, and even used as the bulk and basis of LaBrew’s book, stated basically the same information: the novelty of hearing an African-American woman during this period perform the most difficult music with extraordinary and limited education was phenomenal. All agreed that though Greenfield had a ‘natural talent,’ the lack of education showed in the very high notes or in the required execution of coloratura passages. With the exception of the black community, audience and critics alike were astonished with Greenfield’s powerful voice and pleased with the course she had chosen.

Upon completion of the tour, Greenfield performed in Vermont and surrounding areas, and then returned to Buffalo to complete the necessary accounting documents. While in Buffalo, the singer performed a benefit concert for the Buffalo Orphans Asylum which was held on Tuesday evening in November of 1852. It was noted in the *Buffalo Morning Express* that the benefit raised $167.50 for the orphans.57

Two additional benefit concerts for the Protestant and Catholic Orphan Asylums were scheduled for February of 1853 in Buffalo. According to the *Buffalo Commercial Advertiser*, dated February 24, 1853, these concerts resulted in the addition of $600.00.58 Why the first benefit concert raised only a small amount remains unknown. Just one

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57 *Buffalo Morning Express*, November 1852, as quoted in LaBrew, *The Black Swan*, 52.

month later, Buffalo citizens held a benefit concert, March 7, 1853, to help support Greenfield’s travels to Britain.⁵⁹

The outpouring of cross-racial support in her debut city, Buffalo, made Greenfield’s time in New York both frightening and frustrating. After numerous cities, all with white audiences, the singer’s debut performance at Metropolitan Hall, once again for an all-white audience, created the most animosity revealed thus far from both the black and white community. Metropolitan Hall, which held an audience of two thousand patrons, was threatened with arson if Greenfield performed, and police were stationed throughout the hall during the concert. Fortunately, no such act happened.

The reviews which followed the next day revealed a sense of animosity that had only been encountered in a few places on Greenfield’s tour and offered a possible reason for the omission of this event from the biography. The New York Herald wrote:

The matter was looked upon as the best joke of the season. The “Swan” was most vehemently applauded and was timidly led forward to the front of the stage by a little white representative who seemed afraid to touch her with even the tips of his white kids, and kept the “Swan” at a respectable distance, as if she were a sort of biped hippopotamus. The audience laughed and still applauded with all their might as complete silence was established to catch her first notes.⁶⁰

Unfortunately this was not the first time Greenfield had been led out in such a manner. Previously in Albany, the statement “on her next appearance before the public, she should exert her feminine privilege, and insist on being led out like a lady, by her

⁵⁹ LaBrew, The Black Swan, 53.

⁶⁰ New York Herald, March 30, 1853.
accompanist, and not like a ghost he was afraid of,” appeared in a review the following day.  

The day of the performance at Metropolitan Hall, a notice appeared in The New York Times which stated the time and place of the Grand Concert and that the “Black Swan” would be assisted by Mlle. Ida L’Ecluse, pianist, pupil of the Royal Conservatoire, Brussels; Mr. Stephen Leach; and a Grand Orchestra, under the direction of Mr. Geo. F. Bristow. Mr. Mueller presided at the piano-forte. Tickets were sold at fifty cents, while reserved seats were sold at one dollar. Of interest was the notice at the bottom which appeared in all advertisements and bills and read: “Particular Notice - No colored persons can be admitted, as there is no part of the house appropriated for them.”

Due to the unseeingness of reality that all blacks were excluded from the Grand Concert, the following letter was written to Greenfield by several black, prominent clergymen of the city of New York.

Miss Elizabeth Greenfield:

The undersigned profoundly regret that they and their numerous colored friends in the city are denied the privilege of attending your concert at the Metropolitan Hall, tomorrow evening. That they may not be left with the present painful impression, they hereby respectfully request, if consistent with your engagement, you will be so kind as to repeat your concert on Monday evening, the 4th of April, at the Broadway Tabernacle. Should you decline further benefit for yourself, we would suggest that the proceeds, after paying expenses be divided between the Home for Aged Colored Persons and the Colored Orphan Asylum.

Signed.....

J. W. C. Pennington, Pastor of Prince Street Presbyterian Church

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61 LaBrew, The Black Swan, 41. Only one source from the Albany Express indicated that a “Master Cook” was acting as pianist for the reviewed program. Assumedly, “Master Cook” was white.

Charles B. Ray, Pastor of Bethesda Congregational Church, Wooster Street

J. F. Campbell, Pastor of the A. M. C. Church, Second Street, New York

Henry M. Wilson, Pastor of Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Cottage Place, near Bleeker Street, City of New York

Dempsey Kennedy, Pastor of Zion Methodist Episcopal Church

Sampson White, Pastor of Zion Baptist Church

A “P. S.” followed stating that if Greenfield agreed to repeat the concert she must also agree that no one be excluded. Greenfield immediately responded stating she sincerely regretted that anyone had been excluded from attending the concert, but such action was required in the contract for the use of the hall. Greenfield continued with the remark “I will with pleasure sing for the benefit of any charity that will elevate the condition of my colored brethren.”

Greenfield’s letter to the clergy was quite enlightening. First of all, it was obvious that the black community was disturbed at its exclusion from the concert. Secondly, the response proved that Greenfield was aware that her people were debarred from the event and yet she chose to proceed. Once again, this suggests that she was accommodating white audiences. Thirdly, the letter was eloquently devised and thus leads one to believe that someone, possibly the “Swan’s” manager, wrote the letter in her place. Certainly, the terms of her contract with Wood may have left her with little choice.

As requested by the clergy of the city of New York, Greenfield did give a similar performance the next evening to benefit the Home of Aged Colored Persons and the Colored Orphan Asylum. This gesture, however, did not ease the bitter and negative

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63 New York Herald, April 1, 1853, and quoted in LaBrew, The Black Swan, 77 - 78.

64 New York Herald, April 1, 1853. The signature used the middle initial S.; however, since there were various misspellings throughout the advertisements and reviews one must assume this was of that nature.
responses from the African-American community. Many more articles in the black press appeared criticizing Greenfield for abandoning her own race in order to further her career. 65

The Black Swan. Alias Miss Elizabeth Greenfield.

How mean, bitter and malignant is prejudice against color! It is the most brainless, brutal, and inconsistent thing of which we know anything. It can dine heartily on dishes prepared by colored hands? It can drink heartily from the glass filled by colored hands? Finally, it can go to Metropolitan Hall, and listen with delight to the enchanting strains of a black woman! If in all those relations there be conditions acknowledging the inferiority of black people to white. . .[it is] the following particular notice to be placed on the placard, announcing the Concert of “The Black Swan” in Metropolitan Hall, New York:

“PARTICULAR NOTICE:-No Colored person can be admitted, as there is no part of the house appropriated for them.”

We marvel that Miss Greenfield can allow herself to be treated with such palpable disrespect; for the insult is to her, not less than to her race. She must have felt deep humiliation and depression while attempting to sing in the presence of an audience and under arrangements which had thus degraded and dishonored the people to which she belongs. 66

The above remarks, found in Frederick Douglass’ newspaper, cannot be confirmed to have been written by him. The notice, does however, give insight into the attitude and lack of toleration from the black community and their lack of financial resources to support concert artists indefinitely; yet, they wanted to take part in their careers. On the other hand, white audiences were unprepared to truly accept singers on the concert stage, but did have the financial means. Had the white audiences truly supported Greenfield, she might have received exceptional training and certainly would have been paid at least half of what the European singers were making.

66 Frederick Douglass’ Papers, April 8, 1853.
Letters published in *The New York Herald* revealed a final review concerning the Metropolitan Hall Concert, in which Greenfield was noted as a bold, self-taught singer, who never received the European training of her colleagues. According to the critic, however, there was a greater difficulty, Greenfield was not white; or, at least, not white on the surface.

Again, it was noted that Greenfield never heard any of the great singers and was, therefore, unacquainted with what the American public wanted to hear.\(^\text{67}\)

Many observations can be made surrounding these events and the critics’ bold and sometimes harsh comments during Greenfield’s first tour of the free states. One can assess from these attitudes concerning the musical arts that in outlying areas of the larger cities such as Boston and New York, music was encouraged, regardless of the race. In the metropolis, talent was often destroyed by the uncaring racist pen.

On May 10, 1854 Greenfield sang for Queen Victoria at Buckingham Palace for the fee of twenty pounds.\(^\text{68}\) Though British concert-goers welcomed her, Jenny Lind was paid triple the fee for performing for the Queen. In general, critics, both in Europe and in the States, praised Greenfield for her range, vocal power, and stage personality. Some, such as *The New York Times*, criticized her lack of training, but few could question her remarkable performance.

While much of nineteenth-century America saw African-Americans in general as former or potential slaves, Britain’s racial image was typically not so narrow and

\(^{67}\) *New York Herald*, as quoted in LaBrew, *The Black Swan*, 82 - 84. The comment “she is not white on the surface” might imply that her love of music could make her an “honorary” white among the elite American public. After all, some believe that black inferiority is only skin deep. Yet, black inferiority is still a problem today, otherwise, why does the average American find it peculiar to see an African-American in the opera, symphony, or even musicology?

\(^{68}\) See [Figure 3 - 6] for program at the Queen’s Concert Room, London.
demeaning. Although in the eighteenth-century, the United Kingdom had become quite familiar with the turmoil of slavery, by the nineteenth-century a less demeaning attitude seemed to exist. In spite of this, many of Greenfield’s scheduled dates in England fell through. It appeared that though the contractual agreement stated Colonel Wood would accompany Greenfield to Europe, the biography mentioned that the “Swan’s” British agent refused to advance her funds against future performances, which caused the singer to struggle to meet basic expenses. Greenfield was finally forced to withdraw from her contract and return to the States. In addition, various venues were notified of the singer’s race. Since the British were still sufficiently prejudiced, perhaps the pressure to induce impresarios to cancel engagements out of a fear of alienating white concert-goers was a factor involved in her withdrawal.

Whatever the excuse, Greenfield took matters into her own hands. She sought out Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was in London following the publication of her first novel, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. At once Stowe befriended Greenfield and introduced her to many important figures, including George Smart, organist and composer to Her Majesty’s Royal Chapel. An article entitled “The Black Swan that Sang for Nobility” noted that Greenfield studied with Smart for a brief time, of which he took her to the piano and proceeded to vocalize the singer by intervals, striking notes here and there at random and without connection. She followed with unerring precision. Greenfield also demonstrated to Smart that she had a range spanning from D in alt to A first space in the bass clef.70


Smart was quickly mesmerized by the singer’s three octave range and aided her in gaining new sponsorship and the direct approval of Lord Shaftsbury.

In Stowe’s travelogue, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, a lively account of the British concerts appeared and Stowe frequently celebrated Greenfield’s “astonishing voice, gentleness of manner and self-possession, and quietness and good sense.”

Stowe continued by saying that had Greenfield received the education given to her peers, “no singer of any country could have surpassed her.”

While overseas, the Duchess of Sutherland became Greenfield’s chief patron and arranged for her performances before many members of the London elite, including a private concert given at the fashionable Stafford House, Sutherland’s London home. Though previous rumors had spread concerning Greenfield studying with the Garcia, no evidence emerged to prove such rumors. Despite the Queen’s acceptance and praise over Greenfield’s voice, due to a lack of consistent engagements, the singer was forced to return to the States in July, 1854.

The 64-page biography published in 1855, which heavily emphasized the singer’s British tour, quickly spun four additional tours between 1855 and 1863. The first tour of 1855 engaged her extensively throughout Michigan, while the second tour of 1856 - 57 resulted in several cities from the first tour but also added new venues, traveling as far South as Baltimore and performing more widely in Canada and Wisconsin. During the

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72 Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands*, volume 2, (Boston, Massachusetts: Philips & Sampson, 1854), 139.

1863 tour, the singer frequently performed in Montreal with her pupil and well-known tenor Thomas J. Bowers, (1826 - 1885), Philadelphia’s “Colored Mario.” For obvious reasons, as the Civil War approached, Greenfield’s touring cities still never included the South.

Sometime between the singer’s return from London and her last tour, a newly found handbill and program placed her in Hartford, Connecticut on June 28th, 1863 [Figure 3 - 7]. Although this handbill listed Colonel James Wood as the manager, all ties seemed to have been broken between Wood and Greenfield when she went to London and Wood advertised that the concert would be the “Swan’s last grand vocal and instrumental concert.” Tickets were priced for one dollar and noted that Greenfield was assisted by “The Swiss Warbler.” In addition, the last piece of the second half of the program entitled “I am Free,” was listed as a duet with a remark at the bottom indicating the singer would perform one part in baritone and the other in soprano while covering “thirty-one clear notes - a greater compass of voice than any other mortal has ever reached.”

Ironically, though obviously accommodating white audiences, the singer sang a song about freedom.

After the 1863 tour, the singer returned to Philadelphia to perform locally and establish a voice studio. While there, she also formed and directed productions for an African-American opera company, Philadelphia Opera Troupe that performed in Washington, D.C., in 1862 and in Philadelphia in 1866. Unfortunately, no information

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75 Program for City Hall, Hartford Connecticut, June 28, 1863, found in the Connecticut Historical Society.

76 LaBrew referred to the company as Black Swan Opera Troupe. Neither name showed up in any research regarding black opera companies.
on this troupe under this name was located. Trotter, however, mentioned a newspaper clipping regarding Greenfield and Bowers and their accompanying troupe, which suggested the possibility of the Philadelphia Opera Troupe. His review noted that the troupe was composed entirely of amateurs and was the first of its kind.\textsuperscript{77}

During this period Greenfield also sang for a variety of social causes, mainly benefits for African-American orphans, including regular events that were sponsored by the Civil and Statistical Association of the Colored People of Pennsylvania, including lectures by Frances E. W. Harper and General O. Howard. She achieved local prominence as a music teacher and was listed intermittently in Philadelphia’s city directories as a musician and teacher. Her reputation had reached such a level that nearing the end of her career; the city directory simply listed her occupation as “Black Swan.” Among her students, she counted Thomas Bowers, Carrie Thomas, the leading soprano of the original Hampton Institute Singers, and Lucy Adger, whose family achieved local prominence, as did some of her students. As a devout Baptist, Greenfield directed the choir and sang at the Shiloh Baptist Church.

Greenfield’s career was a frustrating combination of success and humiliation. Beyond the South, support from the prominent white American public remained steady throughout her career. Yet, the white music establishment and certainly the black community were not always supportive or helpful in advancing her career. Though her voice was widely praised, critics were not free of racial jeering.\textsuperscript{78}


\textsuperscript{78} \textit{The New York Herald}, March 30, 1853, 6.
Whereas most of the press acknowledged Greenfield’s “natural ability,” The New York Times and others certainly handled her roughly. The reception to Greenfield’s performances in the States was often mixed. As previously pointed out, the larger cities were usually the most critical. Often journalists claimed to forbear from criticizing the “Swan’s” lack of training, but often recognized that the attraction from the white public was the novelty of the exhibition rather than Greenfield’s natural talent. Additionally, Greenfield’s audience often seemed surprised by the singer’s intelligence and pleasing personality shown from the concert stage. In reviews from both the white and black press, the singer was frequently compared to the famous Jenny Lind, from whom, on many occasions, she borrowed much of her repertoire.

In the absence of recordings or without professional musical training, one could not attribute Greenfield’s success solely to her talent. In addition, her white management and patrons, which lasted only for a few years, may or may not have led to the singer’s success. Yet, based on many critical reviews, Greenfield was noted as possibly the greatest African-American singer of her period. Furthermore, Greenfield’s abilities to obtain bookings, whether with or without the help of patrons and management, certainly made her one of the most ambitious singers of her time. Various handbills advertising Greenfield’s recitals provided evidence that the singer was marketed as a truly gifted individual rather than an exotic novelty or “hot mama;” a concept that by the turn of the twentieth-century was haunting many black women. Even the London Advertiser

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79 The New York Times, April 1, 1853, 4.

80 Women of other races were also included as “red hot mamas,” such as the Russian-Jew Sophie Tucker. Tucker sang burlesque and vaudeville tunes, first in blackface, creating a style that was known as a “Coon Shouter.” Not content with performing in the basic minstrel traditions, Tucker hired some of the best African-American singers of her time (including Mamie Smith and Ethel Waters) to give her lessons and hired composers to write specifically for her. Tucker was billed as “The Last of the Red Hot Mamas,” as her hearty sexual appetite was a frequent subject of her
pointed out that her talent was “a convincing argument against the assertion so often made that the Negro race is incapable of intellectual culture of a high standard.”

Greenfield’s legacy inspired many, including W.C. Handy and Harry H. Pace, who in 1921, named their recording company Black Swan Records, which bore a stylized black swan. In the 1980s, an improvising string quartet of all African-American musicians launched its concertizing and recording career under the name “African-American Swan Quartet.” Though there may be disagreements over Greenfield’s talent, there should be little dispute over her influence as an African-American woman, both culturally and musically. Yet, Greenfield’s memory has not been appropriately honored.

Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield did not fail, as she seemingly believed, in her debut at Metropolitan Hall. This singer’s desire to sing was strong and enabled her to endure and accomplish much. Probably the most refuted belief was that African-Americans were not capable of mental and moral achievements. Rather than hide her talents, Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield continued on doggedly, without adequate education and often fearful of the consequences, in order to make a statement for African-American women. Given such talent, as well as her unprecedented and international fame, her successes as a teacher and her pioneering efforts to promote all black musicians, was notably summed


81 The London Times, June 15, 1853.

82 Information regarding blacks and the recording industry can be found in Tim Brooks’ Lost Sounds: Black and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890 – 1919 (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2004) which argues that George Broome’s Special Phonographic Label was the first recording company owned by blacks.
up in the words of author and activist Martin Delaney (1812 - 1885) who said “Elizabeth Greenfield was among the most extraordinary persons of the nineteenth-century.”

It therefore remains a mystery as to the reason for the omission of this talented woman from those sources focusing on African-American women and musicians. To approach the same arena as the European divas of the day was daring and extraordinary and it required no ordinary courage for this woman to attempt to please an audience that at one time had held her in bondage. Though many others have followed, Greenfield should be recognized for her pioneering efforts to make a name for herself on the concert stage.

**Nellie Brown Mitchell**

The major thrust of African-American women participating in concert and stage music occurred predominately after the Civil War. In cities, such as Boston, noted for its sophistication and upper class citizens, the years of 1870 - 1900 marked a tremendous social ferment among the city. Because of the influx of freed men and women in search of educational opportunities and employment, the city of Boston, in particular, witnessed a black population that tripled in size from 3,496 inhabitants in 1870 to 11,591 in 1900.

During these same years, black leaders promoted the cultural arts in their communities in several ways: they endorsed white American schools of music that admitted black students, they developed a network of patrons to fund classically trained

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black musicians, and they encouraged a group of highly gifted and trained African-American musicians who became leading cultural figures in Boston.

Women of color, especially, figured prominently in the cultural uplift movement that emerged not just in Boston, but all over the north during these years. As a small number of predominantly white schools, centered in and around Boston on the 1860s, opened their doors to admit black men and women, America’s first group of African-American classically trained musicians emerged; among these was Nellie Brown Mitchell (c. 1845 - January 1942).  

Unlike Greenfield, Mitchell encountered a less intense and even different type of racism in her career. The possibility that Mitchell was lighter skinned may have played a role in her greater acceptance among the public. Mitchell should be categorized not only as one of America’s first black classically trained singers, but also as an educator, entrepreneur, financier, and arts-function organizer. She was a true entrepreneur in the full sense of the word.

Born in Dover, New Hampshire in 1845, Mitchell was the daughter of Charles and Martha Runnels Brown. The Browns moved from Boston to Dover in 1845, and after serving an apprenticeship, Charles Brown successfully established his own business as a hairdresser and wig maker. Like many African-American musicians, Mitchell began her career singing in the local church, while attending the Franklin Academy in Dover.  

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86 See [Figure 3 - 8] for a photograph of Mitchell.

87 Established by Edward Hilton in 1623, Dover was the first New Hampshire settlement and the fifth to become a city, granted in 1855. The 1910 census for the city counted 13 African-Americans.

88 The Academy was a chartered school and was established in December 1805. It is now functioning under a different name. Information regarding this school can be found in the State Records, Dover Public Library.
that same year the young singer began studying with a local voice teacher, Caroline Brackett. Brackett encouraged Mitchell to pursue a professional career and remained her instructor for several years.

Mitchell officially began her career in 1865 when she became the lead soloist for the Washington Street Freewill Baptist Society of Dover, New Hampshire, a position she held until 1872.\(^{89}\) Records found in the *Society Clerk Record’s Book No. 1 and No. 2* of Dover Baptist Church, indicated that Mitchell was paid $23.00 for the church calendar year of 1871, and $33.00 the following year. Nearing the end of 1872 the church reported that they would pay Mitchell $100.00 for the year to obtain her as lead soloist. Moreover, the clerk’s records indicated that a concert and festival was given by Mitchell in 1881 at the Washington Street Freewill Baptist Church where she was paid $113.11.\(^{90}\)

Mitchell then accepted a similar post from 1872 - 76 at the Grace Methodist Episcopal Church of Haverhill, Massachusetts, then returned once again to the Washington Street Freewill Baptist Society of Dover from 1876 - c.1878. From 1879 to 1886 while concurrently performing on the stage, Mitchell served as the musical director and principal soloist of the Broomfield Street Methodist Episcopal Church, a local white church in the community. Steady employment opportunities existed for African-

\(^{89}\) The rise of Free Will Baptists can be traced to the influence of the Baptists. The denomination sprang up on two fronts: the Palmer movement in the south which began in 1727 when Paul Palmer organized a church at Chowan, North Carolina; and the Randall movement, organized by Benjamin Randall on June 30, 1780, in New Durham, New Hampshire. Both movements taught the doctrines of free grace, free salvation and free will, although from the first there was no organizational connection between them. The Northern line expanded more rapidly in the beginning and extended its outreach into the West and Southwest. In 1910-1911 this body of Free Will Baptists merged with the Northern Baptist denomination, taking along more than half its 1,100 churches and all denominational property, including several major colleges. The abolition of slavery and the Civil War prevented formal union between the movements. In Nashville, Tennessee, on November 5, 1935, however, representatives of these two groups met and organized the National Association of Free Will Baptists, which comprises more than 2,400 churches in 42 states and 14 foreign countries. National Association of Free Will Baptists, “The History,” 2004, www.nafwb.net, accessed June 2004.

\(^{90}\) *Society Clerk Records Book No. 1 and No. 2*, Dover Baptist Church, Dover Public Library.
American singers, organists, and choral directors in several of the thirteen or so black churches in the greater Boston area of the nineteenth-century. Additionally, a few local white congregations hired black soloists such as Mitchell, in particular the Broomfield Street Methodist Episcopal Church.⁹¹

According to Trotter, in 1865, Mitchell wrote a friend saying “my motto is excelsior. I am resolved to give myself up wholly to the study of music, and endeavor, in spite of obstacles, to become an accomplished artist.”⁹² These remarks clearly showed that Mitchell was aware of the difficulties encountered by African-Americans, especially women.

The decade of the 1860s brought the first real opportunity for some African-American women to receive first-rate conservatory training in the states, notably the New England Conservatory (1867), the Boston Conservatory (1867), the Emerson College of Oratory’s Department of Music (ca. 1880), the School of Vocal Arts (1880s), and the Boston Training School of Music (1891). These institutions provided students with a broad curriculum that included applied musical instruction (such as voice, opera, oratorio, and art song literature), harmony, pedagogy, dramatic interpretation and elocution. Advanced music students performed often in concerts organized by the schools. Just ten years after the Civil War ended, Mitchell was among an elite group and one of the first of her race accepted to the New England Conservatory where she obtained a music

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⁹¹ James Monroe Trotter used the title “Bloomfield” to indicate this church. However, this inaccuracy has been resolved by two other sources, including Josephine Wright and Eileen Southern who use “Broomfield Street Methodist Episcopal Church.”

certification. Immediately following, Mitchell attended the New England School of Vocal Arts in Boston where she received a music degree.\textsuperscript{93}

While still a student, Mitchell gave four recitals in Boston, several in Washington, D.C., and made her New York debut in 1874 at Steinway Hall. On December 19, 1873, the \textit{Dover Daily Democrat} reported that the singer’s performance at the ‘Vocal and Instrumental Concert in City Hall’ was warmly greeted and that the ease and grace of her voice surprised all in attendance.\textsuperscript{94}

Mitchell immediately received rave reviews and even felt confident enough to begin a tour during the 1870s. In fact, Mitchell held her New York debut prior to receiving her professional training at the conservatory, although she was studying with a local teacher, a Mrs. J. Rametti. In 1880, less than one year after receiving her diploma, the singer made her debut in Chicago and then in Philadelphia in 1882.

Reviews repeatedly remarked that Mitchell’s rare power and beauty combined with her charm won her enthusiastic receptions all over the New England area.\textsuperscript{95} In honor of the “Commemoration of the Ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution,” Mitchell performed a concert at the North Russell Street A. M. E. Church in 1874. The \textit{Boston Globe} reported that the program consisted of choruses from Haydn’s \textit{Creation} and Handel’s \textit{Judas Maccabaeus}, interspersed with solos by three sopranos, Miss Nellie Brown [Mitchell] of Dover, Miss E. J. Fisher of New York, and

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
Miss Georgia Smith. “Miss Nellie Brown [Mitchell] showed a particularly well modulated voice and trained study and appreciation of method.”

On May 16-17, 1876, Mitchell performed for the Centennial Musical Festival, a benefit for Boston’s young people, of which she organized and conducted a group of fifty young girls in the operetta, *Laila, the Fairy Queen*. Mitchell appeared as soloist with the James Bergen Star Concert Troupe and was quickly tagged “prima donna soprano” of the company. From 1882 to 1885, Mitchell toured extensively with the Bergen troupe and was often assisted by such artists as the well-known baritone William I. Powell of Philadelphia, the vaudeville entertainer Sam Lucas (1840 - 1916), and soprano Adelaide Smith” of Boston. During the heyday of her career, Mitchell shared the stage with numerous other prominent performers, including Madame Selika Williams and Wallace King (ca. 1840 - 1903). Later in December of 1876, Mitchell again presented the operetta *Laila* in Haverhill, Massachusetts, using students from the local high school.

In the early fall of 1885, Mitchell left the Bergen Star Concerts and embarked on an extended concert tour throughout the South, one of the first attempted by a African-American singer. Touring cities included Cleveland, Cincinnati, Memphis, and Nashville, in route to New Orleans, Louisiana during October 1885. During this time

96 *Boston Globe*, March 31, 1874, 6. The Fifteenth Amendment granted all male citizens the right to vote, regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. Massachusetts passed the law on March 12, 1869. Women were not granted the right to vote until 1920 with the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment. Emory University School of Law, Macmillan Law Library Electronic Reference Desk, “Nineteenth Amendment,” 2000 – 2002, [www.law.emory.edu](http://www.law.emory.edu), accessed January 2002.

97 Adelaide Smith (Mrs. A. Terry), leading soloist of the Newton Center Congregational Church, became one of two African-Americans to sing with Boston’s Cecilia Society in the 1890s. The society was a mixed voice choral ensemble founded in 1874 by Benjamin J. Lang. Smith studied at the New England Conservatory and was a member of the Patrick Gilmore’s World Peach Jubilee Chorus in 1872. Josephine Wright, “Black Women in Classical Music Boston During the Nineteenth-Century: Profiles of Leadership,” *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern*, 394.

port cities such as Charleston and Savannah were musically thriving cities where many Europeans sailed directly to their ports to perform for the wealthy plantation owners. Yet, even after the abolition of slavery, when in theory blacks were allowed to travel to any place in the country, Mitchell did not venture to these southern port cities; the possibility that it was financially more profitable to travel to these particular cities, since New Orleans was her destination, made perfect sense. The cost of transportation via the Mississippi River, which connected directly to the city of New Orleans, may have been less expensive and created less racial issues than traveling by land. This does not, however, explain why Mitchell did not plan an exclusive and additional tour to include these Southern cities. Though the public was beginning to turn to more exciting stage attractions, such as Blackface Minstrelsy and vaudeville, white patrons in many of the cities were still purchasing tickets to see these prima donnas.

Few newspapers, either black or white, reported on Mitchell’s tour of the Southern cities. Due in part to impresario-author James Monroe Trotter, the Cleveland Gazette, on October 17, 1885, wrote that few realized the monumental importance of this tour. As in the case with Greenfield, the black press seemed to handle Mitchell harshly, commenting on the singer’s continual engagements to all white audiences. Once again, the possibility that black audiences could have sustained these artists financially was doubtful. Still, Mitchell, with her predecessors, was blamed for catering to white audiences. The difference, of course, was that the year was 1885, almost twenty years after the emancipation of slaves. At this point in the history of American concert going, one could ask the question where were the black concert-goers? After all, for the first time in the history of America, in theory, blacks were welcomed at the opera house. Yet, even if
they were interested in classical music and welcomed into the venue, could they afford to purchase a ticket?

Employment census dating around 1900 showed that the average monthly salary for an African-American maid was under $10.00. Rents in excess of $6.50 made it difficult for the average African-American to make ends meet. One can deduce, therefore, that few blacks attended these concerts. And, though many were not familiar with the art music repertory, some were still passionate about supporting their own artists but simply could not financially do so. Additionally, though in 1885 blacks had been legally freed, segregation still existed. As a rule, much into the twentieth-century, blacks were restricted from white owned theaters. The two possible exceptions were if the black attraction was popular enough to make it worth while for the owner and/or if the theater was run by African-Americans. The first black owned theater above the Mason-Dixon line was the Pekin Theater in Chicago purchased in 1905. Paradoxically, as time progressed, the majority of black-owned and/or black-managed playhouses existed in the South.

Immediately following the tour, Mitchell returned to Boston where she continued her activities at various African-American churches for a limited period of time. In 1886, she resigned her church position to devote her time to concertizing as a soloist and organizing, financing, performing, and managing the Nellie Brown Mitchell Concert Company, which included her sister and pupil, contralto Ednah B. Brown, and singers Annie A. Park and John Thomas.\footnote{Boston Advocate, September 4, 1886.} Mitchell’s company toured extensively during the late 1880s and 90s, however, information pertaining to the company is limited to a few
newspaper articles. In 1886, the *Cleveland Gazette* gave Mitchell the promising sobriquet “America’s greatest singer of African descent,”\(^1\) while the *New York Globe* acknowledged that Mitchell was the greatest artist among her race.\(^2\) Just two years later, the same Cleveland paper proudly and daringly commented that Mitchell was Madame Selika’s only rival.\(^3\)

In addition to her many concert efforts, in 1876 Mitchell married Lieutenant Charles L. Mitchell, who had served in the Union Army during the Civil War.\(^4\) Following their marriage, though Mitchell’s concert tours became less frequent, she did not waiver in her efforts to continue to study, teach, and organize cultural and musical events. Numerous reviews from 1883 attested to Mitchell’s outstanding musical talent. On October 30, 1883, the *New York Globe* covered a benefit for the Bethel Church in New York, which stated the soprano received an ovation several times and “her singing, together with her grand stage presence, stamped her the greatest stage artist ever.”\(^5\)

A series of concerts followed in 1884 with continued favorable reviews of the singer, which included a James Bergen Concert at the Brooklyn Academy of Music for 3,000 patrons, featuring prima donna soprano, Nellie Brown Mitchell. *The New York

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\(^1\) *Cleveland Gazette*, October 31, 1886.

\(^2\) *New York Globe*, October 30, 1883.

\(^3\) *Cleveland Gazette*, April 14, 1888.

\(^4\) Mitchell was Second Lieutenant in the 55th U. S. Army Massachusetts Regiment. He was later elected member of the Massachusetts State House of Representatives. President Ulysses S. Grant appointed Mitchell clerk of the U. S. Customs House (Boston) sometime after 1869. See the previously mentioned John Daniels’ *In Freedom’s Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes.*

Globe review was glowing especially in regard to Mitchell’s song “Far Away,” which “was given tenderness and pathos almost indescribable.”

On February 8, 1886 a Benefit Concert for the Boston Advocate was presented at the Charles Street African Methodist Episcopal Church, which featured Nellie Brown Mitchell, Marie Selika Williams, Carrie Melvin, and Mitchell’s sister, Edna Brown, as soloists. The program [Figure 3 - 9] was covered by Trotter of the Cleveland Gazette. Mitchell’s repertoire frequently included two of the most famous nineteenth-century ballads “Bright Star of Love” and “Comin’ Thro’ the Rye,” as did her program for the Boston youth benefit. A gala benefit was repeated almost one year later on January 4, 1887 at the same location starring Mitchell and Marie Selika. At some point, Mitchell returned to her home town of Dover, New Hampshire to perform a “Grand Concert” [Figure 3 - 10] at the opera house on September 9, 1886.

After 1885, Mitchell managed her own concerts and supervised those of her sister, Ednah Brown, who began to concertize professionally in Boston and other Northern cities under Mitchell’s tutelage, ca. 1886. In the late 1890s, Mitchell retired from the stage and devoted her remaining years to studio teaching and educating young African-American women in Boston. In the nineteenth-century, American women, regardless of their color, were all treated as second-class citizens; each denied the freedom of education, thought, economic independence, and, until 1920, the right to vote. Occupations open to all women were limited to dressmakers, tailors, seamstresses,

105 New York Globe, March 29, 1884.

factory workers, or domestic servants. Teaching was considered the one of the lowest of all employments and was the only profession in which free African-Americans were accepted.

According to Josephine Wright, out of the eighty-one black women who participated in classical music making in Boston during Mitchell’s career, between 1870 and 1900, thirty-four of them identified themselves as professional or semi-professional performers in Boston. The concert singers account for seventeen on the list while the music teachers account for an additional seventeen. From this list, only two, Mitchell and Rachel Washington were listed as music teachers in the annual *Boston Directory* published by Sampson and Davenport. Along with Mitchell, who was listed in both categories singer and teacher, from 1883 to 1922, Rachel Washington, a music teacher who gave private and group lessons was listed between 1876 and 1909. The listing suggested that both were recognized as professional instructors who maintained established studios and paid taxes derived from the earnings. Though no accounts of requested fees were found for Mitchell, an advertisement for Washington in the *Boston Advocate* revealed that as of December 1886 she was charging $1.50 for ten lessons (one lesson per week) for those who wished to learn to read music.

At the height of stage career, Mitchell opened a voice studio at her home on 16 Mille Street in Highlands, Boston in 1883 where she taught until two years prior to her death in 1922. Mitchell often advertised herself as a “Teacher of the Guilmette Method

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107 Rachel Washington began teaching around 1876 both privately and group lessons until 1909. She specialized in teaching piano, organ, music theory, and composition for many black residents. She expanded her teaching by opening an evening Singing School for adults at the Twelfth Baptist Church where she was organist. Her *The Study of Music Made Easy: Musical Truth* is considered as one of the earliest music theory books written and published by a woman, black or white. Wright, “Black Women in Classical Music Boston During the Nineteenth-Century: Profiles of Leadership,” *New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern.*
of Vocal Technique and Respiratory Exercises with Terms for concert engagements and lessons.”

The Guilmette method stressed a scientific approach to understanding the anatomy of the voice and implemented vocal exercises for the singer to learn to mold the vowel to achieve ultimate purity of sound and to free the tension in the throat.

Throughout her teaching, Mitchell combined her musicianship, stage presence, and knowledge of operatic, oratorio, and art-song literature with this pedagogical approach.

In the 1880s she also invented a device called the *Phoneterion*, an instrument used to reduce muscular tension in the voice, and often advertised as a technician of the instrument. The following advertisement appeared in the *New York Globe*, November 8, 1884:

Mrs. Nellie Brown Mitchell  
SOPRANO VOCALIST  
16 Mille St., (Highlands) Boston, Massachusetts

The Phoneterion is a device to aid the Teacher of Vocal Music or Elocution in developing the voice of a pupil in certain technical exercises. The back part of the tongue has a natural tendency to pull back, thereby constricting the passage of the vocal column, causing it to give out pinched, throaty tone. The purpose of this device . . . . is to secure the back part of the tongue; by this means the glottis, or outer opening of the vocal box or larynx, becomes exposed its entire length, insuring a free tone.

CHAS. L. MITCHELL,  
Patentee, 44 School St., Room 4  
or 16 Mille St., Boston.

Charles Guilmette (? - ca. 1833) pioneered in the treatment of diseases and disorders of the throat in the nineteenth-century. He was active in New York in the second half of the nineteenth-century as a voice teacher, and published a two-volume treatise explaining his vocal method: *Dr. Guilmette’s Vocal Physiology: or, Progressive System for Scientific Education of the Human Voice* (New York, 1860) and *Vocal Physiology: A Practical Treatise* (Concord, 1877). Guilmette also invented the Inspirometer, an instrument which tested the power of diaphragmatic breathing.

During the summer months, Mitchell taught voice in the Vocal Music Department at the Hedding Chautauqua School in East Epping, New Hampshire and counted among her private students Sidney Woodward, a concert tenor. According to Trotter, the singer made an additional tour of the East Coast and Middle Western cities, as well as some Southern cities she had previously toured. Additionally, she performed in the widely acclaimed Grand Musical and Literary Jubilee with Selika Williams and Edna Brown. On March 21, 1918, Mitchell was the primary organizer and financier of a Boston concert whose patrons and sponsors included William Dupree, James Monroe Trotter, and Mamie Flowers. Sponsored in part by the Shamut Congregational Church located in a Boston suburb, the concert was a benefit for Madame Selika Williams.

In Boston, in particular, classically trained black musicians enjoyed patronage from a variety of sources, mainly from newly emerged cultural organizations that had sprung up in the black community. Black women all over the country developed a strong club movement to deal with specific problems particular to their race. Groups such as the Progressive Musical Union (1875), the Social Dramatic Club (1884), the Phyllis Wheatley Club (1886), the Beacon Choral Union (1889), the Ladies Harmony Circle (1891), and the Woman’s New Era Club (1894) stressed the cultural and civic concerns of the community. In addition to her teaching job, Mitchell also organized a Bostonian club, the Chaminade Club, a group for African-American women to study light classical music and the accomplishments of other women artists. Additionally, Mitchell spent a

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10 Mitchell discovered Woodward during her tour of the South and persuaded him to come to Boston to study. He was widely regarded as one of the leading black male concert singers of his day. Indianapolis Freeman, May 24, 1890.

11 Shamut Congregational Church was an African-American Church that flourished during the 1890s. Today renamed Calvary Baptist Church. See [Figure 3 - 14] for an example of the playbill for this event.
portion of her time notating spirituals and instructing a course in notation and transcription of the genre. As an active member of the Women’s Relief Corporation in Boston Mitchell was also an active member of the Music Teacher’s National Association and remained in Boston throughout most of her career as an important figure, both musically and in the community. After she retired from the concert stage in the 1890s, she devoted her time largely to private teaching and benefit programs.\footnote{Mitchell’s work in women suffrage movements fit in with other black women and their interests including Ida B. Wells-Barnett who helped to form the National Association of Colored Women, the Negro Fellowship League, and other progressive women’s clubs. See Patricia Schecter’s \textit{Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880 - 1930: Gender and American Culture Series} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001). Information on more women from the progressive era including Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin (1842 – 1924), journalist and civil rights leader, who aided in the establishment of the Women’s New Era Club in Boston, can be found on PBS Communications, “Women Activist,” 1995 – 2005, \url{www.pbs.org/blackpress/news_bios}, accessed January 2003.}


From the biographies and reviews of Mitchell, one might assert that she existed outside the mainstream of African-American thought. Possibly the social, economical, and political situation of the African-Americans, with regard to Booker T. Washington’s ‘racial uplift’ concept of hard work and enterprise, did not apply to the musical world of
the mid-nineteenth-century, and certainly not to the concert singers, whether black or white, who lived and worked in this industry. Like Greenfield, Mitchell seemed to have entrepreneurial agendas that coincided with both black and white American women of the day. It can be argued that Washington’s racial uplift concept was evident in Mitchell’s career. Though she may have existed outside the African-American’s main current of thought, in that she was educated and neither she, nor her parents, were bound by slavery, Mitchell still exemplified that, although in the music world “natural talent” is a must, hard work and an entrepreneurial spirit could achieve great goals.

Unlike Greenfield, Mitchell was allowed to attend respectable music schools and received the assistance of various white patrons’ throughout her career, which enabled her to succeed as one of America’s first African-American performer-educators.114 African-Americans actively participated in the emergence of classical music in the United States during the 1800s. The advent of African-American women in classical music was closely associated with the rise of the cultural and racial uplift movements that flourished among freed blacks in the north during the antebellum period. It was during this period that several black men and women sought to establish among their communities a tradition in the cultural and performing arts with the belief that such a movement would elevate their race. As Delaney argued, “no equality between races could exist where an equality of attainments was absent.”115

Black women, specifically, had an important role to play in this upward movement as avenues of growth in education and the arts opened during the late nineteenth-century.

114 With the exception of Josephine Wright, whose research is the most detailed and extensive to date, there is limited information about Mitchell. The Boston Public Library does not hold extensive collections for this singer.

Mitchell, of course, was an excellent example of this upheaval. Additionally, white audiences who were initially attracted to the novelty of hearing African-Americans sing operatic arias and art-songs, as in the case of Greenfield, eventually grew tired or apathetic of this so-called amusement. The black singer confronted with this change in public taste was forced quickly to seek an alternative means of livelihood. This new source of income typically arose through studio teaching, concertizing abroad, or performing as a “specialty attraction,” in minstrel shows, vaudeville companies, or musical comedies.

**Marie Selika Williams**

Similar to Mitchell, Marie Selika Williams (ca.1849 - 1937) spent many years of her career either in Europe or in the studio. As in the case of Greenfield, biographical information for Williams is scant and contradictory, especially surrounding the singer’s birthplace and date. No less than three dates have surfaced during this research. Eileen Southern wrote that Williams was possibly born a slave in the familiar city of Natchez, Mississippi, one of Greenfield’s supposed birthplace thirty years prior. Since records of African-Americans, slave or freed, were mainly kept by individuals not by the state, the birthplace or date was not confirmed. Some sources such as Nettles, completely avoid any mention of the date or place of the singer. The *Cleveland Gazette* wrote in April 28, 1888 that Williams was born in 1852 in Natchez, Mississippi.

116 See [Figure 3 - 11] for a photograph of Selika Williams.


118 *Cleveland Gazette*, April 28, 1888.
Nevertheless, several sources agreed that Williams was taken to Cincinnati under the patronage of a wealthy white family, where she was given weekly music lessons. Even more sources referred to Ohio as her native state. Around 1873, the singer moved to San Francisco to study under the tutelage of Signor Bianchi, a well-known voice teacher in the states and famous operatic tenor of the period. Selika Williams made her singing debut in California in 1876 and within the year she was studying with Antonio Farini in Chicago, world-renowned Italian voice teacher, who listed his specialty as operatic and operatic stage studies.119

Sometime between 1878 and 1879, Mrs. Francis Bailey Gaskin of San Francisco, California heard the singer perform and encouraged her to come to Boston to study German, French, and Italian probably with an Edna Hall.120 While in Boston, Williams lived in the home of Gaskin’s mother, continued her studies, sang in local concerts, and adopted the stage name “Selika” from the leading character in Meyerbeer’s popular French opera, L’Africaine.121

As early as 1877, Williams was noted for her ability to sing trills and staccato passages, often being referred to as the “Queen of Staccato.” A composition written solely for her entitled “Selika - Grand Vocal Waltz of Magic” by Frederick G. Carnes


120 The *Cleveland Gazette* wrote on April 30, 1887 that Williams was studying with Nahar Hall in Boston. According to Josephine Wright, this was probably an error, inasmuch as no individual by that name was listed in the Sampson-Davenport *Boston Directory* during the 1880s. Wright did find, however, Edna Hall who maintained a studio on Dartmouth Street in Boston.

121 Whether this sobriquet was the choice of Selika or her manager is not known. The name did, however, give a sense of exoticism to the performer. Selika was originally scheduled to perform in Meyerbeer’s opera, so it is possible that she studied the role, felt a connection to the character, and then adopted the title.
[Figure 3 - 12], required a variety of advanced vocal techniques, one of which demanded a vocal range of more than two octaves.

A large portion of Selika Williams's performances included her husband and manager, Signor Velosko (Sampson Williams), an aspiring tenor (some say baritone) often referred to as the “Hawaiian Tenor,” whom she met in Chicago. Both Williams and her husband were students of Antonio Farini, and though the soprano apparently wished to perform jointly on stage with her husband, most reviews commented that his voice was considerably inferior to hers. As a result, Williams often lost her chance at the extraordinary exposure which could have accompanied numerous quality performances.

On November 13, 1878, the young African-American sang for President and Mrs. Rutherford Hayes in the White House.\textsuperscript{122} In honor of Mrs. Hayes, the Colored Industrial School Children Chorus had sung in the East Room a few months prior to Williams’s concert. It is well known that the President and his wife were huge endorsers and encouragers of African-American talent. Williams's program in the Executive Mansion was another example of this reinforcement.

While in the city of Washington, the \textit{Musical Record} noted that Madame Selika was in Washington. She sang before a number of musical critics in the parlor of the First Congregational Church and received great reviews. In such selections of difficult character as the “Polka Staccato” by Mulder and the “Cavatina” from Lucrezia Borgia, the critics remarked she had a remarkable quality of voice.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{122} Elise K. Kirk, “Nightingales at the White House,” \textit{Opera News}, 45:5, November 1, 1980, 21. It is believed that Williams had previously met the president in his two terms as Governor of her so-called “native” state, Ohio.

\textsuperscript{123} \textit{Musical Record}, November 30, 1878, 30. See [Figure 3 - 13] for an excerpt of the “Polka Staccato.”
Though Williams was obviously interested in obtaining an operatic role, many critics spoke harshly of her inability to sustain the stamina needed for an operatic role. An article in *Musical Record*, March 20, 1879, made reference to Williams's interest in making her operatic debut as Selika in *L’Africaine*. The critic spoke convincingly of her rich intonations, but noted her “faulty method and in some respects her uncultivated taste.”

According to the black press, however, Williams may already have sung the Meyerbeer role while she was in Boston in 1878. While there, *The Cleveland Gazette* recorded that the singer was asked to replace Etelka Gerster\textsuperscript{125} in a concert at Aeolian Hall and subsequently sang the leading role in *L’Africaine* at the Academy of Music in Philadelphia. Although this report was not verified with a program, the remarks in the above mentioned article may have some validity. Newspaper clippings do prove that both Gerster and Williams were in Boston during the same period. Subsequently, the substitution for Gerster led to other professional engagements all over the eastern seaboard.

In 1879, Williams made her New York debut at Steinway Hall. *The New York Times* reported that several prominent journalists in music and enthusiasts, such as the Straskosch brothers, Max and Maurice, attended the recital commenting that Williams displayed her training well and had every reason in the world to excel. Her program included the popular cabaletta from *La Traviata* and “The Last Rose of Summer.”\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{124} *Musical Record*, March 29, 1879, 404.

\textsuperscript{125} Gerster (1855 - 1920) was an Austrian-Hungarian dramatic soprano, noted often for her “cat fights” with Adelina Patti.

\textsuperscript{126} *The New York Times*, May 7, 1879, 4.
Indeed, the Strakosch brothers became Williams's mentors during this period and were well-known entrepreneurs of operatic and concert performances. In speaking of Williams's voice, Maurice Strakosch, manager for Adelina Patti, his sister-in-law, declared the singer’s vocal technique as a beautiful voice rarely found outside of Italy. Later, the Strakosch brothers were managers of the Apollo Theater in Rome where they again worked with Williams.127

Probably around 1885, the soprano gave concerts under the management of Lieutenant William Dupree (1838 - 1934), brass bandsman, concert promoter, impresario, and manager who aided and encouraged numerous young struggling African-Americans and sponsored Mitchell’s 1918 Shamut Congregational Church Concert. Sometime between 1885 and 1889, Williams broke away from Dupree and was managed by James Monroe Trotter (1842 - 92). Both Trotter and Dupree were considered outstanding African-American impresarios from Boston who often helped unknown black artists excel. Sometime in the year 1886, under Dupree’s management Williams performed a program with composer Harry T. Burleigh (1866 - 1949) and Will Marion Cook.

In June 1882, the soprano, along with her husband, began their first tour of Europe, which lasted almost four years. In the fall of that year, she gave a command performance for Queen Victoria at the Saint James Hall in London. This event greatly enhanced the singer’s rapidly growing reputation. She also appeared with Carlotta Patti and Signor Vergora in a London benefit concert for the Cuban Slave Children. The London Daily

News reported that Madame Selika sang two impressive numbers, Dana’s “Ave Maria” and the polka song, “Frior di Margherita.”

As the critics often noted, William’s ability to sing in several languages, including Italian and German, mesmerized both white and African-American audiences alike. She was quickly noted as one of the first African-Americans trained to sing operatic arias in the original language. Nellie Brown Mitchell, however, had obviously learned languages at the Conservatory and performed Verdi’s “Non fu Sogno” in the original language; yet, not one review ever mentioned her singing in a foreign language. In fact, most of the reviews spoke about her lovely rendition of various English art-songs. Why this aspect of Mitchell’s talent was ignored while Williams was glorified, remains unknown.

With regard to Williams's racial barriers encountered on the American concert stage, the Colored American reported that Williams compared favorably with the great singers of the world in her “Shadow Song” by Dinorah and Lucia’s aria “Il Dolce Suono,” both sung in Italian. Other repertoire was sung in French and German. The review continued stating “Owing to the conditions of race questions at present in America, Madame Selika spends most of her time abroad, where she meets with the greatest success.”

Before her return to the states, Williams performed at the Musée du Nord in Brussels, sang the soprano role in Weber’s Der Freischütz in Germany, and toured Russia, Denmark, and the West Indies before returning to the states in 1885. Of the few

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129 Colored American, April, 1902, 324-26.
operatic history books which mentioned the singer, several noted her as the first African-American to sing the lead role in an opera abroad.

*The Paris Figaro* said the soprano sang with perfect ease from C to C and had trills like a “feathered songster.” The *Figaro* continued saying her “Echo Song” could not be surpassed. “It was beyond any criticism. It was an artistic triumph.”¹³⁰ The phrase artistic triumph was a huge complement considering just a few years prior the Swedish Nightingale had made this selection one of the most popular among American and European audiences. In Berlin, *The Tagblatt* rendered the highest expression of enthusiasm saying William’s pure tones, wonderful trills and roulades, and correct rendering of the most difficult pieces, gained her the admiration of all professional musicians and critics.¹³¹

On March 1883, the *New York Globe* reported the soprano’s husband, Mr. Williams, as saying:

There is much adverse feeling in Paris towards colored people since the Zulus slew Prince Napoleon. . . . Brussels is a charmingly beautiful city where me and Selika have never once been slighted on account of our color and could not have received more polite attention. What a lesson for our yet uncivilized America!¹³²

The author of the above article added that it remained to be seen whether the elite American socialites would give Williams their highest endorsements. In such cities as Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, Cincinnati, Louisville and others,

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¹³¹ Ibid., 222.

the critic speculated that “no hall or theater ought to be large enough to contain even all
the colored people -- to say nothing of the whites -- who would flock to see her.”

Obviously, the writer of this article was speaking mainly of Northern concert halls. Articles and reviews from both the African-American and white press spoke harshly of Southern cities, allowing no blacks to patron the hall or segregating the few who did attend. Although, even in the North, blacks were typically restricted from white theaters; the exception would have been if the visiting black artist was popular enough to draw in the black community. On most occasions, a special allotment was made for white patrons by having them enter one side of the building while the blacks entered an opposite side and usually sat in the balcony away from the white patrons view. Though Nellie Brown Mitchell had previously toured the South, one can only assume that by the time Williams's was touring, the concert halls were still not filled with faces of the black race.

While in Europe, minstrel troupe owners, Charles Hicks and Gustave Frohman, made plans to organize the Colored Opera Troupe with Selika Williams as “prima donna soprano.” Hicks was appointed to meet Williams in Paris in the summer of 1883. These ambitious plans never materialized leaving Williams as the only internationally known African-American singer who, at some point in her career, never sang with a touring troupe or company. Supposedly, one of the last accounts of the soprano and her husband found them in Germany as the heads of an African-American opera troupe numbering around fifty singers and crew, but, unfortunately, no information surfaced to verify this rumor.

133 Ibid., 97.
Upon Williams's return to America she sang at the Grand Benefit Concert for the black congregation of the Charles Street (or First A.M.E. Bethel) Church with Nellie Brown Mitchell in Boston on February 8, 1886. Williams reappeared at the Charles Street Church on January 4, 1887. On April 28, 1888, the Williams duo began a short tour of Cleveland, Chicago, and Louisville, Kentucky interspersed with three separate tours to Europe between 1887 and 1892.¹³⁴

During her time in Boston, several sources noted the singer’s various concerts, and mainly due to the exposure created and organized by Nellie Brown Mitchell’s management for the Grand Benefit Concert, critics hailed Selika Williams as “The Patti of the Colored Race.” Though various Bostonian papers covered the benefit concert, one in particular was of interest. Lillian Alberta Lewis (pseudonym, Bert Islew) wrote several articles for the *Boston Advocate*, including the essay entitled “Influences of Music” where she included the above benefit concert. In this article, Lewis championed the cause of the classically-trained black concert musicians who participated in the benefit concert, in particular Williams and her husband, Nellie Brown Mitchell, Carrie Melvin, and Louis A. Fisher.¹³⁵ Lewis added that a few white musicians, such as clarinetist John Gorman of the University Press in Cambridge, volunteered their services for the occasion. Thereafter, the singer appeared numerous times in Boston under the organization of Nellie Brown Mitchell, performing with the soprano and her sister, Edna E. Brown.

¹³⁴ *The Cleveland Gazette*, April 28, 1888. *The Cleveland Gazette* noted that Williams and her husband returned to their home in Columbus, Ohio (though some reviews reported Cleveland) around 1893.

¹³⁵ Fisher was a black baritone from New England who concertized in the states during the 1880s.
The first record of salary among the singers was found in regard to Madame Williams. On July 18, 1891, the *Indianapolis Freeman* reported that Williams was earning in excess of $7,000 a year plus expenses, a salary few African-American singers earned during the nineteenth-century. This was only a portion of what the European prima donnas were earning, such as Jenny Lind who was noted as earning in excess of $720,000.00 annually.\(^{136}\)

Perhaps one of the most interesting accounts of Williams's encounter with racism, and one which paralleled the lack of her playing an operatic role in America, was found in impresario James Henry Mapleson’s *Memoirs*:

> On entering, I was quite surprised to find an audience of some 2,000 who were all African-American, I being the only white man present. In the course of the concert, the prima donna appeared, gorgeously attired in a white satin dress, with feathers in her hair, and a magnificent diamond necklace and earrings...She sang the “Shadow Song” from *Dinorah* delightfully and encored with the “Valse” from the *Romeo and Juliet* of Gounod. In fact, no better singing I have heard.\(^{137}\)

Though the impresario was very impressed with the soprano, he never offered the diva an engagement. In fact, Mapleson’s remarks mentioned only her concert performances in the States and that she was never cast in an American opera. In 1893 Williams's performed at the World’s Fair in Chicago in 1893 and in Washington D. C. in 1912, assisted by Charlotte Wallace Murray,\(^ {138}\) contralto and music teacher, and the Washington Conservatory of Music Choral Ensemble. The “Queen of Staccato’s” last performance was held at the New Star Casino and was directed and organized by David

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\(^{136}\) See Chapter 5 for more information regarding the salaries of European and white American singers.


Irwin Martin, director of the Music School Settlement for Colored People in the City of New York. The program was the seventh annual event which featured the pupils (mostly youth) of the school and was accompanied by the orchestra and chorus from the Music School Settlement and Riverdale Colored Orphan Asylum Chorus. Several guests appeared on the program which included Madame Williams who was assisted by the chorus in an arrangement by Bush of Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home,” and the contralto Marian Anderson. One can assume that the Foster piece was performed with the original text and dialect.\(^{139}\)

After her husband’s death, Williams's career began to decline during the late 1890s. In 1916, she accepted a teaching position at the Martin-Smith School of Music in Harlem, New York and remained active as a private voice teacher until shortly before her death. As mentioned earlier, on March 21, 1918, Nellie Brown Mitchell organized and financed a benefit concert for the singer in Boston. Williams was noted as the first African-American singer to perform an operatic role in Europe, not in the States.\(^{140}\)

**Matilda Sissieretta Jones**

Of the singers mentioned thus far, the most famous classically trained African-American, and the one who succeeded in having the lengthiest and most financially successful career, was Matilda Sissieretta Jones (1869 - 1933).\(^{141}\) With an outstanding

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\(^{139}\) Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-1, Folder 3, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

\(^{140}\) The Martin-Smith School of Music in New York was founded by Helen Elsie Smith, who among many other women of color established one of the few professional conservatories of music in their community. Alongside Smith, included pioneers such as Harriet Gibbs Marshall, founder of the Washington Conservatory of Music and School of Expression, Lillian Morris of the Cosmopolitan School of Music and Fine Arts in Indianapolis, and Mary Cardwell Dawson of the Cardwell School of Music in Pittsburgh. All these women recruited staff from the ranks of gifted black performers of the period, New York Education, “Martin-Smith School,” 1999, [www.martinschool/NY/edu](http://www.martinschool/NY/edu), accessed June 2001. The lack of information leads one only to speculate that the gap between 1899 and 1916 appears to have found Williams privately teaching and limited in her public performance.

\(^{141}\) See [Figure 3 - 15] for a photograph of Sissieretta Jones.
vocal repertoire, Jones was a popular and successful vanguard for many black vocalists. Critics concurred that the singer’s combination of talent and entrepreneurial skills helped convince the musical and theatrical worlds in America to accept the black classical singer in a new image.

Born in 1869 in Portsmouth, Virginia to the Reverend Jeremiah Malachi Joyner and Henrietta Beale Joyner, Jones's father was said to be a native of one of the Carolinas and was his master’s body servant during the Civil War. Devoutly religious, Reverend Joyner became an Afro-Methodist minister\textsuperscript{142} preaching in and around Portsmouth. After the war, Reverend Joyner, as well as many others, found the volatile racial climate of the South an undesirable place to raise a family, so in 1876 the Joyner family moved to Providence, Rhode Island. At that time, Providence was one of the many Northern cities luring African-Americans from the uncertainty of the South and promising opportunities for jobs and racial harmony. For a time, Rhode Island had the second largest African-American population of the Northern states, after New Jersey. It was a well known fact among African-Americans that in this State, African-American men had been voting since 1842. By 1866, Providence’s public schools were integrated; certainly, a welcoming place for the Joyner family.

In Providence, Jones often referred to as “Sissy” or “Tilly,” quickly became well known in the community as a great singer when her voice was heard above all the others at the school choral events of Meeting Street and Thayer Schools. Although information from this period of Jones's life remains obscure, evidence showed that the entire Joyner

\textsuperscript{142} The African-American Registry stated Jeremiah Malachi was a Baptist Minister, Benjamin Miche, ed., 1999, www.aaregistry.com, accessed September 2002. However, Jones's Press Scrapbook, Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-1, Folder 3, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, directly stated an African Methodist Church.
family, all musically gifted, was very active in the church choir at the Pond Street Baptist Church.\textsuperscript{143}

At just fourteen years of age, Jones studied voice with Ada Baroness Lacome (retired Italian singer) at the Providence Academy of Music. Jones's scrapbook indicated that she also studied with a M. Mauros, although no additional information was found regarding this person. Typical of the period, on September 4, 1883, at just fourteen years old, Jones married David Richard Jones and the couple had one child, Mabel, who died at two years old. Richard Jones was described in newspaper articles as a ‘handsome mulatto’ from Baltimore who worked as a news dealer and hotel bellman. Relatives, on the other hand, tagged Richard Jones as a gambler who showed a fondness for racetracks. Later, when Jones used her husband as her business manager, he showed himself to be a serious liability to her career, spending her money and failing to earn any of his own. Ironically, Richard Jones was the individual who encouraged the singer at age eighteen to continue her studies at the Boston Conservatory where she studied privately with a Madame Louise Capianni. She later went to London specifically to study with a Madame Scongia. Although several reviews mentioned these women as important voice teachers for Jones, no information regarding their credentials emerged.

From 1886 - 1888, Jones studied and broadened her contacts with other artists, such as Flora Batson, the leading star of the Bergen Star Company. It was during this period that she established a reputation as a concert singer, giving successful performances before 5,000 at Boston’s Music Hall for the Parnell Defense Fund and at Providence’s Sans Souci Gardens. On April 5, 1888, the soprano, along with Flora Batson, made her

debut at Steinway’s Hall in New York [Figure 3 - 16], nine years after Madame Selika Williams. On May 8, 1888, Jones appeared again in a Bergen Concert at the Philadelphia Academy of Music, with 3,000 white patrons in attendance. Several sources noted the large of number of ticket sales and interestingly enough, the color of the audience.\footnote{Nettles, \textit{African American Concert Singers Before 1950}, 88.}

At a Madison Square Garden performance, the critics commented that about three-fourths of the audience was white. These two accounts offered much insight into the changing attitude of concert-goers and indicated that the remaining fourth of the audience must be African-American. Though the black community had spoken out regarding their desire to attend these performances, as in the case with Greenfield, most of the time they were denied admission. These articles proved that at least the elite African-Americans of the community were interested in supporting their singers, and, in Washington and Saratoga, were welcomed as patrons.

The series of concerts that emerged billed Jones as “the rising soprano from New England” and brought her to the attention of white concert managers Abbey, Schoffel, and Grau (managers for the Metropolitan Opera) who scheduled her for a Wallack Theater debut on July 15, 1888.\footnote{Some sources used the debut date of April 5, 1888.} Again, on August 4, 1888 Jones performed with the Tennessee Concert Company under the management of James R. Smith.\footnote{In an interview with James Smith, Florence Williams stated to the \textit{Indiana Freeman} that the company had disbanded owing to a misunderstanding and the singers had become “swell-headed” and did not wish to give Smith any credit for the fame. According to Smith, the company rebelled against him and broke their contract. Miss Kate Johnson and Mr. Lewis Brown claimed they did not break the contract, but instead it was the manager who was contracted to pay all their expenses, as quoted in the \textit{Indiana Freeman}, April 20, 1889.} Following the
performance, the *New York Age* stated “one of the most promising enterprises that have ever been planned for colored artists.”\(^{147}\)

Jones was billed as the first African-American singer to appear on the Wallack stage. Henry Abbey, manager for Adelina Patti, attended this performance and recommended that the soprano begin a six-month tour of the West Indies in the summer of 1888 with the Tennessee Concert Company. This tour gave birth to Jones's professional career, as the *New York Clipper* labeled her with the sobriquet “Black Patti” (derived from the name of the Spanish soprano Adelina Patti), which remained with her throughout her career.\(^{148}\) Sometime around April 1889, *The Freeman* noted that Jones was appearing with the Georgia Minstrels at Dockstader’s Theater, Broadway, New York. The same newspaper reported the following month that Jones would serve as “prima donna soprano,” along with baritone Lewis Brown, for a short Southern tour under the management of B. F. Lightfoot. Jones returned again to the West Indies sometime in 1890 with the Star Jubilee Singers under the management of Florence Williams.\(^{149}\)

Almost immediately after the flattering nickname first appeared in print, Jones resigned herself to a label that worked both for her and against her. Following in the reigning white diva’s path was difficult as the public was often disappointed in her inability to duplicate Patti’s talent exactly. Critics faulted Jones's manager for setting the

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\(^{147}\) *New York Age*, August 4, 1888.


\(^{149}\) Nettles, “Matilda Sissieretta Jones,” *African American Concert Singers Before 1950*, 83. According to the *New York Age*, Florence Williams had a company in the West Indies even after Jones returned to the states, as quoted in Nettles.
singer up for a comparison she simply could not fulfill. The soprano adamantly disapproved of the title, telling the *Detroit Tribune* “I do not think I can begin to sing as Patti can and I have been anxious to drop the name. That is impossible almost, now it has become so identified with me.” To the *Detroit Evening News*, Jones said “I have a voice and I am striving to win the favor of the public by honest merit and hard work. Perhaps some day I may be as great in my way, but that is a long way ahead.”

But in spite of the perilous sobriquet, Jones soon established herself as a great singer. Even George Bernard Shaw, a tough music critic of the nineteenth-century, acknowledged Jones's special gifts. He praised her wonderful instrument with its great range and birdlike agility. By all accounts, Jones had a phenomenal voice with solid training, and it is a great loss to the music world that there are no recordings to prove this. The criticism of whether she sounded exactly like Adelina Patti soon diminished as both critics and the public agreed that Jones was to African-Americans what Adelina Patti was to Anglo-Saxons - the “Queen of Song.” Possibly the critics and audiences of the day were weary of the initial attraction of an exotic novelty and were paying tribute solely to the singer’s talent.

It was presumed at some point that Adelina Patti and Jones met; however, there seems to be no evidence to prove or disprove the encounter. A reporter from the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* claimed that Patti attended one of Jones's performances, was impressed and paid a personal tribute; however, other glaring errors in the article cast

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150 “Her favorite is L’Africaine,” *Detroit Tribune*, February 12, 1893, 5.


doubt on this claim, as well as the lack of possibility that Jones, an African-American, was allowed in the hall. Furthermore, the comparisons to Adelina Patti were somewhat ludicrous, for Patti was the idol of millions and demanded at least $4,000 nightly per engagement. On the other hand, Jones rarely earned more than $300.00 for one appearance.

In an article reprinted in the *Washington Bee* from the *Saratoga Union*, the critic mentioned he spoke with Mr. Charles F. Chatterhorn, assistant and translator to Adelina Patti who said, “this colored woman is certainly a very good natural singer, and while I should hardly feel like comparing her voice with Madame Patti’s, I find her Negro dialect much better, as shown in her rendering of the “Suwanee River.””

The year 1892 was a pivotal point for the singer having gained approval from New York’s demanding music community. During the 1892 - 94 seasons, Jones signed a three-year contract with Major James B. Pond, manager of the American Lecture and Musical Agency in New York. Though not true of today’s impresarios who are high society and very refined, Pond was a shrewd and savvy businessman. Much like P. T. Barnum, Jenny Lind’s manager, these astute characters were always in search of an entertainer to exploit and profit from. Pond also managed the humorist Mark Twain and antislavery leader Henry Ward Beecher and seemed to have a knack for providing what

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153 Nettles, “The Black Patti and a Cakewalk,” *African American Concert Singers Before 1950*, 90. The correct spelling is “Suwanee River;” however, as today, the “u” was frequently left out of the spelling.

154 James B. Pond (1838 - 1903) was the son of an ardent abolitionist. As a young boy he worked in St. Louis where he was a call boy at a theater and a printer of a religious newspaper. Pond joined a gold mining expedition to Colorado in 1859 and the following year joined the Wide Awake Club, a staunch anti-slavery Republican group. After the Civil War, Pond began to manage several different lecture tours in conjunction with the Redpath Lyceum (managers for the Hyers Sisters). He began his own lecture bureau in New York City in 1879 and over the next twenty years he became the nation’s premier lecture agent delivering such acts as Mark Twain, Booker T. Washington, and Henry Ward Beecher. Pond wrote four books based on his experiences as an agent, promoter, and tour agent. Kevin Dier-Zimmel, “James Pond Collection,” 1996, [www.wilh.org/james_pond](http://www.wilh.org/james_pond), accessed January 2000.
the public wanted and had the deftness to combine the singer with Harry T. Burleigh and violinist Joseph Douglass (1871 - 1935), grandson of Frederick Douglass. The group became a forum for the most talented African-Americans of the day showcasing diverse entertainment.

Jones's greatest performances took place in 1892 when she attracted national attention with her performances as principle artist at Madison Square Garden’s “Grand African Jubilee”\(^{155}\) from April 26 -29, the White House for President William Henry Harrison, and in London for the Prince of Wales. Following these engagements, the soprano appeared with white cornetist Jules Levy and his band at a number of white Expositions, including the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago and the World’s Exposition in Pittsburgh,\(^{156}\) where she appeared as soloist with Gilmore’s Band in 1893, under the management of Major Pond.\(^{157}\) According to Ann Estill, author of *The Contributions of Selected Afro-American Women Classical Singers: 1850 - 1955*, Jones received $2,000.00 for the one-week engagement. In 1898, *The Colored American* noted that Jones received the salary of $500.00 per week.\(^{158}\)

An additional concert surfaced as a Gala Concert at the local white congregation of People’s Church in Boston on May 29, 1894 where the singer performed in a concert

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156 See [Figure 3 - 17] for an advertisement of the Exposition.


158 *The Colored American*, Washington, D.C., July 9, 1898. See Table 7 - 2, Comparative Analysis Chart.
organized by black impresario Ednorah Nahar.\textsuperscript{159} James Weldon Johnson (1871 - 1938) stated in \textit{Black Manhattan}, that Jones was contracted to sing at the Metropolitan Opera in 1892 by Abbey, Schoeffel, and Grau, but due to a fire which closed the house down, immediately following the offer, her debut never took place. More than likely, Johnson received his information from reviews such as the following which told that Jones was contracted with the Metropolitan Opera House to sing the lead roles in both \textit{Aida} and \textit{L'Africaine}. Unfortunately, plans for her Metropolitan debut were not carried out.\textsuperscript{160}

Located at Howard University, Jones's scrapbook contained a newspaper clipping from \textit{The Empire} in Toronto in 1891 which noted the singer was made an offer to sing in \textit{Scipio Africanus} by Pietro Mascagni, but she turned this down saying she preferred the concert platform. Since this statement was directly contradictory to her wish to perform in an opera, one is led to believe that either the close mindedness of American audiences had finally taken it’s toll, or perhaps, Jones did not, or even could not, handle the lead female role in that opera.\textsuperscript{161}

Throughout her career, Jones performed for three United States Presidents: Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt. As opera was not a

\textsuperscript{159} Ednorah Nahar (fl. ca. 1880s - 1890s), a native Bostonian, managed and organized concerts for several nationally-known black singers, including Jones, Rachel Walker (soprano from Cleveland, Ohio (ca.1873 - ca.1940 or thereafter), and violinist Joseph Douglass (1871 - 1935), grandson of Frederick Douglass. Nahar closed her Chicago office in 1897 and moved to Cincinnati, Ohio where she opened a successful school of elocution. Nahar had began managing concerts in the late 1880s by arranging her own performances of over 800 dramatic readings in thirty-one states and in Canada. Sometime in the 1890s she organized the Ednorah Nahar Concert Company. More on Nahar can be found in \textit{Women's Era I}, June 1894. Along with Nahar, Florence Williams and Mattie Allen McAdoo pioneered as impresarios in the tough profession that was and still is dominated by men. Wright, “Black Women in Classical Music Boston During the Nineteenth-Century: Profiles of Leadership,” \textit{New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern}, 394.


\textsuperscript{161} Alain Locke Papers, Box 164-I, Folder 1, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, 3 - 6.
new tradition in the White House, many of America’s early Presidents and their families showed a curious and special interest in the genre. Though the first six Presidents probably obtained a wider acceptance and knowledge of the arts than their nineteenth-century successors, support of the nation’s artistic achievements ranked high in the mid to late 1800s with concerts by Jenny Lind, Teresa Parodi, Maria Alboni, and Henrietta Sontag.

The practice of interpolating folk and patriotic song, even hymns, into grand opera productions was quite prevalent in this city. For example, Emma Abbot was noted as singing “Nearer My God to Thee,” within her opera performances and she placed “The Star Spangled Banner” in Rossini’s *Semiramide* (both to the disdain of many critics). Furthermore, just a few years prior Jones performed on February 1892 (or September 1892, according to James Weldon Johnson) at the White House for President Harrison and later for President Hayes where she sang several Italian arias in the original language and concluded with American folk songs.

The power, uniqueness, and underlying pathos of the African-American singer was recognized first in Washington D. C. by Selika Williams who received the honor of performing for President Hayes in 1878 and then by the wide reputation of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who sang the popular spirituals for President Arthur at the White House in 1882. Yet, following these various popular performances at the White House, Jones's engagement was pivotal in that various invitations followed to perform in the homes of several elite Washingtonians and diplomats.162

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162 It is possible that Williams also performed for such individuals but reviews did not surface to confirm this speculation.
On her tours in South America and the West Indies, heads of governments and the
elite showered Jones with diamonds, gold, rubies, and pearls as tokens of admiration.
Yet, unlike Williams, Jones never performed in a complete opera. She was a diva in
every sense of the word, singing operatic arias in their original languages from
Meyerbeer’s *Robert le Diable* and *L’Africaine*, “Caro nome” from Verdi’s *Rigoletto*, and
“Sempre libera” from the same composer’s *La Traviata*. Following in Patti’s footsteps,
Jones indulged the public’s taste by performing popular ballads such as “Comin’ Thro’
the Rye,” “The Last Rose of Summer,” “Maggie, the Cows Are in the Clover,” “Home
Sweet Home,” and Foster’s beloved “Suwanee River.” No matter what the African-
American prima donna sang, the crowds were large and enthusiastic.

In addition to her numerous performances in the states, Jones toured Jamaica,
Barbados, and Haiti for a period of eight months. After performing in the Caribbean
Islands, the local newspapers hailed Jones as the “greatest singer of her race” and
presented her with medals laden with precious stones and valuable jewels. A miniature
gold crown set with jewels was a gift from residents of Kingston; American residents of
Colon gave an inscribed gold ivy leaf to her; and a group of Haitians presented her with a
gold medal set with diamonds. Yet, all the jewels the world could offer could not cast
this “prima donna” in a complete opera - her lifelong desire. After returning to the States,
under the management of Voelckel and Nolan, a short tour of several cities on the
northeast coast was arranged for Jones where she sang frequently on the tour with
baritone Louis Brown.\(^{163}\)

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\(^{163}\) *Story, And So I Sing: African-American Divas of Opera and Concert*, 6 - 8.
The *New York Age* wrote on October 24, 1891 that Jones had more of a reputation in the West Indies than in the States and, while in Haiti, President Hippolyte, in the palace at Port-au-Prince, gave Jones $500.00 in gold as a mark of his appreciation.\(^{164}\) Likewise, on February 20, 1895 the *Berliner Frembenblatt* wrote that the singer’s color seemed to contradict the first part of her sobriquet, but the enthusiastic applause proved the epithet to be true.\(^{165}\)

Nettles found an interesting article from the German paper *Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* that was reprinted in *The Indianapolis Freeman* dated May 4, 1895 which stated that Jones's performance at the Wintergarten was not only appealing because of her nationality, but because of her voice. This review implied that though the American audience appeared to be growing tired of the newly freed slave turned concert singer; Europeans were still intrigued by hearing blacks perform classical music.\(^{166}\)

Following a concert at the National Theater in Washington, D.C., the *Washington Post* stated “probably no voice of our time has made such an impression by its vibration, its purity, and its natural flexibility. Nature has here produced a cantatrice, who sings with full-throated ease. . . .compass, and brilliancy of her tones, all criticism and prejudice.”\(^{167}\) Most of the music press found Jones intriguing and beautiful. She was an attractive woman of medium height and stature who captivated audiences with her pleasing appearance, gentle manner, and impeccable taste. Jones had a predilection for

\(^{164}\) *New York Age*, October 24, 1891, as quoted in Nettles, “Madame Selika Abroad,” 100.


\(^{166}\) *The Indianapolis Freeman*, May 4, 1895, as quoted in Nettles, “Mme. Sissieretta Jones,” 100.

dressing stylishly and she was often described as elegant and majestic. Typical of those who came from the lower economic class of society, many individuals, black or white, would dress in the latest trends of the day in hopes to receive what they believe to be respectability from the upper class. Photographs typically showed her in beaded, laced gowns of silk or satin wearing long, white gloves.

Though most reviews admired Jones's voice for its richness and power, cynical critics of various newspapers including *The New York Telegram*, which claimed to be educated in the techniques of singing, stated that the “Negro was not prepared for the classics in music; he excels only in his weird and somewhat nasal euphonies of plantation and camp meeting melodies…and will probably only excel in rag-time opera.”

During the 1892 - 94 seasons the soprano, still managed by Major Pond (at times to her dismay), gave performances across America including Expositions at Pittsburgh, Buffalo, and Toronto. Though sometimes tinged with the racial slurs of the day, most reviews of her performances were positive. John van Cleve, a respected Bostonian-trained musician and critic, defined Jones technique as being of “high and genuine ability both as concerns the gift of nature and the supplementary additions of art.”

Following her triumphant tours in many other countries as well as in the States, mishaps, managerial problems, and slow attendance at concerts began to break the singer. Symptomatic of black performers in the past, Jones was forced to deal with her mismanagement under Pond through a string of legal disputes and lawsuits. In a *New*

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York Times article entitled “Lectured the Black Patti” much was revealed concerning the court’s decision in Jones's dispute with Major Pond.

On June 8, 1892, the Major contracted “Black Patti” for a year at $150 per week, all furnished accommodations and traveling expenses. At some point the Major and Jones disagreed and ended up in court for several months over a clause which gave the manager the privilege of re-engaging the singer for an additional two years under the same terms provided for the first year’s work. It appeared as though Jones wanted to manage herself so Pond then brought an injunction to Judge McAdams. In granting the motion, Judge McAdams informed the court the following:

She feels now as if she could get along without her benefactor, and she has thrown down the ladder on which she ascended to the position she now enjoys. Every sense of gratitude requires her to be loyal to the Manager who furnished her with the opportunity for greatness, and every principle of equity requires her to perform her engagements according to the spirit and intent of the contract. Talent is of little value without opportunity, and history records on its brightest pages the names of many who would have died in obscurity, but for opportunity.

Following the final break-up with Ponds, Jones signed a contract with Ednorah Nahar, the African-American female impresario who had organized a concert for Jones in 1894. Immediately following, Jones signed with the Damrosch Orchestra Company in the Fall of 1894, and once again toured extensively across the United States. Following the tour, Jones performed at the Centennial Jubilee Concert at Carnegie Hall in New York City on October 12, 1896. The handbill advertised that Madame’s Williams, Jones, and Batson were scheduled to perform and the evening would be the first public appearance of the three artists together.\(^\text{170}\) No clippings were found in Jones's scrapbook of the review to indicate whether the concert took place. Nonetheless, this was the noted

\(^{170}\) Indianapolis Freeman, October 10, 1896.
second appearance at the hall by Jones. According to the African-American Registry, the first concert was given on February 13, 1892 by The World’s Fair Colored Opera Company with Sissieretta Jones billed as the star singer. This ambitious performance came one year after the hall’s opening and was recorded as the date of the first black American performers to appear on the stage. Jones was introduced to one of the world’s greatest composers, Antonin Dvorák, director of the National Conservatory in New York. The Bohemian composer was long an admirer of African-American musicians and had recently written the *New World Symphony*, a work inspired by African-American folk melodies. Dvorák invited Jones to participate in a program of African-American students of the Conservatory to benefit the *New York Herald’s Free Clothing Fund*. With the famous composer himself conducting, Jones performed Stephens Foster’s “Old Folk’s at Home” in a new arrangement by Dvorák.¹⁷¹ In addition, assisted by the black male choir of St. Phillip’s Church and under the direction of Dvorák’s composition student, Edward B. Kinney, the prima donna sang the soprano solo in the “Inflammatus,” from Rossini’s *Stabat Mater*. In regard to the above performance, a critic of *The Indianapolis Freeman* made the following comparison: “we believe, as Mr. Dvorák of New York, that music is an inherent quality in the Negro; he comes by music as naturally as a duck takes to water.”¹⁷² One must remember that this African-American singer was well-trained and, by this time in her career, world renowned.

¹⁷¹ “Dvorák leads for the Fund,” *New York Herald*, January 24, 1894, 3. See [Figure 3 - 18] for a newspaper advertisement regarding this event.

As Greenfield, Mitchell, and Williams engaged in commercial enterprise, so Jones found herself following suit. Several sources reported that during this time the Metropolitan Opera had refused to employ African-Americans in the late nineteenth-century. In Black Manhattan, James Weldon Johnson stated he believed otherwise. It is possible that Abbey, Schoffel, and Grau discussed and were ready to embark on a marketing ploy for the house when the fire broke out or that Johnson’s report was correct and the sincerity was plausible. Though the truth surrounding the mystery of the opera house will remain unknown, it is apparent that no African-Americans sang from that particular stage until 1955 when contralto Marian Anderson made her heroic debut.

The Metropolitan’s policy, combined with the effervescent racist conditions encountered on the concert stage, forced the frustrated singer to hire approximately forty African-American performers, the Black Patti Troubadours. The company was managed by Rudolph Voelckel and John J. Nolan and opened its first season on July 25, 1896. Operatic touring companies resembling and including the Black Patti Troubadours were historically significant due to their abilities to springboard a number of African-Americans into the music industry. Though minstrels typically presented African-Americans as naive, slaphappy buffoons, the art form gave many blacks one of the few opportunities to use the stage as their form of livelihood. Due to the high recognition of Sissieretta Jones, the Black Patti Troubadours were one of the most critiqued, reviewed, and talked about operatic touring companies in North America. In 1896, the Detroit Free

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173 More information regarding the Black Patti Troubadours can be found in Chapter 6.
Press stated “without exception the Black Patti Troubadours company is the best colored theatrical organization that has visited this city. Every member of it seems to be a star.”

By 1909, the Black Patti Troubadours had appeared in all the newly owned African-American theaters around the country. Theaters such as the Howard Theater in Washington, D.C. and the Colonial and Morton Theaters, both in Athens, Georgia, proudly advertised the Black Patti Troubadours’ concerts. According to the Athens Banner, Jones and Company visited Athens several times between 1909 and 1914.

Several chronicles noted that during the group’s nineteen-year span, the Black Patti Troubadour’s toured mainly in the Western and Southern cities. The northeast which had played such a profound role in the lives of the other singers was now almost obsolete, with the focus placed in other regions of the country. Jones's unique talent combined with her entrepreneurial abilities and leadership, appeared to be exactly what the African-American musical world needed. Like many singers before her, the soprano attempted to integrate and influence a society that was still segregated, at least in the classical music world.

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174 Detroit Free Press, October 11, 1896, 2. The earliest known opera company was the Colored Opera Company founded in 1872 in Washington D.C..

175 The Colonial Theater, now demolished, was the main theater for whites in Athens, Georgia. The Black Patti Troubadours performed at the theater during December 1909 and January 1911. Monroe Bowers “Pink” Morton (1856 - 1919) was born in Athens, Georgia, the son of a slave mother. The Morton Theater, seating capacity 800, was billed as the “colored opera house” in the early 1900s and was located at the “hot corner,” the hub of black businesses in Athens. Various white business owners, such as doctors, dentists, insurance salesmen, barbers, undertakers, pool-hall owners, bankers, and druggists all occupied the three office floors of the Morton building. The euphemism “opera house” was used for any place for staged entertainment. The Morton House, in particular, produced the higher-class concerts and musicals. Josephine Wright, “Black Women in Classical Music Boston During the Nineteenth-Century: Profiles of Leadership,” New Perspectives on Music: Essays in Honor of Eileen Southern (Michigan: Harmonie Park Press, 1992), 327.

176 See [Figure 3 - 19] for a photograph of the Black Patti Troubadours. Athens Banner, December 10, 1909, January 21, 1911, January 25, 1912, April 21, 1918, January 6, 1924, and January 7, 1924.
Although blacks were restricted from white theaters as a rule, exceptions were made if the visiting black attraction was profitable, as in the case of most of the theaters that booked the Black Patti Troubadours. Once black owned theaters began to emerge, artists, such as Sissieretta Jones, were given more of an opportunity. Since many African-Americans were not financially in any state to purchase frivolous items such as concert tickets, the patrons of these various theaters were mostly white. Nevertheless, the handbills for the Morton Theater in Athens, Georgia, often advertised segregated seating, where blacks entered from one side of the building while whites entered from another. Box tickets at the Morton were sold at $1.00 each and only to the white public.

After a sudden illness, which prevented Jones's participation in the 1913 - 14 season the company disbanded after its last show in Church’s Auditorium in Memphis, Tennessee. With the close of the company, the prima donna gave her final performances at the Lafayette Theater in New York City in October 1915 and at the Grand Theater in Chicago, Illinois. Though Jones promised her public she would return, for her remaining eighteen years, the soprano limited her public performances to appearing only in various church functions and for the black soldiers of World War I.

When most classically-trained African-Americans found little work because of racial prejudices, Jones was one of the few who enjoyed celebrity status. She was endowed with a phenomenal range and power, and she brought musicality, artistry, and dramatic flair to the concert stage. If American audiences were not prepared to see an African-American woman on the concert stage, they were even less prepared for the unusual color of her voice which spanned nearly two and a half octaves, from a low C to a high E. Her upper notes were described as clear and bell-like while her lower register
was said to have the depth of a contralto. She often fulfilled the true reputation of the prima donna by holding “a high note for fifteen seconds in an immodest and unmusical display of vocal athletics that delighted her audience.”

Reviews often remarked that Jones was more like Nordica than Patti, thus asking the question: why was Patti’s name used as the comparison for Jones?

In spite of unscrupulous management and a drunk, gambling husband, the singer managed to survive. On the stage she was intelligent, charming, attractive, and professional. Yet, she was not white. As an African-American woman in the nineteenth-century, Jones was subjected to the same attitudes that beleaguered most African-Americans in America during that period. Unlike Mitchell, who did not seem to encounter racial prejudices, even during her two tours of the southern states, Jones frequently spoke of such events. Although Mitchell never spoke of such acts, it is unlikely that she avoided an encounter with racism on her many tours of the states.

Racism encountered by Jones was revealed by the *Detroit Evening News* when the singer stated “it would not be pleasant I fear, Louisville is as far as I go.” Contrasting, several years later, the singer did tour the South, including Newport, Richfield Springs, Saratoga, the Moody Tabernacle in Atlanta, Georgia, and the Masonic Temple Theater in Louisville, Kentucky where she often noted to the press the immense amount of racism she received. Oddly, in spite of Jones's obvious encounters with racism, Jones toured theaters and halls that no one before her had even dreamed of touring.

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178 Although no information was found regarding a Moody Tabernacle in Atlanta, Georgia, evangelist Dwight Moody (1837 - 1899) did hold a large crusade in Atlanta in 1895 which Jones could have performed. It is possible that Jones previously met Moody at the World’s Columbia Exposition in Chicago in 1893, as both attended this fair.
At the Masonic Temple Theater in Louisville, African-Americans were not allowed on the orchestra floor but were permitted to sit in the balcony. The balcony filled up quickly while the orchestra floor was only half filled with whites. Instead of allowing the remaining African-Americans to occupy the ground floor seats, the management turned them away. Furious, Jones noticed the division and told the *Louisville Courier Journal* “it’s so strange, I never saw anything like it before - putting the colored people off in the gallery and leaving all those vacant seats downstairs. I felt very much disappointed. I never before had such an experience, and I could not help feeling it.”\(^{179}\) The fact that the “white” section was only half-full once again raised the question: Were the white patrons growing tired or even bored of what once was a unique experience?

Unfortunately, even the Northern and Mid-western cities were not always pleasant. Audiences were often divided by race in the halls, and hotel accommodations, unless prearranged by her white manger, were difficult to reserve. In Cincinnati, Jones complained about the hotel situation saying they searched for hours before they could find a nice place, often being turned away even though it was obvious that many rooms were available.\(^{180}\)

For the most part, Jones seemed to take her disappointments and difficulties in stride, but not being cast in an opera because of her race was perhaps her biggest disappointment, as she spoke of the situation constantly. Even if an impresario had offered, there was little hope that management would have succeeded in finding white

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producers for the show, especially with whites playing subordinate roles while Jones played the lead.

Like Selika Williams, Jones also went abroad to help secure her reputation as a concert singer. Her comment to a *Detroit Tribune* reporter on February 12, 1893 had a certain poignant, even prophetic overtone: “I would like very much to sing in opera, but they tell me my color is against me.” Yet, at the end of her career, the singer took in two homeless boys who were wards of the State. Poverty eventually forced her to sell most of the property she had accumulated during her concert years - four houses in Providence, some of her jewelry, and most of her medals and crowns from the West Indies. When the funds from the sale of her property ran out, Jones went on state relief. In 1933, she became ill and a charitable friend paid her property taxes and utility bills. No further record of the boys taken into custody by the singer exists. Though the famous soprano died penniless on June 24, 1933, she managed to leave a large amount of jewels, furs, and expensive clothing; a prima donna in the true sense of the word.\textsuperscript{181}

Sadly, the woman who had sung for three United States Presidents, filled nearly every major concert hall in the country, and had been heralded as one of the great singers of her time, was given a grave by friends to escape burial in Providence’s ‘Potter’s Field.’ Though she never reached the heights of Adelina Patti, Jones presented herself as talented, capable, intelligent and dignified, traits which had previously been associated solely with whites. She was noted as the first African-American to sing at Carnegie

Concert Hall and one of the first to appear with many prominent composers and performers. The memoirs of those who worked with this great singer recognized that Jones struggled to establish racial pride and self-esteem in young performers during one of the most depressing and difficult periods of American history.  

At first glance, it would seem that nineteenth-century America had no place for the African-American classical artist. Americans wanted band music and were willing to hear the music of the African-American bandsmen as long as the music was well played. Oddly, the white American public wanted music teachers and in some places, the color of the teacher’s skin was less important than the ability to instruct. Simultaneously, America, for a short time, seemed to be curious about the talented, African-American concert artist that was so recently removed from slavery.

The nineteenth-century was the time of sentimental ballads and salon pieces full of embellishments. Much of the music heard at the recitals from the famous divas, African-American, white American, and European, was frivolous and full of pyrotechnics. But as vaudeville and minstrel shows became the rage in America, there were fewer musical and literary programs. In many cities, African-American audiences were not in a financial position, nor allowed publicly, to attend the concerts and therefore could not sustain and support African-American artists. In spite of the few successes, for the most part white audiences were unprepared to accept African-American singers on the concert stage and soon the fickle public grew tired of hearing these women.

In addition to the women discussed in this chapter, there were many more African-American singers performing in the United States and abroad during the nineteenth-

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century. Although each and every one of these singers was gifted, some well trained and some even fortunate in obtaining respectable management, their careers on the concert stage were relatively short, ranging from three to twelve years. Given that the white divas of the day were performing frequently for twenty to thirty years, one must assume the color of the women’s skin, a trait that originally brought the public to the hall was, by 1890, a trait that kept the public away. By the late nineteenth-century, because of the lack of public interest, the African-American prima donna had almost completely disappeared from the nation’s concert halls. Whether their careers were sustained in the black community or even continued in smaller black venues, after the larger halls began to turn them away, remains unknown. Most of the information collected from the singer’s scrapbooks and personal papers focused mainly on the white venues, leading one to believe that the women believed their performances for the elite white class were more respectable and possibly more memorable.¹⁸³

These singers’ noteworthy talent and poise weakened the argument that the African-American was intellectually unsuited to a stage career or incapable of an entrepreneurial drive and spirit. In 1955, over one hundred years after Greenfield’s first performance on the concert stage, America was finally ready to accept Marian Anderson on the operatic stage. Furthermore, for the African-American woman of the nineteenth-century, the stage was not the appropriate place for a lady. Even the now famous-German composer, Fanny Mendelssohn, composed under her brother’s name for fear the public would not accept her compositions.

The determination of the African-American musicians of the nineteenth-century, both composers and performers, presented to the world great talent, skill, patience, drive, and most of all, courage. The new century of African-American divas promised bolder voices and women less willing to be muted than the proud pioneers of the past. While the major opera companies obstinately continued to deny engagements to African-Americans, the American public eventually responded to the voices of these courageous women.
Figure 3-1. Photograph of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield (ca. 1819 - 1876)
Know all men by these presents, that I
Eliza Taylor of the City of Philadelphia, single
woman, being of sound mind, do make and
consist this to be my last Will and Testament
I desire all my just debts and funeral expenses
to be paid, I desire give and bequeath to my
Sister—Mary Parker. Three Hundred Dollars
2. I give and bequeath to my Nephew James
Buchanan Tyler. Two Hundred Dollars
3. I give and bequeath to my niece Lawrence
Tyler. Two Hundred Dollars. The rest
of my property of every kind and description I
desire to be equally divided be
between my nieces Mary Tyler and Eliza
Edwards
Lastly—There is David E. Farrell of
the City of Philadelphia, as my sole leg
atee to carry out the provisions of this
last Will and Testament
Witness whereof I have
this thirtieth day of March
Eigh teen hundred sixty six
Eliza Taylor

Register of Wills In and For the County of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Figure 3-2. Will and Testament for Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield
Miss E. T. Greenfield respectfully announces that in compliance with the very general request, she will give a vocal entertainment at Townsend Hall, on Wednesday evening, October 22nd, on which occasion she will be assisted by the celebrated pianist, Mr. E. L. Baker.\footnote{Buffalo Daily Express, October 18, 1851. The pianist, Everett L. Baker, was a native of Buffalo who taught music lessons in the city. It is possible that Mr. Baker was Greenfield’s teacher while in the city.}

**PROGRAMME - PART I**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>Composer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Song Salut a la France from the Opera of “La Fille du Regiment”</td>
<td>Donizetti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballad “Make me no gaudy Chaplets” from “Lucretia Borgia”</td>
<td>Donizetti</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballad “On the banks of Guadelquiver” from “Linda de chamounix”</td>
<td>Bellini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballad “Oh Native Scenes”</td>
<td>Bellini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Piece “Sound the Trumpet” arranged by Gardner</td>
<td>Hummel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**PART II**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>Composer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Piano Forte “The Bouquet” arranged &amp; performed by E. L. Baker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cavatina “Like the gloom of Night retiring”</td>
<td>Bishop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ballad “Why do I weep”</td>
<td>Barnett</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song “Dying Warrior” (guitar accompaniment)</td>
<td>Lemon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Song “Natalie, the Maid of the Mill”</td>
<td>Peters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria “Sweetly o’er my sense stealing”</td>
<td>Zengarelli</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

October 22, 1851

Figure 3-3. Program for Townsend Hall, New York
CORINTHIAN HALL

THE BLACK SWAN
From Philadelphia

PROGRAMME:

PART I
Sound the Trumpet, (arranged by Gardner)     - Hiemel
Oh! Native Scenes, (arranged by Carpenter)     - Bellini
The May Dew, (Song)     - Glover
Why do I weep, (Ballad)     - Barnett
Salut a La France, (Opera of La Fille du Regiment) - Donizetti

PART II
Like the Gloom of Night retiring (Song)     - Bishop
Banks of Guadalquiver, (Opera of Linda de Chammouni) - Lavenue
Dying Warrior, (Song)     - Lemon
Do Not Mingle, (Opera of La Sonnambula)     - Bellini
Where are now those hopes, (Norma)     - Bellini
NATIONAL AIR, Piano Forte, by Mr. Hobson

Doors open a 61/2 o’clock. Concert to commence at 8. Tickets $1.185

December 11, 1851

Figure 3-4. Program for Corinthian Hall, Rochester, New York

185 Rochester Daily Advertiser, December 11, 1851.
Figure 3-5. Program for Fireman’s Hall, Detroit, Michigan

Courtesy of the Detroit Public Library, Burton Historical Collection
Figure 3-6. Program for the Queen’s Concert Room, London
Figure 3-7. City Hall Program, Hartford, Connecticut
Figure 3-8. Photograph of Nellie Brown Mitchell
# Program for Charles Street Church

## Part I

1. Selection—"The Artillerists' Oath" ........................................... C. Fadam Walker Quartette  
2. Clarinet Solo—"Behold Smiling in Heaven" ................................. Barber of Seville  
   Mr. John Gorman  
3. Fantasia for Violin, by .................................................. [Charles] de Bériot  
   Carrie Melvin  
4. Cavatina—"Robert, My Beloved" ................. Meyerbeer  
   Mme. Selika  
5. Solo—"Let Me Dream Again" ............................................. Sullivan  
   Frank A. Bland  
6. Solo—"Let Me Love Thee" ................................................... Arditii  
   Mr. S. W. Williams  
7. Solo—"O, Don Fatale" ....................................................... Verdi  
   Mme. Mitchell  
8. Song—"I Fear No Foe" ....................................................... [Ciro] Pinsuti  
   Louis A. Fisher  
9. Solo—"La Farfarelletta" ..................................................... Cirillo  
   Edna E. Brown  
10. Reading ................................................................. Cirillo  
    Louisa J. Peters

## Part II

11. Cornet Solo—"Felicity Polka" ............................................... Hartmann  
    Carrie Melvin  
12. Duet—"From Masnadiere" .................................................. Verdi  
    Mme. Selika and Mr. S. W. Williams  
13. Song—Selected ............................................................... Verdi  
    Louis A. Fisher  
14. Selection—"Brightly the Sunlight" ...................................... [Olivier] Métra  
    "Far Away" (by request) ................................................... Lindsay  
    Mme. Mitchell  
15. "Waltz Song" ............................................................... Frank Howard  
    Mr. J. B. Stanton  
16. Song—"Good-bye" ............................................................ Tosti  
    Mme. Selika  
17. Duet—"Veni al mio sen" ................................................... [Harrison] Millard  
    Mme. Mitchell and Miss Brown  
18. Clarinet Solo—"Ave Maria," from the Union Mass .................. La Hache  
    Mr. John Gorman  
19. Solo—"Good Night, My Own Dearest Child" ......................... [Franz] Abt  
    Frank S. Bland  
20. "Arion Waltz" ............................................................... Vogel  
    Walker Quartette

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James Monroe Trotter, Correspondent

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**Figure 3-9.** Program for Charles Street Church
GRAND * CONCERT!
AT THE
OPERA HOUSE, - DOVER, N. H.,
ON
Thursday * Evening,
SEPT. 9, 1886.

* * * * ARTISTS * * * *

Mrs. Dellie Brown-Mitchell, Soprano.
Miss Annie A. Park, Cornet & Zither.
Miss EDNA E. BROWN, Soprano.
Mr. JOHN THOMAS, Humorist, Vocalist and Reader.
Mrs. LOTTIE P. HAYNES, Pianist and Accompanist.

* * * PROGRAMME * * *

PART FIRST.
1. PIANO SOLO—La Romance—Leybach.
2. HUMOROUS SONG—Arthur and Martha—Lloyd.
3. SOPRANO SOLO—Waltz Song—Pattison.
4. CORNET SOLO—The Favorite—Hartmann.
5. SOPRANO SOLO—Non Fu Sorridi—Verdi.
6. DUETT—Trust Her Not—Balfe.
7. ZITHER SOLO—Souvenir de Môme—Norton.

PART SECOND.
1. HUMOROUS SONG—Facial Family—Thomas.
2. SOPRANO SOLO—Do You Really Think He Did?—Brendelarie.
3. CORNET SOLO—Polka Brillante—Bagley.
4. SOPRANO SOLO—Echo Song—Kochert.
5. DUETT—Holy Mother, guide His Footsteps (by request)—Wallace.
6. SOPRANO SOLO—Good Bye—Tosti.
7. HUMOROUS SONG—She and I—Veale.

ADMISSION 25c.
RESERVED SEATS 55c.
For sale at Vickers' Drug Store.
Doors open at 7 o'clock, to commence at 8.
Libbey & Scales, Book and Job Printers.

Courtesy of the Dover Public Library

Figure 3-10. Program for Dover Opera House
Figure 3-11. Photograph of Selika Williams
Figure 3-12. Music for “Selika - Grand Vocal Waltz of Magic,” Frederick G. Carnes
Figure 3-13. Music for Mulder’s “Staccato Polka”
Figure 3-14. Shamut Church Playbill
Figure 3-15. Photograph of Sissieretta Jones
Bergen Star Concert.

STEINWAY HALL, NEW YORK, April 5, 1888.

FOR THE ODD FELLOWS' BUILDING FUND.

MISS FLORA BATSON, New York.

"Queen of Song."

"Jenny Lind of the Race."

Probably the Greatest Ballad Singer in the World.

She carried the house by storm, and five times was she recalled to the footlights—N. Y. Herald.
A wondrous voice! The greatest ballad singer the race has produced.—N. Y. World.
A concert in herself. It is worth going a thousand miles to hear her.—Philadelphia Tribune.
Her articulation is so perfect that her rendition of each piece seems like a recitation set to music.—Kansas City Dispatch.
The unrivalled favorite of the masses.—N. Y. Age. The race has produced no sweeter voice.—Boston Advocate.
The secret of her matched power of electrifying an audience, lies not solely in her studied art, but in the captivating melody and sweetness and singularly extensive range of her faultless voice, coupled with her simple, unostentatious and childlike naturalness.—Bishop S. T. Jones, D. D., in N. Y. Age.
The magnificent crown with which the citizens of Philadelphia crowned Miss Batson, "Queen of Song," in December last, the solid Gold Diamond Cut Bead Necklace presented to her by Committee at Steinway Hall, New York, January 31, and the superb Diamond Ear Rings presented by the Citizens of Providence, February 22, THE GIFTS OF THREE CITIES, will be worn by the great songstress in the coming concert.

Prof. GUS L. DAVIS, Cincinnati,
AUTHOR, COMPOSER, PIANIST. (First appearance in New York.)
The most popular author and composer the race has produced.
His "Mountain Bella," "Irène Good Night," "Lighthouse by the Sea," "Baby’s Laughing in her Sleep."
"The Hermit" and other pieces have had an immense sale.
The PROFESSOR, MR. W. J. MOON and MR. C. J. JOHNSON will render some of his selections.

MR. WM. I. POWELL, Philadelphia,
CELEBRATED BARITONE, "PRINCE OF HUMORISTS," "KING OF FUN."

MME. M. S. JONES, Providence, R. I.,
NEW ENGLAND'S RISING SOPRANO STAR. (First appearance in New York.)

MR. LEWIS L. BROWN, Philadelphia,
THE POPULAR BUFFO BASSO. (First appearance in New York.)

MISS M. A. CRAWFORD, Philadelphia,
Has recently appeared in Humorous and Dramatic Recitations in nine Concerts with Miss Batson with marked success. (First appearance in New York.)

THE DE WOLF SISTERS, Boston,
IN DUETTS UNEQUALLED. (First appearance in New York.)

MR. B. F. LIGHTFOOT, Providence, R. I.,
NEW ENGLAND'S FAVORITE TRAGEDIAN AND ELOCUTIONIST.

PASTOR PENALVER, MME. ALBERT WILSON, Brooklyn
VIOLIN SOLOIST. ACCOMPANIST.
THE GREAT
Pittsburgh Exposition.

Last Day of Black Patti.

If you have the blues

and his hand will drive them away.

Last day of

BLACK PATTI

THE GREAT
Pittsburgh Exposition.

ALLURINGLY
ATTRACTIONS.

CAMPANINI

The Incomparable Tenor.

BLACK PATTI,

The Colored Song Bird.

Gilmore's

Magnificent Band, every afternoon and evening.

SATURDAY 23

THE PITTSBURG PRESS
THURSDAY, OCTOBER 19, 1893.

TWENTY-SEVEN HOURS

Now Left to Visit the Pittsburgh Exposition.

IN GOUNOD'S MEMORY.

A Selection from Faust Was Played.


This is an exuberant day in every sense of the word. Over every line entering in Pittsburgh crowds arrived this morning, and the railroad clerk in the block within the sublime parts, birth of Pittsburgh iron, spent the busiest morning in his career stamping the excursion tickets. There were families and bondobos, single tickets and double ones, not including passes to the queen's taste as well as that of Manager Johnston. The latter said that the shows would close in an aura of boos or hies, with a good fight for success won against overwhelming odds.

A very touching episode of last evening's performance was the announcement by the leader of Gilmore's band, D. W. Reaves, of the death of Gounod, the famous composer. He then played a selection from Faust, the composer's greatest work, in memory of the departed. Campianini would himself last night and was twice called back to satisfy the appetite for music which has been sharpened for the last six weeks by whetting on such choirs vocal celebrities. In this evening's program will be found a number of Gounod's compositions, particularly as war than led to "A Day in Camp in 1862," which is a graphic description in music of life in the field. The following is the musical menu:

PART I—10 O'CLOCK

Harp—Dr. Bryant (new) 
Soprano—Miss Flora Overton 
Contralto—Miss W. H. Carter 
Tenor—Mr. H. W. May 
Baritone—Mr. A. W. McLean 
Bass—Mr. A. W. McLean

Campanini

MUSIQUE UNION ORCHESTRA

PART II—30 O'CLOCK

War memories, A Day in Camp in 1862.

A graphic portrayal of a day in camp, the music includes popular songs of the time.

BING

Ludwig, Tenor

Herrn

Obermeister, Organ

The fact that only two days remain in which to enjoy the position ought not to be a sufficient incentive to the people, who should make up for lost time.

Courtesy of Howard University, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center

Figure 3-17. Pittsburgh Exposition Advertisement
Figure 3-18. “Old Folks At Home” Advertisement
Figure 3-19. Photograph of the Black Patti Troubadours
CHAPTER 4
FROM THE PULPIT TO THE CONCERT STAGE: THE INFLUENCE OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN CHURCH

The music of nineteenth-century white America seemed to be thriving not only in the concert halls, but also in the churches, as musicians sprang from all classes: professional emigrants from Europe, native professionals, “gentlemen amateurs” and lower-class amateurs. In fact, musician domestics, both indentured servants and slaves, black and white, tried their hand in the arts. America during this period was not noted for its opera singers, regardless of the race, and opera as an art form was not for the masses but instead the child of wealth. Though black singers were deprived of necessary training, cultivation, and management, the establishment of the black church quickly helped to carve out a future for these singers by offering, at times, the pulpit as their only stage.

As young women, Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones were noted as singing in their local church choirs. Their participation in the local black church helped them to develop an appreciation for music in general. Likewise, at some point in each of their careers, these women took on church music positions, were funded by church benefits, and used the pulpit as a stage when the American public grew apathetic toward hearing them in the concert hall. In spite of the successes of these four women, the black classical singer was still relegated to sing spirituals or “coon songs.”¹ Since spirituals were an African-American creation, most of white America envisioned that blacks would

¹ The genre of “Coon Songs” is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6 and the definition can be found in Chapter 2.
sing their own music rather than the high brow European art songs or arias. Because the
music used in many of the black church services was not classically oriented, it is
probable that as with white audiences, had they been admitted, black audiences would
also have preferred to hear a more familiar church sound. Most of the black patrons
would have found the classical arias and art songs unfamiliar. To better understand the
interaction of these women with their local churches, a brief history of the black church
follows and the connection between the black congregation of the local churches and the
classical music heard in the concert halls is discussed.

Since the local black church often held benefits in honor of these singers, there was
no doubt that the community had an active interest in these women; yet, did a significant
percentage of the black community attend church? Of those who did attend, were they
informed from the pulpit of the success of Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones? If
so, were they in a socially progressive area that would allow them to attend the concert
hall to hear these women sing? Was the black congregation encouraged from the pulpit
to support these women financially, educationally, or socially? Had they been allowed to
attend any of these concert hall performances, what would have been the average black
patron’s expectation of the singing style? Lastly, was there a connection between the
success of these women and the racial uplift movement?

For much of the black community, the church preserved many characteristics of
their African ancestor’s music, celebration, and ceremony. Although the preservation of
African religious traditions was difficult and nearly unsuccessful, isolated songs, intricate
rhythms, dance, and beliefs in the curative powers of roots and a world of spirits did
manage to survive well into the nineteenth-century. These African religious traditions were combined in creative ways with the various forms of Christianity.

Once established, the black church functioned as the center of social life for the black community acting as a family, political, social, and entertainment organization. The religious experience for the African-American was rich, full, and poignantly important - mainly due to the fact that the normal avenues of expression were limited or often not allowed. The black church was the center for much of the social and cultural activity of the community as they organized Sabbath Schools for adults, day schools for children, and singing schools for the talented amateur. In essence, the establishment of this highly effective institution helped many to transition from slavery to freedom. Religion to the African-American became a source of consolation that raised his endurance to a new level.²

The racial divide that existed for many years in the church was not so easy to justify. Incongruously, however, what attracted most to Christianity, and other religions such as Islam, was that these religions offered something to everyone.³ The organization served more than the powerful, rich, or those of a certain race or from a certain region, clan or people. The black church was an open forum for all African-Americans to speak and act with freedom. Unlike the many venues that kept the African-American community from seeing and hearing those of their own race, religion was for everyone.

The traditional way of singing hymns in the early church (black and white) was without accompaniment or musical notation. This inevitably led to the development of

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untraditional practices in congregational singing. Instruments were frowned upon in the beginning of the organized church in America and thus were not available to remind the congregation of the correct tune. Those attending the service quickly began to forget the original psalm tunes and began to change the tunes slightly each time they were sung. The music leader or “precentor” often did not provide the correct tune, setting the pitch too high, or embellishing the melody to the point that the singers following along were often confused. This non-traditional way of singing, referred to even today as singing by rote, continues well into the twenty-first century as a method of singing for the black church. Perhaps the lack of musical structure in the black service helped to retard the growth of those members who might enjoy or understand a classical sound. After all, the singing style alone requires an appreciation of the classical sound, especially after one receives training. Though encouraged by seeing one of their own perform, it is likely the average African-American church goer was expecting more of a church sound and performance style; a problem that still exists today.

Nevertheless, throughout the North, regardless of the race, singing schools and societies were organized so that the public could receive instruction in “correct singing.” In fact, were organs were purchased for many churches in hopes to establish an accompaniment for congregational singing, mostly to enforce the correct pitches. The use of the organ continued through the years as the primary instrument for the African-American service. It is not known as to whether the churches attended by these four

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4 Ibid., 29. The term “Psalms Tune” was derived from the fact that the text was taken directly from the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament.” In New York, a Dutch Reformed Church law of 1645 ordered the precentor or voorzanger to “tune the psalm” for the congregational singing. The procedure consisted of the precentor chanting one line at a time, ending on a definite pitch, and the congregation following with the singing of the same line, generally with some elaboration of the tune. This practice called “line out” later became a characteristic feature of hymn singing in black churches and still lingers today.
singers used the organ or even whether they could play the instrument. Greenfield was noted, however, as being self-taught on the piano and it is probable that the others were also self-taught.

The importance of music in the black church played a phenomenal role. Though spirituals were not confined to the slave period or to the religious experience, they laid the foundation for the music used in the black church. The African-American congregation in the mid-nineteenth-century was bound by no musical rules. The jagged harmonies, improvisation, and dissonance of the spirituals was neither trained nor reproduced. In fact, no two church singings ever sounded alike. Just as in the spiritual, in the regular church service pitch was the least important element to this group of singing individuals.

The writings of Phyllis Wheatley indicated that in the North, the educated black often assimilated very successfully into white culture. In response, the Northern black churches replicated white evangelical patterns very closely by implementing classical music as the foundation of their worship services. In the South, on the other hand, where slaves were usually isolated from the white worship and viewed the white church as a contradictory sham, many African practices and beliefs were incorporated successfully into the worship style of the evangelical Southern black church. In addition, since all four singers attended Northern churches, the influences absorbed from their community church were more than likely different from those who attended a Southern church, allowing these singers to more easily crossover to the classical genre.

Typically, in the North, trained singers were organized into church choirs that took over the responsibility of performing difficult religious music, as well as leading the
congregation in its singing. At first glance one might assume that these trained singers were white, however, several sources revealed in various Northern locations that blacks were permitted to receive a similar training. In fact, Mitchell was noted as working as music director and soloist in both a white and black church at various times of her life.  

Though scholars disagree on the time period when black Christians began to organize autonomous congregations under their own leadership, evidence showed that blacks were holding religious meetings away from the supervision of their masters as early as 1690. The first self-governing black congregation was organized in Georgia by George Leile (ca. 1751 - ?), the slave of a Baptist deacon and one of the first black men to receive permission to preach.  

The earliest permanent black congregation in the nation was the First African Baptist Church at Savannah, Georgia, organized in 1788 by Andrew Bryan (1737 - 1812), an ordained minister. On April 12, 1787, the Free African Society, an ethical and beneficial society for all blacks, was formed taking one of the first steps toward an organized social life. The rise of this society was the beginning of the African-American Church in the North. The society was more than a mere club and usually met at private houses or the “Friends’ Negro Schoolhouse.” For about six years the society leaned religiously toward Quakerism but eventually the two leaders of the society, Absalom Jones (1746 - 1818, born a slave in Delaware) and Richard Allen, decided that Methodism was best suited to the needs of their race. In 1784, Jones and Allen became the first black men to receive preaching licenses from the Methodist Church. The

5 Ibid., 32 - 33.

6 Southern and Wright, Images: Iconography of Music in African-American Culture, 1770-1920s, 44.
majority of the society, however, still followed the laws of the Episcopal Church creating a division between the two parties. Jones gave in to the majority and eventually became the first black rector in the Episcopal Church of America. By 1790, Allen and a few followers withdrew from the Free African Society and formed an independent Methodist Church. Soon after, Allen became the founder and first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church of America, entitled Bethel Church. In Boston, near the home of Nellie Brown Mitchell, the black community organized The African Baptist Church in 1805 under the leadership of Thomas Paul (1773 - 1831). The First African Baptist Church (1808) and the First African Presbyterian Church (1807) were established in Philadelphia, and in New York in 1818, the St. Philips Episcopal Church was erected.

For several years Methodism proved to hold a special appeal for the lower-class of both races. Blacks especially found the doctrine and practice of the Methodists well suited to their spiritual needs. In fact, by the mid-nineteenth-century, African-Americans constituted about one-fifth of the total membership of the Methodist church. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the city Greenfield spent the majority of her youth; the African Methodist church movement reached its peak. The three bodies of members inside the Methodist denomination were the African Methodist Episcopal, founded by Allen; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion, which sprung from a secession of blacks from white churches in New York in the eighteenth-century; and the Methodist Episcopal Church, which consisted of black churches belonging to the white Methodist church. By the mid-1800s, religious movements all over the United States began to take off in the

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black communities. These churches began to collect large amounts of offerings, property value, and memberships quickly pushing the significance of this organization to the forefront of the black community religiously, politically, and socially.

The headquarters of the African Methodist Episcopal Church was established in Philadelphia where the organization set up a publishing house of a weekly paper and quarterly review, hymnals, church disciplines, short treatises, and leaflets. The Episcopal churches received more outside help than other denominations and did more mission and rescue work for the community. The average African Episcopal Methodist church held $150,000.00 worth of property, enrolled 900 - 1000 members, and had an annual income of $7,000.00 to $8,000.00. This denomination represented all levels of the African-American community all over the United States. In fact, these numbers give justification as to how the Broomfield Street Methodist Episcopal Church, employed Mitchell.

As the church became an institution which functioned as a family, political and social organization, the newly established independent congregations discovered that their freedom away from the white mother churches had severe limitations. Under the umbrella of the Methodist church, white elders still controlled the activities of the black churches. In fact, in most cases, regardless of the amount of money invested by black members, the white council still owned the building in which the black congregation was holding services. After Allen took a position on the Pennsylvania Supreme Court, however, the road was finally opened for all African-American congregations to be completely autonomous. During the next few decades, as the total membership rose past seven thousand, congregations were established throughout the North, and for a brief period of time, in the South, mainly in Charleston.
During the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, the black church expanded rapidly in the South where new denominations sprang up such as the Colored Primitive Baptist Church, which broke away from its mother church (Primitive Baptist Church) in 1865, and the Christian Methodist Episcopal (formerly Colored Methodist Episcopal Church) which left its mother church, the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1870. Nonetheless, the white Methodist Episcopal Church in the South aggressively recruited ex-slave preachers to bring in converted ex-slaves as early as 1867 and, thereafter, established their own congregations while still working under the jurisdiction of the mother church.

Unlike the Methodists, the Baptist congregations, who controlled their own affairs, joined together to form state and national conventions: the National Baptist Convention in 1880 and the Black National Baptist Convention, Inc. in 1895, an organization which now represents the largest black religious organization in the United States. The most striking religious development of the century, however, was the emergence of the Pentecostal Church in the black community around 1890. Among this group of churches, the Church of God in Christ became the most well known.

The nineteenth-century African-American centered his or her life in the church with various celebrations which included baptisms, weddings, and burials. It was also a center for gossip, courtship, friendship, weekly education, as well as a source of political and social news, and entertainment. DuBois established that the African-American Church was a social institution first and a religious organization secondly, though its religious activity was wide and sincere. Many critics and singers, including Mitchell, Williams, and Jones, spoke of their experiences at the community church. The singers seemed to return to this safe venue when they were either seeking employment or in need
of funding for concert tours, or when the American public grew tired of hearing them in the concert halls.

As in the white churches the cleft between denominations was wide, especially between Methodists and Baptists. In contrast to the white church, however, the black church was the birthplace of schools and all agencies which promoted education for the black community. Beneficial societies were born in large numbers in the church, as well as secret societies, cooperative and building associations. Moreover, from the beginning of its formation the church quickly established a school to educate ex-slaves, set up Infant Schools to care for the children, sponsored benevolent and moral-reform societies, organized literary and debating societies, libraries, recreational programs, and supplied a platform for performers. In addition, the church played the important role of patron by sponsoring singing schools for children, adults, and often showcased the new and upcoming talent within the black community through promotion of concerts, recitals, and benefits. At times this great institution even raised money for necessary musical study, and even opened its doors to allow the black to experiment with composing. Although no specific dollar amount was found for Mitchell, Williams, or Jones, various sources concluded that churches, such as the Shamut Congregational Church that held a benefit for Selika Williams, often organized these events in the singer’s honor.

In so much as the pulpit was used not only as a religious haven, but also as a political forum, various concepts must have been spread including those of Washington’s racial uplift. Other movements, such as the feminist movement, gained momentum through the various programs, associations, and clubs stemming from the church. With

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8 Ibid., 200 - 208. Secret societies included the Black Masons (a sub-group of the Free Masons which held the membership of many famous composers, including Wolfgang Mozart).
the exception of Greenfield whose career mostly pre-dated the Emancipation period, these singers should have received knowledge, instruction, and encouragement regarding these movements, which various characteristics were often exemplified throughout their careers. The search and obtainment of employment, and the establishment, organization, and management of traveling troupes proved that these women believed in the uplift concept.

At the turn of the twentieth-century, black churches of various denominations sprang up, in both rural and urban communities, all over the country. Though nationwide, the doctrines and the names of the individual churches may have differed, several things were guaranteed: the charismatic delivery of the black preacher, the lively and jubilant music celebration, the effective role the church played in the black community, and its ability to support and assist in the flourishing of many African-American’s careers.

In spite of DuBois’s assessments, by the end of the nineteenth-century the black church had significantly furthered the African-American culturally and somehow enabled the race to emerge with great strength and perseverance. Though the 1800s was a time of tremendous strain and transformation within the African-American culture, the church became and remains a primary political, social, and cultural meeting place for the black community. In fact, this great institution helped lay the platform for many talented African-Americans from the Alabama politician to the Philadelphia concert singer.

The swiftness in establishing the institution of the church was not solely the result of the African’s native legalistic and organized culture, but also, in part, was due to the increasing intricacy of his social life in America. The black church offered religious
activity, social authority, and general guiding and coordinating events for the community. The family functions were shown by the fact that the church was a center of social life and intercourse, acted as a community newspaper and intelligence bureau, and was organized, in part, as a political organization. In short, the church was the center of all amusements and social life for the African-American community. One may assume in the touring cities and surrounding areas, the church was advertising the performances of these singers. Many sociologists, including DuBois, established that at least ninety-five percent of the black community attended church, and if the concerts for these singers were advertised, these congregations would have been aware of the successes of these women. In the majority of the cities, however, they would not have been allowed into the concert halls, leaving this community to only hear these women during a church service or church funded benefits. Whether the black audience would have enjoyed the classical genre remains unknown, but based on their choices of worship style, it is unlikely. The black church, in DuBois’s opinion, was far from the ideal association to foster a higher quality of life, but instead was a combination of extravagance and showmanship; qualities certainly not needed for a race to succeed, but helpful in producing a concert singer.\footnote{Ibid., 232 - 234. See also Philip S. Foner, 
CHAPTER 5
MONEY TALKS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS
OF VARIOUS EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN PRIMA DONNA’S TRAINING,
REPERTOIRE, SALARIES, UNITED STATES CITIES TOURED, AND
MANAGEMENT ACQUIRED

The pre-eminence of the European prima donna began long before the nineteenth-century as her popularity extended beyond all classes of society who exhibited a curious interest in her life. In fact, the public and musicians and critics alike, have never ceased to utter joyful lamentations or merciless cries of protest in regard to the prima donna. From the seventeenth-century, the beginning of operatic success, this icon has excited and produced much praise and approbation from the public.

As late as the late nineteenth-century, parents all over Europe were still forbidding their daughters from the unfeminine career of performance. Although at this point in the history of opera, few women were allowed on the stage, most were given menial housework and allowed only limited musical training. Nonetheless, some women chose to walk the road of possible stardom, some succeeded, and many failed. Assuming they were musically gifted, of those who did manage to make it in the world of opera, several succeeded due to the help of their families, but many succeeded because they were European. A brief look into the training, repertoires, salaries, cities toured, and management of some of the most well known European prima donnas of the nineteenth-century proved that once women were allowed on the stage the money, power, and success began to flow. In addition, the comparison revealed there was and remains a discrepancy between the European and African-American classical singer.
To have been a successful prima donna in the nineteenth-century, one must have possessed a variety of gifts and acquirements in addition to a beautiful singing voice. Training was ultimately the key factor in ensuring the prima donna would be *absoluta donna*. If one was lucky enough to study under the various popular European teachers of the day, (i.e. Matildhe Marchesi, Nicola Vaccai, Manuel Garcia, Francesca Lamporti) although not guaranteed, she certainly received a better chance at withstanding a long and prosperous career. Yet, the singer of the nineteenth-century stage was expected to not only have trained with one of the great voice teachers of Europe, but also to have been an adequate, if not excellent, actor. Additionally, to pursue a European career she must have been comfortable with singing in various languages, including Italian, Latin, French, and German.\(^1\)

The European training combined with an exceptional stage talent opened many doors for the European prima donna. These singers were quickly approached by some of the savviest managers of the day, large venues, such as La Scala, begged for their engagements, and ticket prices rose exceedingly high. Thus, the salaries of the European prima donnas, both past and present, have received immense compensation and gifts for their talents. The rewards for a first rate nineteenth-century European prima donna could amount to double that of the best paid Ambassador, approximately £24,000 yearly or $120,000.00\(^2\) in 1800s currency value and she retained the right of receiving presents,

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\(^1\) Though most Europeans of the day were fluent in the Romance languages and it was helpful in conversing quickly and efficiently with the conductor/composer, reading, writing, and conversational knowledge of several different languages was not mandatory for a stage career.

\(^2\) Hugo S. Cunningham, *Gold and Silver Standards Between 1815 and 1914*, 1976, 1999, www.cyberussr.com/hcunn/gold-std, accessed August 2004. Whereas one sterling pound is estimated to actual value of $4.8667, the estimation assumes $5 for convenience of a whole number and is therefore slightly overestimated. Within the text the exchange rate is left in the dollar value of the 1800s. Table 7 - 1 displays a 16 to 1 ratio which is used for all salaries calculated from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century.
whether jewelry, gold, or monetary, which usually doubled the singer’s income.3

Although most singers incurred various expenditures, such as travel, wardrobe, and servants, the fact remained that the European prima donna was well paid.

As opera progressed and concurrently women were permitted on the stage, composers began requesting specific singers. Soon the prima donna became an ornament of society with salaries that exceeded those of her male predecessors and colleagues. Although women performers were not fully accepted, especially by the American public, some did manage to have careers and excelled previous to the 1800s.

As early as 1800, European prima donnas were already demanding exceedingly high rates. One of the great Italian singers of the nineteenth-century was Angelica Catalani (1780 - 1849), whose soprano voice encompassed nearly three octaves. Catalani’s total annual profits averaged about $100,000.00 a season. The singer truly left the most vivid impression upon those who heard her, billing herself as *Prima Cantatrice del Mondo*, or “first singer of the world;” and for the first two decades of the nineteenth-century this was not an extravagant claim. In terms of sheer voice, her power was considered remarkable by those who heard her.

Though her profits ran high, the critics were not always kind, often mentioning her shortcomings as an actress and musician; pre-requisites of eminent prima donnas. Her voice had a respectable range from G below the staff to the B above. When Catalani arrived in London in 1806, Lord Mount-Edgcumbe regarded her fondness of singing variations, usually on a simple air, and sometimes without accompaniment.4

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From the time of Meyerbeer’s arrival in Paris in the 1820s, composers tended to write a decade or so ahead of the singers in their vocal requirements. During the bel canto period, composers wrote with certain singers in mind, tailoring the music to their personal vocal abilities. In some cases, composers waited an entire generation for the ideal singer to materialize. When this person did appear on the operatic circuit, they were usually grabbed immediately by the composers and quickly pushed to stardom.

Though in the early to mid-nineteenth-century Guidetta Pasta (1798 - 1865) was noted as being almost solely responsible for combining the art of singing with that of acting, she was not one of those singers pushed immediately to stardom. Born Jewish-Italian, the records of her early years were somewhat sparse. Beyond the fact that she received her first musical lessons at the Cathedral of Como and her later training at the Milan Conservatory, Pasta spent her early years performing at second-rate Italian theaters in subordinate roles. After leaving the operatic world for several years to study, the diva made a huge comeback into the business around 1820 with an enormous salary of £14,000 or $70,000.00 for her return season at the King’s Theater. After her success as Desdemona in Rossini’s Otello, Amina in Bellini’s La Summanbula, and the title roles in Norma, and Anna Bolena, her salary nearly doubled by the income from miscellaneous gifts, such as jewelry, furs, and gold. The following year Pasta received £1,200 or $60,000.00 for one month’s services. She appeared during that month ten times. In addition to her salary, Pasta performed for a benefit in which she was paid a fee of

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4 Henry Pleasants, The Great Singers: From the Dawn of Opera to our Time (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 113 - 116. The variations to which Lord Mount-Edgcumbe was referring were a set by Pierre Rode (1774 - 1830), the great violinist of the pre-Spohr generation. She also loved to sing variations on Rode’s Air in G major and often reformed Giacomo Gotifredo Ferrari’s (1763 - 1842) variation on Paisiello’s “Nel cor più non sento.” It is possible the variations were sung without accompaniment, as stated by Lord Mount-Edgcumbe, but they have been preserved in sheet music form with piano accompaniment. It has been said that Rode’s variation was given a text by Catalani.
£2,500 or $12,500.00. The following season the Italian diva sang at Milan for a salary of 40,000 francs or $8,000.00 for twenty performances.

Some four years after the appearance of Madame Pasta, Henrietta Sontag (1805 - 1854) emerged as the greatest German singer of the century.⁵ She was admitted to the Prague Conservatory at a very young age where she spent four years studying voice, piano, and harmony. She began singing minor parts at the age of eight and made her debut at fifteen years of age. Her voice was a pure soprano, reaching from A or B to D in alt. Her high notes were always displayed in lavish passages to show off her silver bell-like quality. In 1848, the singer lost everything she had earned due to the economic collapse during the Revolution. After recovering emotionally from her loss, she returned to the stage in London thereafter with the salary of £17,000 or $85,000.00.

During the mid-1880s there was a fertile field in America due to a newly formed affluent middle class who had the time and money for music, accompanied by the attitude that any performer from Europe was superior to any native musician. Knowing this apparent attitude, Madame Sontag made a tour of the large cities of the United States in 1852 where she quickly established herself as a great singer, in spite of the fact that Malibran, the eldest daughter of the great tenor Manuel Garcia, and the Swedish Nightingale Jenny Lind, had proceeded her.⁶ She arrived in New York where she commenced a series of concerts and then continued her tour into Boston, Philadelphia, and the larger cities of the South, such as

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⁵ Pleasants uses the birth date of Sontag as 1806 although other sources use 1805.

⁶ Ibid., 41 - 47.
New Orleans. Typically, for most European prima donnas, the touring cities, in addition to those mentioned above, were Chicago, St. Louis, Cincinnati, Baltimore, and Washington.\(^7\)

Several chroniclers recorded that by the 1850s Sontag was receiving a salary of £2,000 or $10,000.00 yearly. If the sources were correct in reporting yearly rather than monthly, the amount was substantially less than the salary of the great castrata Farinelli received almost two hundred years prior. Additionally, this amount was remarkably less than the typical annual salary European prima donna of the 1800s who was receiving a salary of £20,000 or $120,000.00 annually. One must assume if the figures were correct, that gender, not lack of talent, was the reason for the considerable lower fee than Farinelli received. Although Castrati were considered more “exotic” than the prima donna, Pasta also made a substantially large salary; therefore, gender may not have been the only issue. If the fee quoted in the chronicles was meant to be monthly, this would have been a competitive rate for the mid-nineteenth-century.\(^8\)

After establishing herself in the role of Norma, Maria Garcia (1808 - 1836), known to most of the period as Madame Malibran, quickly took on the sobriquet as “La Regina del Canto” (the Queen of Song). Gioacchino Rossini once said that “Many singers of my time were great artists...but there were only three true geniuses: Lablache, Rubini, and that child so spoiled by nature, Maria Felicita Malibran.”\(^9\) As the daughter of a premier


\(^8\) H. Sutherland Edwards, *The Prima Donna: Her History and Surroundings from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth-Century*, 212 - 242. By 1854, the death of Sontag, it was well established that a concert singer could make the most money in America.

Malibran’s vocal training came mostly from her father who, much in the tradition of the Neapolitan School, allowed the student to only sing vocalises. The exercises were used to extend the singer’s range, to work through the passaggio, and to increase the flexibility and agility of the voice.

Early on the singer went to America with her father who had conceived a project for establishing opera in the United States. His company consisted of his son and daughter and the threesome managed to tour all of the large cities in both America and Europe. During her two years in New York, Maria’s voice developed remarkably ranging in three octaves from low D to high D. The quality was much of a contralto with a soprano register added; a practice that many of the African-American singers imitated. She, like Pasta before her, had learned to change the timbre of the voice throughout the registers in hopes to add to the character. For example, her lower register was usually sung in the rich power of chest tones, which she used frequently and with more force than any singer before her.  

Malibran’s salary continued to increase, in part due to the press spreading the news of a Paris engagement. Rossini had insisted upon engaging Malibran as prima donna of his new French opera. To dissuade him, the young singer demanded 30,000 francs per year and a three month vacation. No more was heard for several days until a new contract was presented for a four year contract at 25,000 francs per year. But Malibran

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10 Ibid., 1 - 44.
was not interested in singing French opera and once again refused him. The management increased its offer to 35,000 francs per year and a three month vacation. As the news spread publicly, the singer continued to refuse the offer while simultaneously performing benefits for the huge fee of 300 francs a night. Eventually the offer of 800 francs per performance and a four month vacation was accepted.\(^\text{11}\)

At the news of Malibran’s arrival in Italy, impresarios rushed to engage the young singer. Each theater was willing to offer her enormous fees, sums greater than any artist had ever received at the equivalence of 4,000 francs per performance. At La Scala, where Malibran received $95,000 for eighty-five performances, the management of the Teator Comunale reported that ticket sales for her performances were the highest ever recorded in the archives of the theater. It was also reported that boxes at La Scala sold for as much as 1,000 francs (approximately $200.00 per ticket). In Milan, the soprano accepted two engagements at the Carnivals of 1835 and 1836 at a total fee of $84,000.00.

Simultaneously appearing on the opera circuit with Malibran and Grisi was the “Swedish Nightingale”\(^\text{12}\) Jenny Lind (1820 - 1887). Besides being one of the greatest singers of the century, her deep religious principles and innumerable charity works were a huge and enticing part of her career. Her musical credentials were superb as she had the admiration of several of Europe’s greatest musicians, including the Schumanns, and Felix Mendelssohn.

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\(^\text{12}\) It was not unusual to apply names of birds to singers in the nineteenth-century. John Sullivan Dwight of *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, in April 10 issue of 1852, no. 1, attacked the notion that Lind was a “nightingale,” i.e., possessed of a voice, but no mind.
During her tour to the United States, the “Swedish Nightingale” worked the majority of her career under the management of the already famous Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810 – 1891), a savvy American showman and sniggler.\(^{13}\)

While under Barnum’s management in the States, the “Swedish Nightingale” made somewhere between $150,000.00 and $300,000.00 combined income and gifts,\(^{14}\) of which she used to fund scholarships and other charities in her native land, Sweden. The singer’s arrival to the States began with a serenade by 130 bandsmen preceded by 700 New York firemen and was viewed by a crowd of 30,000 people. Her tour cities included Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, Charleston, and Havana. The tour was a limited one compared with those made by Adelina Patti.

Lind’s personal reputation was impeccable as Americans saw her as the “natural Puritan.” Indeed, some Americans even associated her concerts with attending a church service. Yet, despite her colossal acceptance, the singer was aware of society’s attitude toward women on the stage and believed it particularly unfortunate, since opera was the most remunerative occupation for women with musical talent. Though much of the

\(^{13}\) P. T. Barnum, born in Connecticut was a store keeper and in 1829 began a weekly newspaper, The Herald of Freedom. After several libel suits and a prosecution which resulted in imprisonment, he moved to New York and began his career as a showman with the purchase and exploitation of Joyce Heth, an African he advertised as over 160 years old and the nurse of George Washington. His tours became very successful until Joyce Heth died in 1836 and her age was proven to not be more than seventy. Barnum’s claim to fame came when he contracted Jenny Lind in 1850 to sing in America at $1,000.00 per night for 150 nights, all expenses paid by the entrepreneur. Barnum retired from the show business in 1855, settled with his creditors in 1857 and began his old career again as showman and museum proprietor. In Brooklyn, 1871 he established the “Greatest Show on Earth: and merged with James Bailey to create the Barnum and Bailey Circus, Joel Benton, “Phineas Taylor Barnum,” Project Gutenberg, 2003, www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phineas_Taylor_Barnum, accessed August 2002.

\(^{14}\) Estimates of Lind and Barnum’s earnings vary widely. For example, a clipping from Westminster Day found in “Jenny Lind: A Collection of Magazine Articles,” nos. 3-6, Boston Public Library, estimated Lind’s net earnings at $208,675.00, and Barnum’s as over $500,000.00. In “What Jenny Lind Did for America” by Fannie Morris Smith, the profits received by Lind were estimated at $302,000.00, about equal to that of her manager. According to Adrienne Fried Block in “Two Virtuoso Performers in Boston: Jenny Lind and Camilla Urso,” Ware and Lockard, who checked the figures in Barnum’s own accounting, gave Lind’s net earnings (exclusive of what she gave to charity) as $176,675.09. Barnum’s gross amount listed, after payment to the singer, was $535,486. These figures covered only the concerts under Barnum’s management.
public believed that people who made their living from the stage were mere vagrants, almost single-handedly Lind convinced the American public that a woman could be on the stage and simultaneously retain her virtue.

The Lind fever was by far greater than anything America had incurred and was displayed in the following advertisement found in the *Detroit Free Press*, reprinted in *Holden’s Magazine*:

> Come and hear her! Sell your old clothes, dispose of your antiquated boats, distribute your hats, hypothecate your jewelry, come on the canal, work your passage, walk, take up a collection to pay expenses, raise money on a mortgage, sell “Tom” into perpetual slavery, dispose of ‘Bose’ to the highest bidder, stop smoking for a year and then come and hear Jenny Lind.¹⁵

Lind’s contract with Barnum stated she was to give 100 to 150 concerts during her American tour, which ended in May 1852. After 95 concerts, Lind bought out of her contract and managed herself until the end of her tour. Yet, it was at the hands of Barnum’s savvy promotional tactics that the singer was dubbed the “musical saint.” Simultaneously, Barnum reinforced publicly that American born singers were second-best; an idea the American public needed no help in generating. Lind’s great American tour only fueled the country’s belief that European singers were far above others, and the huge amount of money she made in the States inspired hordes of other European singers to come to the new country; thus, a difficult stage for the American prima donna was created. Though Lind was very religious as she never traveled or performed on the Sabbath, and never set out to destroy the careers of American singers, her success, combined with Barnum’s underhanded tactics, played a role in the very difficult task of

American born singers in acquiring instructors, management, and an open-minded audience.

Clearly, Lind had a unique vocal ability as her repertoire always included endless renditions of Eckert’s “Echo Song,” “I know that my Redeemer liveth,” “The Herdsman’s Song,” and other Victorian favorites. The singer’s specialties were “Casta Diva” from Bellini’s *Norma*, and vocal arrangements of popular instrumental pieces. The sopranos programs often ended with popular favorites, such as “Comin thro’ the Rye,” Swedish folk songs, or “Home Sweet Home.”

In the States, these European favorites created high price ticket sales at $3.00 per ticket. The tickets for her New York debut were sold by auction, and the highest price paid was $225.00. The premium went up in each city so that by the time the singer had reached Boston the ticket price had raised to $625.00 each. During her stay in America, Lind was always followed by huge crowds eager to see her and even more eager to pay to hear her. In Castle Garden in 1850, Lind received profits of $10,000 from the $26,000 taken in for a single concert, all of which she donated to a New York charity. That same year Lind fired Barnum for a forfeit payment of $30,000.00. Of Lind’s ninety-five concerts under Barnum’s management, the singer received a total of £142,432 or $712,160.00, a fortune in the nineteenth-century. Lind retired from the stage as the highest paid singer of the nineteenth-century until the reign of Adelina Patti.¹⁶

Adelina Patti (1843 - 1919), the singer whose sobriquet was given to Sissieretta Jones, began her career in America first appearing in 1859 under Maurice Strakosch, director of the Italian Opera at New York. As a child, she had received vocal instruction

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¹⁶ Ibid., 81 - 87.
from an Italian opera singer named Paravelli, who visited the Patti house regularly. Under the supervision of Signora Paravelli, Adelina made rapid progress. When asked whether she went through a regular course of technical training, the diva answered “No!” It seemed as though nature had taught her nearly everything that the average student had strived to obtain. Signora Paravelli and Ettore Barili, also a local teacher, had merely filled in the gaps by teaching her how to breathe and execute scales and runs with agility. Her voice had a considerable range from a low A below middle C to a C sharp or D above the staff. She also possessed the rare ability of singing in a contralto voice as easily as she sang soprano; once again, a popular performance practice of the day.

Patti was sixteen years old when contracted at a monthly salary of 2,000 francs (or $400.00 in 1800s US currency value) for the first year, and 1,000 francs thereafter. As her fame soon spread over Europe, the young artist was receiving the minimum payment of 1,000 francs ($200.00) nightly, though not the massive salary seen, certainly a substantial fee for a young singer. Patti’s tour cities in America included all the Northeastern and Western cities such as Boston, Philadelphia, New York, plus Chicago, San Francisco, Salt Lake City, Havana, and New Orleans where she was attacked, robbed, and beaten.

For Patti, American ticket prices ranged from $10.00 to $100.00 (for a private box) per ticket with usually 2,000 to 4,000 in attendance. Estimated in today’s figures these ticket prices would range from $160.00 to $1,600.00. In comparison, Jenny Lind received as much as $625.00 per ticket during her American tour. By the completion of her American tour, Patti received a salary of $6,000.00 per night and in Europe £400

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($2,000) monthly. Once her career was established, the diva was always associated with high prices, and not without cause. In her later years she was noted as receiving £500 - £600 ($2,500.00 - $3,000.00) per performance in Europe, and over £1,000 ($5,000.00) per night in the States. In fact, Mapleson recorded in his memoirs that Madame Patti had requested no less than $50,000.00 for each engagement, and in many cases, received the large sum. Though other singers received larger sums for isolated engagements, no one of the period succeeded in maintaining such a consistently high rate per performance.\textsuperscript{18}

In regard to Patti’s repertoire, Mapleson noted that in the early years the diva often ended with “Coming through the Rye,” “The Last Rose of Summer,” Eckert’s “Echo Song,” and “Home Sweet Home.” Since Sissieretta Jones's programs mimicked Patti’s programs almost entirely, the sobriquet “Black Patti” was applied.

When Patti came to Boston in 1882 owing to the competition of Henry Abbey, the American impresario, Mapleson, raised Patti’s salary from $1,000.00 per night to $4,000.00 per night and later to $5,000.00 per night, a sum previously unheard of in the annals of opera performances. In one week Patti sang three performances totaling a salary of $20,895.00. The attendance at the Saturday matinee was 9,142 people and her share of the receipts for that performance alone was $8,395.00.

On the second night of the Boston three-day performance, Patti was billed to sing in Verdi’s \textit{La Traviata}. Though Patti’s fee was $5,000.00 the expenses were so high that only $4,000.00 could be scraped together. At two o’clock in the afternoon of the scheduled performance Patti’s agent, Signor Franchi, called the theater only to be informed that the fee was $1,000.00 short. Madame Patti agreed to take the $4,000 and

\textsuperscript{18} Mapleson, \textit{The Mapleson Memoirs}, 101 - 103.
dress for the part with the exception of her shoes. She would arrive at the theater at the regular time and when the remaining fee was raised she would put on her shoes and be ready to go on stage. The events happened as Patti had promised. She arrived at the theater costumed as Violetta, minus her shoes. Franchi called the box-office, but only $800.00 more had been raised. Patti put one shoe on and said when the remaining $200.00 was paid she would wear the other shoe. The box office raised the $200.00 and Patti appeared on stage radiant as ever with both shoes on. Truly, a forth telling example of the reputation that was so quickly associated with the prima donna.

Under the management of Colonel Mapleson, Patti traveled in the most luxurious of style. She had a special car, which was said to have cost $65,000.00, and a whole crew of servants. Tickets to the opera were $10.00 each and there were consistently at least 3,000 people in attendance. Patti left Boston and toured other northeastern cities and then immediately left for Europe. While in St. Petersburg, Patti was paid 100,000 rubles ($8,224.00) for one performance and presented with a diamond necklace. Compared to the $300.00 per performance received by her colleague Sissieretta Jones, this was truly a phenomenal amount. Patti’s wealth was not confined to her real estate in Wales where she lived lavishly, but also included a rare collection of jewels, which many believed to be the largest collection owned by any of the modern actresses and opera singers. Additionally, the singer often insisted on expensive wardrobe, such as the gown she worn in the third act of La Traviata, which was covered with precious stones with a value of $500,000.19

19 Ibid., 136 - 141.
A great prima donna, according to H. Sutherland Edwards, was not only an exceptional singer, actor, and musician, but also a cosmopolitan familiar with the artistic, literary, and fashionable society of every capital of Europe. In addition, she was on speaking, as well as singing terms, with all the principal Courts. Though the African-American female singer attempted such a career, she continually found herself in a catch-twenty-two situation. Because she was denied European training, she in turn did not acquire the skill, virtuoso repertoire, or the savvy management available to her white colleague. Without the skill or virtuosity, tickets were not sold at high prices and therefore the salaries never soared as they did with the European divas. It is assumed by most that a disparity of salaries between the European prima donna and her African-American counterpart existed; however, the magnitude of the disparity was not as easily recognizable to most of the average public today.

The careers of these five European prima donnas caused an influx of European singers in the nineteenth-century and greatly heightened the country’s appreciation for classically trained operatic voices. Yet, the average American of the mid-1800s could not make heads or tails of this European based art form. With the dramatic and almost ridiculous situations of the plots, not to mention the lack of understanding of the foreign languages, opera was simply too far removed from America’s understanding. Unfortunately, this attitude was instilled at the birth of opera in the United States and continued to exist for over 200 years. Many could have possibly appreciated the beautiful singing, orchestration, and splendid scenery, but the marriage between the text and the music that gave opera its dramatic character, escaped most American audiences. In spite of the lack of public understanding, due to the “Lindomania” which had swept
the country and inspired many generations of young women to study voice and to perform on the stage, there were a few American prima donnas who achieved international fame amongst the Europeans: Julia Wheatley (c. 1820 - ?), Adelaide Phillips (1838 - 1880), and Clara Louise Kellogg (1842 - 1916). Nonetheless, the import of opera into the States was not fully absorbed into the country’s cultural fabric until the twentieth-century.

Although many of the operas contained popular airs of Rossini, Donizetti, Bellini, and Verdi, all of which caused a huge following among the elite, most of the American public was unprepared to deal adequately with opera. The popular arias written by these Italian composers were often recast as ballads and sung in English in the States; a practice which continued well into the late 1900s. It took great strides for serious opera to flourish in the new country and even then a serious American repertory did not develop until the twentieth-century. Unfortunately without a true American sound, the native singers never achieved the same status in the history of opera as their European counterparts. Opera in America in the 1800s was nothing more than a re-creative European art form.

Due to the lack of native repertoire, it became the American singer’s task to transform the great operas of Europe’s musical past into an integral part of the musical culture of their own country. In the twentieth-century, singers such as Beverly Sills, Maria Callas, Emma Eames, Marilyn Horne, and many others, succeeded spectacularly, often becoming more popular than the European prima donna. But in the nineteenth-century, American singers were struggling to not only receive European training, but to
overcome the reputation that American singers were inferior to the great European singers.

The nation’s earliest singers could hardly have predicted the development displayed by these twentieth-century divas. Encouraged by the Lind phenomenon, an increasing number of American singers made the dangerous commitment to pursue singing as a profession. Many parents supported and approved the decision of their children either because they were overly ambitious or overly naive. Additionally, most found the trip to Europe for training a necessary and expensive task. For nearly a century, the trend for most American singers was to receive the finest instruction, test their talents in smaller opera companies, gain experience, establish themselves, and hopefully become stars. Some singers disappeared without a trace, some found success, and many never came home. But usually those who succeeded overseas managed to have careers both at home and abroad.

In addition to familiarizing themselves with a multiplicity of foreign musical styles and languages, if the singer decided to stay at home and not receive European training then the most difficult hurdle was to find adequate vocal instruction in the States. The instability of early American musical institutions at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, combined with the widely perceived idea that the stage was no place for a lady, added to the long list of characteristics that deeply hindered the progress of American female singers.

Opera was for the cultured and musically elite and at this point in American music, the general public continued to prefer catchy tunes sung in English. Hence, was the reason why so many singers, black or white, chose to end their programs with songs such
as “Coming through the Rye,” “The Last Rose of Summer,” or “Home Sweet Home.” As the nineteenth-century progressed, the public began to marvel at the European prima donna and were quick to pay out large fees for tickets in order to hear virtuosity. In turn, this same elite public, who at one time could not understand or even appreciate European music, became more prejudiced against their own countrymen, considering the American singer as second-best.

Many of America’s first professional singers were born in Europe, spent their childhood there and even received their early musical education in Europe. If the singer was born in the States, she was typically born in the northeast area. This, of course, was not surprising since the roots of European culture were first firmly planted in the Boston-New York-Philadelphia area. Finding adequate training in the States was very difficult for most young singers and for those who chose not to attempt the demanding travel abroad, managed to study at respectable institutions or with already established, usually European, voice instructors.

A lack of technical, musical, emotional, and/or artistic abilities, combined with the beginning birth pains of opera in the new country, caused several American singers to fall short of European standards for lengthy operatic careers. Though surrounded by music from birth, Eliza Biscaccianti (1824 - 1894) had an even less productive career than the previously mentioned singers. Oddly, though Biscaccianti studied in Italy with two of the era’s most outstanding pedagogues, Nicola Vaccai and Francesco Lamperti, and according to some accounts was coached by Giudetta Pasta, her lack of true natural talent was obvious. She made her debut in May 1847 at Milan’s Teatro Carcano as Elvira in Verdi’s Ernani and a few months later made her New York debut at the Astor Place
Opera House as Amina in Bellini’s La Sonnambula. Many enthusiastic hometown supporters traveled from Boston to see the singer in New York to view what was at that time an anomaly: an American prima donna. Of course, by 1849 Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield was performing in Boston as well. Thus, if Biscaccianti was an anomaly just two years prior, one can only imagine the curiosity toward Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield. The singer’s reception and reviews were mixed and her reputation as well as her talent, or lack thereof, remained at the center of controversy for the remainder of her career.

By mid-century, American music critics had taken on an aggressive and brutal tone and sometimes even crossed the line to personal prejudices as exemplified in the following excerpt from the Morning Courier & New York Enquirer:

What was the surprise of such an audience, so disposed, when, after a weary first act-- the curtain fell upon a failure so utter, so crushing, that the prospective second act seemed as self-sacrifice both to the artist and audience. . . .Biscaccianti’s voice is a soprano, or rather, was, for it is utterly ruined and has at present no particular character.\(^20\)

The article continued to complain of “attenuated pianissimos and bodiless fortes, out of tune singing, and bad acting” while concluding that the whole “sorry situation” simply reflected how far America must travel before reaching the musical maturity of Europe. Both the critics and public agreed that to cultivate and advance the arts in America, the country should raise the artistic bar not lower it.\(^21\)

In spite of the press’ criticisms, Biscaccianti traveled to San Francisco and was the first opera singer of any renown to perform on the West Coast. It should be noted that


even P. T. Barnum did not venture into that area of the country when Jenny Lind visited America in 1851. Yet, unlike many of her African-American counterparts and in spite of the critic’s cries for in-tune singing, Biscaccianti was in such high demand that her agent usually relocated her to larger theaters where her repertoire often consisted of the favorites of the day: Verdi, Bellini, Rossini, and Adam, as well as the popular ballads “Oh Cast That Shadow from Thy Brow” and “I Am Queen of a Fairy Band.”

At times the critic’s reviews were surprisingly favorable, in spite of the well-known fact that the voice was seriously flawed. For example, a Boston critic wrote in February 5, 1859 in *Dwight’s Journal of Music* the following:

> We all knew before that she was one of the most highly cultivated sopranos of the day…while it [her voice] has naturally lost some of its power, she makes up for it by the sweetness, purity, and refinement of its quality.  

Most of America responded positively to the singer, mainly to the novelty of hearing a classically trained singer, whether black or white, especially one so young. After touring the West Coast, Biscaccianti began her extended world tour, which included South America, Italy, France, and Russia. The tour eventually ended with serious vocal problems and shrunk the young singer’s career to church work and appearances with a minstrel show.

There were several American singers active in Europe during the mid 1800s, of which the most significant was Adelaide Phillips (1838 - 1880). Phillips was the first among American singer to have a fully rounded career both as a professional opera singer and as a concert singer. Although not born in America, Phillip’s parents immigrated to Boston when she was seven years old and the young singer grew up on the stage

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appearing at the Tremont Street Theater at the age of eight. As she matured vocally, the instruction was put into the hands of a local voice instructor, one Émilie Arnoult, who decided that Phillips was a contralto. At age eighteen Phillips sang for Jenny Lind while she was in Boston and received not only positive encouragement, but also a check for $1,000.00 and a recommendation letter to study with Manuel García II, at that time the most celebrated voice teacher in Europe. From 1851 to 1853, Phillips studied with García and made her debut on November 5, 1853 at the Teatro Grande in Brescia, as the warrior Arsace in Rossini’s *Semiraminde*. Unfortunately, the contralto’s sporadic engagements produced insufficient fees to support her and her family in Europe. Even though her American debut was not as enthusiastically received as Biscaccianti’s ten years earlier, critics commented on Phillips’s unusually effective stage presence and fine artistry. Her touring cities included the East and West coasts, Havana, and large European cities, such as Paris. Together with her younger sister, Mathilde, the singers formed the Adelaide Phillips Opera Company, but the venture quickly collapsed after one year due to financial difficulties. From 1879, the contralto was mainly associated with the Boston Ideal Opera Company until illness forced her to retire.

By the 1800s, American singers were beginning to establish a real presence on the international scene. Many still struggled, however, with similar problems of their earlier colleagues: finding proper vocal instruction, comprehending the idiomatic performance styles of many foreign cultures, and above all the difficult task of obtaining acceptance at home and abroad. There were many more American prima donnas than those mentioned here: Emma Abbott (supposedly the wealthiest opera singer in America), Emma Thursby (1845 - 1931), the teacher of Geraldine Farrar, Clara Louise Kellogg ((1842 - 1916), the
first New York Marguerite in *Faust*, and Minnie Hauk (1851 - 1929), the first American Juliette, Carmen, and Manon. Of the dozens who drifted in and out of the operatic American scene, only a handful left a serious impact on the art. The American musical community worked diligently to produce singers who could compete with European singers and appease the European critics, but no one really succeeded until the twentieth-century. In fact, by the time Minnie Hauk (the next singer to achieve any real fame) was at the peak of her career, it was estimated that more than two hundred Americans were studying voice in Europe, not in the States.

The January 10, 1874 issue of *Dwight’s Journal of Music* proudly announced several American-born young singers who were active in Milan, totaling more than a dozen names in all. The fact that none of the hopefuls listed in the article ever amounted to much is hardly surprising as the road to international success for the singer, especially for a woman, was at times disappointing and frustrating.

Surprisingly, Dwight’s list only included one male, David Bispham (1857 - 1921), the first American-born male to achieve world renown. Previous to this article, America had only produced a small number of professional tenors, baritones, or basses, of which none achieved the same fame as their women counterparts. One can only assume from this article that since the trend for the nineteenth-century was that a lady was meant to be a homemaker and wife, not a concert singer that a similar concept existed for the male not having a concert career. Perhaps the idea of a man studying to become an opera singer was even more ludicrous to the average American. After all, singing for a living would have struck many as unmanly and pointless, considering the innumerable opportunities for making a well-established living in business, if one was white.
Bispham was born in Philadelphia and made his debut in London in 1891. Later in his career, the baritone became well known as the Wagnerian baritone of the New York City Metropolitan Opera and one of the highest paid male soloists of the day. In the preface to his memoir, *A Quaker Singer’s Recollections*, Bispham touched on the division between gender and the changing times in which he lived, stating that most considered singing not manly.\(^{23}\)

Bispham officially began his career in London when he was thirty-three years old; an age when most of the European sopranos and mezzos of his generation had not only been singing professionally for fifteen years, but in many cases were on the vocal decline. Bispham’s delay in beginning a music career was attributed to the difficulty in finding vocal instruction combined with the uncertainty of a man having a music career. Additionally, Bispham came from a strict Quaker upbringing which, of course, frowned upon music-making of any kind.\(^{24}\)

In spite of his conservative background, the baritone performed all over the United States, England, and Australia to white audiences. The response to Bispham’s performances from the African-American public is not known. One must assume, however, that since Bispham was a white male singing classical music, the novelty, support, and interest would have been minimal from the black community.\(^{25}\)


\(^{24}\) Ibid., 103 - 109.

\(^{25}\) To date, research did not reveal that Bispham performed elsewhere in Europe. Bispham is noted, however, as recording under a contract with Gramophone and Typewriter Company.
The exact salary of the American singers is scant and inconsistent due mainly to their inability to achieve a similar fame compared to their European colleagues. Indeed, a few white American divas did have their day on the stage. For the African-American singer, however, this fame, not to mention the few luxuries allotted to the white American singer, was not an option. The continuous struggle throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries of black Americans entailed overcoming poverty, prejudice, poor education, and social rejection. For the African-American singer, the lack of finding respectable vocal training was added to the long list.
Table 7-1. Comparison of Salaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGERS NAME</th>
<th>TOURING YEARS</th>
<th>VOICE TEACHER</th>
<th>ANNUAL SALARY (UNLESS INDICATED)</th>
<th>EXCHANGE RATE FOR 1900S</th>
<th>COUNTRY/STATES TOURED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malibran</td>
<td>1830 - 50s</td>
<td>father – trained tenor</td>
<td>$11,200.00 per performance</td>
<td>$18,000.00 per performance</td>
<td>Extensive US + Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sontag</td>
<td>1850 - 60s</td>
<td>theater child, no formal training</td>
<td>$100,000.00</td>
<td>$1,600,000.00</td>
<td>NE America + Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasta</td>
<td>1850 - 60s</td>
<td>Cathedral of Como, Milan Conservatory</td>
<td>$140,000.00</td>
<td>$1,120,000.00</td>
<td>Extensive US + Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lind</td>
<td>1850 - 70s</td>
<td>Several including Milan Conservatory</td>
<td>$712,160.00</td>
<td>$11,394,560.00</td>
<td>America - South limited + Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patti</td>
<td>1860 - 80s</td>
<td>privately with Paravelli</td>
<td>$6,000.00 per performance</td>
<td>$96,000.00</td>
<td>Extensive America + Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greenfield</td>
<td>mid-1840s - 1865</td>
<td>largely self-taught, Miss Price - Philadelphia, Buffalo - teacher unknown</td>
<td>$50.00 - $75.00 per performance</td>
<td>$300.00 - $460.00 per performance</td>
<td>NE America + IL, DC, MD, OH, MI, WI, Canada, London</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell</td>
<td>1870-80s</td>
<td>Franklin Academy - NH, New England Conservatory</td>
<td>$23.00 - $100.00</td>
<td>$138.00 - $600.00</td>
<td>MA, NH, NY, DC, IL, PA, OH, TN, LA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams</td>
<td>1870 - 1880</td>
<td>Signor Bianchi - CA, Antonio Farini - IL, Edna Hall – MA</td>
<td>$7,000.00</td>
<td>$42,000.00</td>
<td>MA, DC, MD, IL, PA, NY, KY, Germany, London, Russia, Denmark, West Indies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jones</td>
<td>1880 - 1915</td>
<td>Ada Baroness Lacome - Providence Louise Capianni - Boston Conservatory, Mdme Scongia – London</td>
<td>Various reports: $150.00 weekly - $2,000.00 weekly + jewels, gold, furs</td>
<td>$930.00 - $12,000.00</td>
<td>NY, RI, KY, TN, GA, PA, IL, OH, DC + Toronto, S. America, Jamaica, Haiti, Barbados*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 6
CROW, COON, AND OPERA?
THE BUILDING AND STAGING OF BLACK OPERA COMPANIES
OF THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY

Following the rage of African-American concert singers, America produced a new and popular form of theatrical performance, blackface minstrelsy. This new entertainment essentially consisted of exploitation by white performers. These white men found wearing blackfaces and singing and dancing as the pictorial slave was humorous and lucrative. Likewise, the black minstrel show originated on the slave plantations of the South and according to numerous observations every plantation had its talented band of black musicians that could crack jokes about the slave’s life, and sing and dance to the accompaniment of the banjo and the bones. When the owner wished to entertain his guests, he simply called on his troupe of black minstrels.

For some period of time these slave bands traveled around a circuit as semi-professionals; however, the limitations of slavery set definite boundaries to the travel and eventually ceased, especially in the South. Eventually blacks found themselves participating in Blackface Minstrelsy, which quickly became a way of life and a lucrative business for many African-Americans. After America’s curiosity of African-American concert singer disappeared, the four singers mentioned in this work turned to traveling turned to traveling shows in order to continue their stage careers.¹

In the early nineteenth-century, the minstrel shows took on an even less sensitive attitude than previous years. The typical show usually presented the black man more as a comic figure to be ridiculed rather than as the tragic or pitiful character he began as at the birth of blackface minstrelsy. This new ridiculing position was evident in popular minstrel songs such as *The Negro and the Buckra Man* (1816) and *The Guinea Boy* (1816), and in the play *Obi; or Three-Fingered Jack* (1812). Those who helped to develop the new, cruel face of Blackface Minstrelsy included entertainers George Nichols and George Washington Dixon. Although cruel and ridiculing, many black musicians performed these types of songs in order to stay employed.²

The history of blackface acts began in Louisville, Kentucky in 1829 when Thomas Darmouth Rice, the “Father of Stage Minstrelsy,” created his act from watching a black stable hand named Crow. Rice observed that Crow sang a funny, catchy song, moved with a curious shuffle, and at times added a little jump in the air as he worked. Rice found Crow’s character very comedic and believed the rest of America would as well. According to minstrel historian T. Allston Brown, the song belonged to the folk tradition of Kentucky slaves. The white performer blackened his face with burnt cork to visually appear as Crow and sang the popular “Ethiopian songs” of the day in the style he had observed. Likewise, Rice included in his performance a slew of condescending jokes based on the slave’s life. This act was such a success that blackface minstrelsy was

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² The federal census of 1849 counted 1,490 black actors and showmen who worked solely in the minstrel entertainment. According to David Carlyou in *Dan Rice: The Most Famous Man You’ve Never Heard Of*, (New York: Public Affairs, 2001) between 1750 and 1843, over 5,000 theater and circus productions included blackface acts. Since in many states, African-Americans were forbidden to perform on stage with whites, most of the blackface acts were performed solely by white entertainers, though a few companies did secretly include African-Americans among the cast by disguising their true color. Regardless of race, all minstrels were required to blacken their face with the use of greasepaint. Blacks, in particular, used white greasepaint to highlight their lips to enhance the comedic look. It was not until after the Civil War that theater owners and managers began to bill the shows as “Authentic Negroes.”
introduced at the Bowery Theater in New York, November 12, 1832 and became what was to be the entertainment vogue of two generations of the American stage. This was one of America’s earliest contributions to the world of music.  

Typical of the minstrel song, the published version had many verses and there were many versions of the song in print. As time passed, minstrels typically improvised the verses more and more to create continued interest. Despite the ever-changing of lyrics, the verses contained one common element and that was to disparage the black man and his life style. Two basic types of slave impersonations emerged soon after T. D. Rice first appeared on the stage, and both characterizations became popular among the white patrons: Jim Crow, a caricature of the plantation slave with his ragged clothes and thick dialect, and Zip Coon, the city slave dressed in the latest fashions.

The troupe became the first to offer a full evening of blackface variety entertainment and therefore most scholars marked the January performance as the beginning of minstrelsy on the American musical stage. Over the next few years, the Virginia Minstrels introduced several hits into their repertoire, including “Polly Wolly Doodle” and “Blue Tail Fly.” Following suit, all-white companies were soon touring the States with similar programs. By 1856, New York City had ten full, all-black, resident companies, and twice that many less than a decade later.

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4 “Jim Crow Laws” which began in the 1880s and legalized segregation between blacks and whites derived its title from the popular character in minstrel songs. The movement to end Jim Crow began almost as soon as the Civil War was over, though arguably before that in the urban North. The system became entrenched after Reconstruction and was sanctioned in law by *Plessy vs. Ferguson* in 1896. The march of Washington by over 200,000 Americans in 1963 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 was the culmination of that struggle.
For the next four decades, Ethiopian minstrel shows were performed for the whites and by the whites and quickly rose as the most popular form of theater in the United States. To most of Europe, this unique and popular form of entertainment was America’s first contribution to the long established world of music. To obtain new material for the lyrics, most minstrels visited plantations and then tried to recreate the scenes on the stage as humorously as possible. The visitors listened carefully to the “Ethiopian Songs” whether they were work songs, spirituals, or folk songs, memorized the melodies and used them as the basis for the minstrel songs which added much improvisation.

In its complete form, the minstrel show consisted of three parts: songs and jokes, olio or a variety of specialty acts, and ensemble numbers. Typically, the performance concluded with a “walk around finale,” an act in which a few of the performers sang and danced on the front of the stage while the rest of the company stayed in the background. In the nineteenth-century, the subject matter of the minstrelsy received a great deal of attention from white audiences both abroad and at home. Unlike the operatic European plots, the slave’s life and music was very familiar to the American audiences. An essay published in 1845 by author J. Kinnard in Knickerbocker Magazine contained the following excerpt on the relationship between minstrel lyrics and the slave songs.

Let one of them [Negro], in the swamps of Carolina, compose a new song, and it no sooner reaches the ear of a white amateur, than it is written down, amended, printed, and then put upon a course of rapid dissemination. Meanwhile, the poor author digs away with his hoe, utterly ignorant of his greatness.5

When African-Americans began to appear on the minstrel stage, they brought to the theater a more genuine humor of the caricatures and expertness on those instruments

accessible to the slave and usually made by him, including the banjo, fiddle, and drums. The typical minstrel of the nineteenth-century was no lyrical troubadour, but instead an improvising clown. Music was simply the bottom of this clown’s bag of tricks. The minstrel’s main show consisted of capers, antics, and very eccentric dancing, all of which were reproductions of the white man’s view of the slave partaking in worship services or celebrations. One may think it ludicrous to ask a newly freed slave to make light of a horrible and torturous time, but the artist’s need to be on the stage was obviously far greater than his or her remembrance of the slave years. Just as Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones had proven, accommodating white audiences was a given if the artist wanted to make a living at his or her art.

Characteristics of the minstrel show, whether black or white, consisted largely of “Ethiopian Songs” or “Negro Songs,” as they were often referred to in the nineteenth-century. These songs had been in circulation since the mid-eighteenth-century in England, where they were performed on the concert stage and published in various song collections. In the United States, contemporaneous sources reported the singing of Ethiopian songs as early as 1769 when Lewis Hallam sang “Dear Heart! What a Terrible Life I Am Led” in his role as Mungo in Bickerstaffe’s comic opera, *The Padlock*, at the John Street Theater in New York. The earliest reference to a “Negro dance” appeared in a New York newspaper, the *New York Journal*, in regard to a performance by a Mr. Tea in a stage entertainment on April 14, 1767.  

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6 This account taken from Southern’s *The Music of Black Americans*, corrects errors previously published in several sources regarding the first performances of so-called Negro songs in the United States and is based on S. Foster Damon, “The Negro in Early American Songsters,” *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 28:1934, 133 - 41.
Minstrel shows found an immediate popular and profitable response from the white audiences. Rice was not only the box-office success of his day, but spread the vogue abroad. The first group to be credited with a full-length minstrel show was the Virginia Minstrels, a quartet of white minstrels which included William “Billy” M. Whitlock, Daniel “Dan” Emmett, Frank Bower, and Dick Pelham. Later known as Dan Emmett’s Virginia Minstrel’s, their blackface revue premiered in January 1843 at the Chatham Theater in New York, following in February at the Bowery Amphitheater in February, and later at the Park Theater. All three theaters were owned and managed by whites. In March of that same year, the quartet performed in Boston where they gave the first full-length Ethiopian Concert. Thereafter, the group established a renowned career in both the States and abroad.8

Over the years, minstrel songs, originally inspired by slave songs, were altered and adapted many times as they passed from white minstrels to black minstrels and back again. Regardless of the race, all hoped to adapt to fit the ever-changing musical taste of the white or black American, whichever happened to be the audience. For all practical purposes, the slaves sang the minstrel songs the same way they sang the genuine slave songs; with a deep and touching pathos. This was a very different overall tone than had been heard from their white counterparts. In the Continental Monthly of 1863, G. Spaulding observed that there was a definite and obvious difference between the two

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7 Dan Emmett was the composer of “Dixie,” a song sung by the black slave long before it was sung by the Confederates. The first official title of this song was “Dixie-Land: Ethiopian Walk Round.”

kinds of songs “a tinge of sadness pervades all their [blacks] melodies, which bear little resemblance to the popular Ethiopian melodies of the day as twilight to noonday.”

From 1875 - 1895, a period of artistic decline swept the nation as minstrel music declined in quality with its cheapening caricature content. The caricature spread from the black plantation slave to the Irish and Jewish American in quick succession in the next few years and unfortunately hindered, not helped, the stereotypes of the black race. Once again the correlation between the most ridiculed and hated of America’s society became evident. The stereotype of a shiftless, irresponsible, thieving, happy-go-lucky people, worsened. Many of the leading entertainers spent the remaining years of the nineteenth-century imitating the black man’s lifestyle, whether happy or sad, and these deeply rooted stereotypes continued into the twentieth-century on the vaudeville and musical stage.

Entertainment around the country, was divided among the classes of American society: opera was chiefly for the upper and upper middle classes, minstrel shows for the middle class, and variety shows usually performed in concert saloons were aimed toward men of the working class and the lower class. Vaudeville was developed by the direct interest of entrepreneurs seeking higher profits by attracting a wider audience.

The black traits of mood and sentiment, portrayed earlier in the century by composers, such as Stephen Foster, soon disappeared and were replaced by a period that was ridiculous. On the stage, the period immediately following the golden age of minstrelsy (1850 - 1875) consisted mostly of copper and brass instruments and quickly became connected to the circus - mainly gaudy and cheap. Elements directly related to

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the minstrel show fused with the circus tradition and soon the entire show was nothing more than a freakishly exaggerated form of entertainment that included falsetto singing, fat men impersonating large, black women cooks, and ridiculous horseplay. It was not long before the serious European music, which included the insertion of barber-shop quartets, a serious and refined contrast to the circus-like events, was drowned out by the boorish laughter. Even serious singing by trained vocalists took on a trite form and singers were making any song part of the Ethiopian genre simply by adding a plantation dialect.

A considerable amount of time passed before a creative, true American fire was rekindled on the American stage and among American composers. In fact, for a period of time, musical talent was overridden by the vast number of European musicians who stood firm in control of music composition in America. These musicians from abroad filled all the important positions from theaters to churches and were the majority of those who gave concerts, and established and directed the musical institutions. Additionally, to continue to keep up with America’s changing taste, native-born white musicians who achieved recognition in the previous century for composing psalms and hymns, in the nineteenth-century, added popular music to their lists.

Though the practice of blackface minstrelsy in the early years reinforced unfortunate stereotypes of black men and women which persisted well into the twentieth-century on the vaudeville stage, in musical comedy, the movie screen, radio, and even television, in an odd sort of way blackface minstrelsy was viewed as a tribute to the African-American’s music and dance. This tribute was seen by many in the leading figures of America’s entertainment who spent a large portion of their careers imitating
the slave’s style.\textsuperscript{11} At first, minstrel shows were the only professional stage outlet for the talented African-American performer and remained an all-male profession until 1890, when *The Creole Show* attempted to reshape minstrelsy’s all-male tradition by offering a female interlocutor as well as other women in an all-black cast.

For the first time, black women were elegantly costumed and attractively presented by the theatrical stage. The attempt to flee the minstrel stereotypes was seen vividly in the acts of The Hyers Sisters Combination, variously known as the Hyers Sisters' Concert Company, the Hyers Sisters' Negro Operatic and Dramatic Company, Hyers Sisters Comic Opera Company, the Hyers Colored Comedy Company, and the Hyers Colored Troubadours, was the sister team of soprano Anna Madah (1857 - 194?) and contralto Emma Louise Hyers (1859 - 189?) of San Francisco who flourished on the stage from 1871 to 1893.\textsuperscript{12} The sisters began their career under the management of their father, Sam Hyers, and made their professional debut at the Metropolitan Theater in Sacramento, California on April 22, 1867 for an audience of white patrons.

With their father acting as manager, the Hyers Sisters embarked on a tour of the Northeastern States stopping first in Salt Lake City, Utah on August 12, 1871. Their repertoire during this period consisted mostly of arias from Donizetti’s *Linda di Chamounix*. By the time the duo had reached Chicago, reviews were praising them as musical prodigies. The tour took them through Cleveland where they added the tenor Wallace King (ca.1840 - 1903) and baritone John Luca (ca. 1820s - 1910) and eventually landed the ensemble in Boston at Patrick Gilmore’s organized event of 1872, the World


\textsuperscript{12} [See Figure 9 - 1] for a photograph of the Hyers Sisters.
Peace Jubilee. Various critics noted the Hyers Group as the first successful black concert company. In 1876, the quartet was joined by Sam Lucas (1840 - 1916), a pianist, comedian, and singer, and previously of Callender’s Georgia Minstrels. By 1875, the group was referred to as the Hyers Sister Combination and was the star attraction at the Sunday Sacred Concerts at the Boston Theater.¹³

That same year the Hyers Sisters, being the first to produce musical comedies, began their production of *Out of Bondage*. Now called The Hyers Sisters Concert Company, still under the management of their father, they changed the troupe’s format to a musical-comedy company after the huge success of their 1876 premier. In August 1875 a white organization, the prestigious Redpath Lyceum Bureau of Boston, took over the management of the Hyers Sister Troupe, the only black group on its roster. Indeed, the Hyers Sisters were the first African-American company under professional white management anywhere at that time. By the time Redpath had met the sisters, their reputation under the management of their father had exceeded any other traveling group. From 1871 to 1876, the Hyers Sisters traveled all over the Northeast, Mid-West, and Western states presenting programs that typically consisted of operatic arias and ballads.¹⁴

To advertise the Hyers Sisters Company in *Out of Bondage*, Redpath published special circulars headlining columns with such phrases as “The Centennial Sensation,” “The Great Moral Music Drama,” and “Best Colored Artists in the World.” ¹⁵ Originally

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¹⁵ See [Figure 9 - 2] for an example of the Redpath Lyceum.
the play was entitled “Out of the Wilderness,” and was advertised in the *Clipper*, a New York area paper, as a clever production that would no doubt prove successful.16

Redpath made it a point to note that the Company was not to be misconstrued with a regular minstrel show. Instead, he pushed the high-class dramatic appeal to the most cultivated portion of the community. It was important to management, as well as the entire cast, that the kind of stage activity envisioned for the troupe should differ entirely from the typical minstrel show, where the white audience typically accepted blacks only in stereotypical roles, particularly that of the Blackface Minstrelsy. Fortunately, the marketing attempt was supported by the white press, in particular the *Clipper*, which gave scholarly and critical reviews.

From the origin of *Out of Bondage*, Joseph Bradford (1843 - 1886) identified the play, which he conceived in its entirety as an operetta, solely with the Hyers Sisters Combination.17 The quartet premiered Bradford’s new operetta on March 20, 1876, at Lynn, Massachusetts. For almost fifteen years following, the Hyers Sisters Comic Opera Company (now called) toured the nation with a rigorous schedule of one-, two-, and three-night performances, staging the ballad opera, *Out of Bondage*, numerous times in small villages, towns, and large cities. At times the group even appeared on the grand stages of the country’s greatest opera houses. At the premiere of the show, and for a few

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16  *Clipper*, February 12, 1876, 122. Along with the *Folio*, the *Clipper* was one of the important theatrical journals for white artists in New York between 1875 and 96.

17  Bradford was born on a plantation near Nashville, Tennessee, into a slaveholding family. Later released from slavery, Bradford joined the Navy and served in the Civil War. After leaving the military, he began a career on the stage, first in Baltimore, then later touring with stock companies out of Philadelphia and Boston. By 1871, he was recognized as a poet and playwright, specializing in light dramas and comedies, and as a journalist who regularly contributed a column to the *Boston Courier*. In addition to *Out of Bondage*, Bradford wrote *The Cherubs, One of the Finest*, and *Our Bachelors*.
months following, the opera was performed with other musical plays, such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, or with a musical concert.\(^{18}\)

The plot of the operetta was often broken into three parts by the press, as seen in the *Clipper*, referring to the three acts as Slavery, Freedom, and Up North. The first act represented the slave at his plantation; the second act focused on the slave’s admission to freedom by joining the Union army; and the third act showed the old folks coming North and meeting the young military man, who by this time had attained affluence.\(^{19}\)

The music from *Out of Bondage* provided an excellent outlet for displaying the singer/actor’s magnificent voice and the talents of master comedian Sam Lucas, as well as making a distinction between the “Minstrel Songs” of yesteryears. Bradford did, however, make it a point to include musical innuendoes of minstrelsy with terms such as “jig time” (one of the earliest antecedent’s of ragtime) to describe the very lively piano music. Many critics viewed these innuendoes as almost taking a bow to minstrelsy stereotypes. Included in the lists of songs were renditions of spirituals - “Nobody Knows what trouble I’ve seen,” “One more ribber to cross,” minstrels’ songs - “Carve dat possum,” “Chin cum a rink um da,” ballads - “One night as the moon was beamin’,” and the slave’s banjo music. Yet, ironically, “Parisian Waltzes” and “Incidental music,” both genres familiar to the elite, were added by Bradford to encourage the distinction. Once again, Stephen Foster’s, “My Old Kentucky Home,” made its way into the repertoire.

\(^{18}\) The first white show to employ blacks was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin Company*, based on the popular book by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Hugely successful at both home and abroad, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* generally had several companies touring simultaneously with white actors in blackface until 1876, when an enterprising director and producer conceived the idea of using blacks to play black roles. Slavin’s Original Georgia Jubilee Singers was one of the first all-black groups to perform in the play and set the precedent for all others to follow.

\(^{19}\) *Clipper*, July 1876, 351, 3.
With his choice of vocabulary, dialect, and even figures of speech, Bradford embraced openly the slave’s language, making the characters believable and likeable. The overall tone of the script was humorous allowing the actor to provoke humor. Yet, Bradford made no subtle statements concerning his personal opinion about the kind of relationships that existed and should have existed between blacks and whites, particularly after emancipation. His views were most evident in Act III, when the characters revealed their awareness of the heavy responsibilities they encountered as first-class citizens in an integrated society.

There were many revivals of the popular operetta, but as in most African based music, the work remained a continuously evolving piece. A reconstruction of the work took place in 1879 which promised new music and beautiful costumes, and the drama picked up the sub-title *Slavery and Freedom*. Inevitably, over the years, the group attracted new white management, such as Colonel J. H. Rice, Mt. T. Skiff, and L. K. Donovin (or Donovan), all who wanted to get their hands on the profits. In addition the managers often brought aboard new African-American talent, in particular those who were already established, such as Billy Kersands and Fred Lyons. When the Hyers Sisters were not able to pay for management, their father resumed the responsibility.

By 1871, the typical repertory of the group, in addition to *Out of Bondage*, included *Urlina, or the African Princess, The Blackville Twins, Colored Aristocracy*, and a *Plum Pudding*. At times reviews reported having a “good house,” but as the turn of the century approached, houses reported ticket sells as only fair or worse. On May 26, 1888, the

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20 The *Colored Aristocracy* was written by new playwright Pauline Hopkins (1859 - 1930), an African-American woman from Boston, and often called “Boston’s favorite Colored Soprano.” The Hyers Sisters performed her play during the 1880s. Hopkins later wrote *The Underground Railroad*, a work which draws upon the same repertory as *Out of Bondage*. 
Clipper reported that at Cincinnati’s Grand Opera House business was not large enough to pay the gas bill. Soon after, handbills advertising the troupe’s activities began to appear less often, until they eventually ceased entirely.

On April 15, 1893, the Indianapolis Freeman announced the Hyers Sisters retirement from the theatrical stage. Their shows were played not only in opera houses, but also in churches, small music halls, and even prisons. Though Redpath targeted the upper class, while trying to make a distinction from minstrelsy, the lower and middle class turned out in droves to see the troupe. In their heyday, the Hyers Sisters were truly an American institution.  

All of the Hyers’ productions had racial themes, which generally began with slavery scenes and traced the character’s adventures from bondage to freedom. The performers implemented authentic plantation songs, ballads, operatic numbers, and genuine folk dances, and still managed to attract audiences of all color and class. The press frequently noted the Hyers troupe as one of the best opera bouffe troupes in America. Whether the sobriquet was correct, the group stood alone for over a decade for being the only troupe to perform an all-black repertory. Until the 1890s, the Hyers Sisters Concert Company offered the only avenue to a stage career for those black musicians who wanted to bypass the minstrel circuit. Over the years the leading

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21 Eileen Southern, African-American Theater: Out of Bondage and Peculiar Sam; or, The Underground Railroad, vol. 9, (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994), p. vii - xxxii. In collaboration with Eileen Southern, general editor Deane L. Root of University of Pittsburgh put together this insightful series of anthologies that helped to fill the void in the area of musical theater by discussing the major genres and styles of the century. Thus, the majority of the information concerning the Hyers Sister’s Out of Bondage, was derived from this material.
performers of the troupe included entertainers Sam Lucas, Wallace King, Billy Kersands, and John and Alexander Luca, among many others.  

After the Hyers began to perform separately, Emma Hyers starred in a production of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1894 while Anna performed with John Ishman’s minstrel group, Octoroons in New York. By 1895, accounts found Anna performing in Louisville, Kentucky and in 1898 in Connecticut with John Isham’s Tenderloin Coon Company. The sisters joined once again under the title Hyers Sisters Colored Specialty Company in Wisconsin, Illinois, with concerts following in Philadelphia between 1896 and 97. After Emma’s death, Anna toured Canada for one year performing operatic selections and immediately followed with a two year tour of Australia, New Zealand, and Hawaii with Curtis’s All-Star Afro-American Minstrels and Hogan’s Minstrels. Anna ended her career with John H. Isham’s Oriental America Company, retiring in 1902. Although the Hyers Sisters did not tour together internationally, for a ten to fifteen year span, these women appeared in musical plays that profoundly and straightforwardly dealt with the black slavery experience in America.

In the nineteenth-century, most African-American women singers who sought stage experience and wanted to be guaranteed employment, were forced to form their own opera companies. These companies did not remain financially successful as they were often under funded and had difficulty in obtaining adequate performance venues. The

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first of these organized companies was the Colored Opera Company established in 1873 and composed solely of black amateur entertainers. In reviewing a performance of the Colored Opera Company, a Philadelphia newspaper stated “the opera, *The Doctor of Alcantara*, has frequently been given previously by various English companies; we venture to say, never so perfectly in its ensemble as by this company.”

According to the tone of the review, the American audience was highly interested in patronizing such an event.

In the genre of opera, Theodore Drury (1860s - 1940s), one of several black students who studied at the National Conservatory of Music in New York during the 1890s, along with Harry Thacker Burleigh, Desseria Plato, and others, first attracted the attention of the media as a concert baritone on Grand Star Concerts and as one of the few successful newly formed companies. In 1889, he formed the Drury Colored Opera Company which began presenting operatic scenes to the public but, like most, and in comparison to the European touring companies, this group was short-lived. This company was primarily a touring company in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Providence. By 1900, however, Drury had reorganized his forces and produced one grand opera each year for nine years at the Lexington Opera House and other various halls in New York.

As owner and manager, Drury quickly learned if he needed to sell more tickets he must employ a white orchestra and occasionally white soloists. In the interest of being funded by an elite white group, white company members were necessary. Fortunately,

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the chorus and most of the leading roles were sung by African-American singers. In addition to himself, his regular soloists included Desseria Plato, Estelle Pickney Clough, and George Ruffin. The repertoire of the company between 1900 - 1908 consisted of both French and Italian operas including Bizet’s *Carmen*, Antonia Carlos Gomez’s *Il guarany*, Gounod’s *Faust*, Leoncavallo’s *I pagliacci*, Mascagni’s *Cavalleria rusticana*, and Verdi’s *Aïda*.

Drury continued to produce operas and oratorios throughout his career. After returning to the States in 1918, he began touring as a concert singer, and then returned to Boston, where he opened a music studio. In his last years, he moved to Philadelphia, established a studio, and was noted as late as May 1938 as having performed in the Drury Opera Company production of *Carmen.*

In the early twentieth-century, black theaters were purchased and established all over the country. Each served as a secular temple for black communities. By the end of the nineteenth-century the public was going to the black theater to hear a variety of music from musical comedies, vaudeville acts, touring concert companies, choral organizations, orchestral groups, vocal and instrumental recitalists, and dramatic troupes. In 1905, Chicago’s Pekin Theater, established by Robert Motts (d. 1911), was the first black-owned theater in the nation. The theater pioneered in presenting African-American entertainers, actors, playwrights, and composers before the public. Pekin’s first production was *The Man from Bam*, written and directed by Joe Jordan with Flournoy Mill and Aubrey Lyles as the play’s leading men.

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26 Ibid., 294.
Before the demise of the Pekin Theater, other theaters were established by black communities, such as New York’s Lincoln and Lafayette Theaters, Philadelphia’s New Standard and Dunbar Theaters, (both owned by John T. Gibson), and in St. Louis, the Booker T. Washington Theater, owned by Charles Turpin of ragtime fame. In the nation’s capital, the Howard Theater, where Sissieretta Jones and the Black Patti Troubadours appeared in 1909, was established along with the Morton Theater in Athens, Georgia. These owned and operated black theaters became invaluable institutions for the African-American performer in the early 1900s.27

After the huge minstrelsy craze, white managers Sam T. Jack and John Isham were the first to produce shows in these major black theaters using an all-black cast. Jack’s Creole Burlesque Company began their tour in New England and then opened in New York in 1890. This group was considered a variety show not a minstrel show, and included both men and women in the performing cast. Among those performing included, Tom and Hattie McIntosh, Irving Jones, Charles S. Johnson, and the DeWolfe Sisters (Eva and Sadie) who performed widely from 1870 - 84 and joined Jack’s Creole Show in 1900. Jack enhanced his musicians with a sure fire crowd pleaser - a chorus line of “pretty girls.” The show enjoyed huge success on tour, especially in New York.

By following the model established by the Creole Show, Isham produced shows with his Octoroon Company in early 1895. In 1896, Voelckel and Nolan, managers for Sissieretta Jones, introduced the Black Patti Troubadours 28 to the public with Jones starring as the superstar. This troupe toured from 1896 - 1915 and made a profound mark

27 Ibid., 296 - 302.

28 See [Figure 9 - 3] for a sample handbill for the Black Patti Troubadours.
upon the theatrical stage. The program for the Troubadours consisted of principal singers
performing opera scenes in the show’s finale, with the concert artists singing arias and
the addition of choruses and ensemble numbers. A typical show of the Black Patti’s
Troubadours was divided into three parts, in the tradition of a minstrel show.

Part I was a comedy skit entitled “At Jolly Coon-ey Island,” written by Bob Cole
and included comedy, songs, and dances, performed by artists such as Tom McIntosh,
Stella Wiley, Bob Cole, Billy Johnson and other established entertainers. Cole eventually
found it impossible to work with the company’s white managers and soon established his
own all-black production company.

In 1898, Cole and Johnson composed and produced New York’s first full length
musical comedy written, directed, and performed exclusively by African-Americans, A
Trip to Coontown. Aside from the unfortunate title which spoofed A Trip to Chinatown,
this musical relied almost solely on minstrel stereotypes to tell the story of a con artist,
Jimmy Flimflammer, and his unsuccessful attempts to steal an old man’s pension.
Variety acts were thrown in at various stages to keep the show lively. The musical,
which toured for several years, was immediately tagged as a landmark musical in the
history of black theater due mainly to the new minstrel format, which was conceived,
written, produced, and performed by African-Americans. Cole went on to compose
several more black musicals with lyricist J. R. Johnson. After Cole left the Troubadours,
in 1809, John Larkins wrote and appeared in the new musical A Royal Coon, presented as
part of the Black Patti Troubadours show.

Part II of the Black Patti’s Troubadour program was entitled “Vaudeville Olio,”
and was a section of specialty acts performed by the actors and singers. Part III was the
“Operatic Kaleidoscope” and was considered the show’s big finale. At this point, Sissieretta Jones made her entrance and sang arias from several of the following operas: Carmen, Faust, Il trovatore, Daughter of the Regiment, La bohème, Rigoletto, Lucia da Lammermoor, and others.

Jones was supported by a quartet of soloists and a chorus numbering about thirty members. The full company comprised fifty members including the orchestra. After nineteen years of the touring circuit, the company disbanded and performed its last show in Church’s Auditorium in Memphis, Tennessee. With the close of the company Jones gave her last solo performance at the Lafayette Theater in New York City on October 1915. By the time of her retirement, Madame Jones and her traveling group had reached a new level of popularity among the music world and the public. In fact, the group was so popular that the cover of “Ma Gal’s de Town Talk,” by Kentucky-born African-American composer Ernest Hogan (1860 - 1909), included a photograph of an African-American minstrel performer, a charming drawing of an African-American woman (which Hogan proposed as Sissieretta Jones), and a reference to the Black Patti Troubadours.

The same year he produced the Black Patti Troubadours, Isham organized a second company, Oriental America. Both shows employed the most talented black singers, actors, musicians, and writers of the day. In 1897, Isham’s introduced his third group, Octoroon, No. 2. These groups often used finales entitled “Thirty Minutes Around the Opera” and “Forty Minutes of Grand and Comic Opera” to attract the white public, along with famous names such as Belle Davis, Mamie Flowers, Desseria Plato, Fred Piper, Theodore Pankey, Sam Lucas, and Madah Hyers of the famous Hyers Sisters. The box
office sales skyrocketed for these groups and America proved it was finally ready to hear
the resounding voices of African-Americans, not necessarily in the concert hall, but on
the musical stage.

The long list of black women who made outstanding contributions to the American
theater is extraordinary and impressive. Although Selika Williams was mainly a soloist,
at the end of her career one of the last accounts found her and her husband in Germany
producing and directing a black opera troupe of about fifty people. Disappointingly,
detailed facts concerning this company have not surfaced.

Moreover, though the exact year is unknown, LaBrew noted that sometime in the
1860s Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield also tried her hand in the entrepreneur realm and
formed and directed productions for an all-black opera company, entitled Philadelphia
Opera Troupe or Black Swan Opera Troupe (both names have appeared in sources). This
group performed in the Washington D.C. area around 1862 and in Philadelphia until
1866. Like many other black touring troupes, Greenfield’s group disbanded after a short
time due to a lack of funds.

Similarly, Nellie Brown Mitchell formed her opera company in the 1880s entitled
the Nellie Brown Mitchell Concert Company, after first touring with James Bergen’s Star
Concerts (one of the leading promoters of black artists) between 1882 and 1885. Like
other African-American companies, the Nellie Brown Mitchell Concert Company
eventually disbanded.

In addition to, and stemming directly from the ever popular minstrel shows, black
opera troupes were built upon the foundation of the musical stage. Unfortunately, as a
whole, there were too few of these black men and women who presented limited numbers
of performances, lacked permanent houses to perform in, and were constantly in need of funds. Much like the African-American concert singer, they too soon disappeared. Thus, the question remains: had the novelty of ex-slaves singing classical music worn off and now the American public wanted to hear African-Americans sing African-American music, as in *Out of Bondage*? Or, perhaps the American public never really grasped the language, plot, and advanced musical elements of European opera, though they certainly pretended to do so when the genre was in vogue.

The business of opera was not and is not an easy task. Even today many opera companies, regardless of race, fold due to lack of funding and participation from the American public. At the turn of the century even white-managed opera companies who employed black casts changed owners, management, and performers frequently in order to keep America’s attention. This was not true, however, of the white-owned European companies, such as the Philips or Garcia troupes. Sadly, well into the twenty-first century, the Barnum and Bailey Circus saw more patrons than the traveling opera companies.

In *Music in America*, Frédéric Louis Ritter wittily summed up the vicissitudes as he saw them in the 1880s:

> At the beginning of a season great blowing of trumpets by the manager and his interested friends. . . . the manager is on the road to make a fortune in a short time; the unexpected whim of some jealous singer; the orchestra and chorus strike for higher wages; the public, for one cause or another, becomes indifferent and stays away from the opera-house; the press becomes restless, and challenges the manager to reform. . . . the principal singers leave in disgust for Europe, and the chorus and orchestra hold a mass-meeting in some “saloon” in order to devise means for getting their pay, and swear never to be entrapped again by those unscrupulous managers.

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More than twenty-five thousand people performed on the nineteenth-century musical stage over its fifty-plus years, and many Americans went to the theater to see these minstrels, troubadours, and vaudevillians. In spite of the gloomy outlook on managing an opera troupe, several excelled. Many unscrupulous and cunning white managers purposely targeted the African-American musicians knowing they could pay the performers very little and meanwhile obtain a large portion of the profits. The trade newspapers defined the musicians as having three levels of pay: “small time,” which was cheaper tickets, large and small town theaters where musicians averaged $15.00 a week; “medium time,” good theaters where the artist averaged $75.00 - $100.00 a week; and the “big time,” first rate theaters with two performances a day where performers averaged $1,000.00 a week.

Needless to say, life in a small theater company could be quite rough with only two or three musicians performing all the roles. Likewise, many artists were frequently required to clean the rented hall (sometimes schoolhouse) where the show was to be presented, usually on the evening of, while simultaneously designing the set. The real difficulty arose after the show in the search for overnight accommodations. Typically in small, Southern towns, many bypassed the warning signs that read “Nigger Don’t Let the Sun Go Down on You!” or “Nigger, Read and Run!” Though Sissieretta Jones never spoke of such signs, one must assume she and her troupe encountered these similar horrible remarks.

Contrastingly, with a more well-to-do company, life was very different. Management often provided Pullman cars for traveling, which were used as a hotel,

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dismissing the problem of finding adequate accommodations. The day of a traveling company typically began at 11:45 a.m. with the conventional parade through the principle streets of the town where the stars of the show paraded in tall silk hats and scarlet or plum-colored long-tailed coats. The secondary cast or “walking company” dressed in brilliant coats and brass buttons accompanied by local boys carrying a banner advertisement. Before the evening show the accompany bandsmen would play a program in order to draw a crowd to the hall where the ticket seller would perform his magic. The show usually lasted from forty-five minutes to an hour where, only then, the performers were free to relax.

By the early 1900s, only two groups, the white-owned Lew Dockstader’s Troupe and the Black Patti Troubadours, were the last major touring companies successfully making a living from the stage. Although various characteristics from minstrelsy remained on the stage through the emergence of Broadway, after 1920, the genre was no longer commercially viable.

Whether large or small, African-American opera and minstrel companies were highly celebrated around the country by the turn of the twentieth-century. The extensive theatrical activities of the nineteenth-century provoked wide interest among the American public, and both the white and black press. In fact, the United States federal census of 1910 listed more than 7,500 African-Americans involved in show business, of whom 5,606 were musicians and 1,279 were actors. Indeed, many African-Americans looked to the stage for their employment. Oddly, though every nation has a skeleton of bigotry in its historic closet, only America’s bigotry gave birth to a form of song, dance, entertainment, and livelihood that impacted the theatrical world for decades to come.
Figure 6-1. Photograph of the Hyers Sisters
Saturday Matinee and Night, May 23.
Black Patti Troubadours,
Voelckel & Nolan, Props and Mgrs.
In a Musical Comedy Entitled
DARKTOWN’S CIRCUS DAY.

CAST.

Josiah Johnson, the Pan-Ball of Darktown John Green
Muriel Johnson, his wife “With an eye on Society” Anthony D. Byrd
Princess Maria Muriel Johnson’s “Heiress” Will Clark
Wendy Little Willie, their younger, with “Slyly” aspirations Jan. Chappley
Angelina, the queen of the tribe” Ada Perone’s
Paul, Darktown boy, with a case on his hands J. E. Green
Handy Andy, with troubles of his own Bobby Kemp
Petticoat Jane, a guardian of the tribe Louise Trinetti
Bill Barker, a circus spider with the dope Max Albin
Hement Tenant, “From the Opera” James Wolfe
Peter Hamllt, an actor J. J. Reed

Bells of Darktown.

Beatrice Gibson, Nettie Lewis, Jeanette Murray, Hettie Williams, Sarah Green, Emma Thomsen, Louisa Taylor, May Cogdell, Harriet Peterson, Malide Turner, Ella Carr.

Candy Beaulier, Benjy Vroom, Animal Attendants, Actors, Actresses, Monkeys, Bears, Elephants and others.

Scene I. Exterior of Darktown Circus.
Scene II. Interior of Darktown Circus.
Scene III. Interior of Theatrical Tent.

Marie Lecoullot and Nolan present selections from Grand and Comic Opera in costume including BLACK PATTI (Mrs. Bessie Jones), Sarah Green, Contralto; James C. Worles, Tenor; J. E. Green, Baritone. James F. Reed, Bass; and a chassis selected from the best negro voices in the country.

Orchestra Selections.

Courtesy of Maud Cuney-Hare, *The Afro-American in Music and Art*

Figure 6-3. Black Patti Troubadours Handbill
CHAPTER 7
SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Spanning almost one hundred years, the extraordinary talent and stage careers of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Nellie Brown Mitchell, Selika Williams, and Sissieretta Jones, set standards of excellence for all African-American musicians who followed. Although these four women made huge sacrifices and overcame great obstacles to develop a skill and technique to perform European arias that astounded their public and created a popular vogue, this vogue was short lived. Yet, how did the pioneering efforts of these four women change the operatic world for those who followed? What was the role of the twentieth-century black classical singer and would she have similar obstacles to conquer?

In spite of encouragement, support, and training, the black opera singer continued to struggle in the arts well into the twentieth-century. Lillian Evanti (1890 - 1967), the first African-American to sing with an organized European opera company, was noted as saying:

I had no sponsors on the other side. . . . I had a big mountain to climb. . . . In America the Negro was accepted only as a buffoon in big-time music. A World War had been fought for democracy, but it did not extend to democracy in musical opportunities. That alone was enough motive to go elsewhere.¹

Evanti, who studied and graduated from Howard University School of Music in 1917, was in Europe six months before she made her operatic debut in *Lakmé* with the Nice Opera Company. Like *Aïda*, *Lakmé* was a role considered by the public and critics

to be one which did not conflict with her color. Although by the beginning of the twentieth-century several African-American singers had sung in Europe, color seemed to remain a barrier for the early twentieth-century black classical singer, in the United States as well as abroad. In spite of her great success with a touring opera company, Evanti did not perform in any of the major European opera houses. Most of the prominent houses, such as La Scala, refused to engage the company as long as Evanti was employed.

Between 1945, when Todd Duncan made his debut as Porgy in *Porgy and Bess* and 1955, when Marian Anderson first sang at the Metropolitan Opera House (the last and most important goal for all singers) in New York City, only four African-Americans appeared on the Metropolitan Opera stage. Howard Taubman, critic for the *New York Times*, stated in 1959 that the lack of African-Americans in opera was mainly due to the limited roles (Aïda and Amonasro) that were not in conflict with their color.²

Following in the path of Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones, Marian Anderson (1897 - 1993) played a key role in the pioneering efforts of those who followed. Encouraged by her family, community, and the Union Baptist Church, as a young adult Anderson first encountered the ugly head of racism when she attempted to enroll in a Philadelphia music school, only to be abruptly told, “We don’t take colored.”³

In contrast to the European singers of the day, Anderson was forced to settle for private study with local soprano, Mary Saunders Patters. Years later, Giuseppe Boghetti, tenor and coach, took Anderson as a student without pay and remained her teacher until his death in 1941. A benefit concert on May 14, 1920 sponsored by the Union Baptist

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² Ibid., 170. Marian Anderson actually made her operatic debut as Ulrica, a gypsy.

Church helped to fund the remainder of Anderson’s training. Understanding that in the 1920s European training was considered the most favorable; Anderson continued to concertize (mainly in Southern black colleges and the Philadelphia area) in hopes to soon study in Europe.4

On April 23, 1924, the young contralto held a disastrous recital in the Town Hall of New York City where the critics harshly stated Anderson sang her Brahms as if by rote. Her lack of training was obvious to all. Anderson returned to Philadelphia to continue her training and soon won first prize in the Philadelphia Philharmonic Society’s Annual Young Artist Contest.5 Coming to grips with the fact that only European training could add the necessary polish and culture that she needed, Anderson began her first tour abroad where she spent the majority of the next decade.

European audiences and critics alike billed Anderson as the “American Colored Contralto.” At the age of thirty-eight her program included Handel airs, Schubert lieder, a Verdi aria, some Scandinavian songs, and a collection of spirituals that Anderson often said made her feel as if she had come home. Whether she was aware of Greenfield and others is not known, but the trend of displaying extraordinary ranges continued. Just as her predecessors, Anderson often demonstrated two voices, a lighter soprano as in the

4 Since Anderson’s autobiography and her own foundation, The Marion Anderson Society, has no mention of Greenfield or the others, one must assume that she was not aware of her predecessors. See Allan Keiler’s Marion Anderson: A Singer’s Journey (New York: Scribner Publishing, 2000) for more information.

characterization of the dying maiden in Schubert’s “Der Tod und das Mächen,” contrasted with the seductive baritone blandishments of Death, descending to a low D.\textsuperscript{6}

The most famous event in Anderson’s career was not one of performance, but instead, a living symbol of racial equality. The outdoor recital on Easter Sunday, April 9, 1939 in Washington, D. C., held in front of the Lincoln Memorial with 75,000 people took place after the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) refused to allow Anderson to sing in Constitution Hall. Although the DAR maintain even today that the hall had been previously booked (the claim has never been substantiated), most of America remembers only the remarks of Fred Hand, the manager of the hall: “No date will ever be available for Marian Anderson in Constitution Hall.”\textsuperscript{7}

Showing that her European training was effective, Anderson’s program consisted of difficult arias such as Donizetti’s “O mio Fernando” from \textit{La Favorita}. Anderson added a welcomed American sound by performing three spirituals for an encore. The recital was prefaced with a speech by Harold L. Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, in which he remarked “a great auditorium under the sky where all of us are free” and referred to Anderson as a living example that genius draws no color line.

The press wasted no time in making the dispute a national issue, particularly after Eleanor Roosevelt publicly resigned her membership from the DAR. In the midst of the controversy, Anderson remarked, “I could see that my significance as an individual was

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 338.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 339.
small in this affair. I had become, whether I liked it or not, a symbol, representing my people. I had to appear.”

With the hiring of Leontyne Price (b. 1927) came to the Metropolitan Opera House with the reputation of possessing one of the finest voices of the century. Not only was she an American with a superior voice, but she was also the first classically-trained black opera singer to achieve world renown.

The daughter of a midwife and a mill worker in Laurel, Mississippi, Price was blessed with supportive parents and a wealthy patroness, Elizabeth Chisholm. Chisholm financed the young singer’s early musical studies which included the Juilliard School under the training of Florence Page Kimball. The singer was spotted by Virgil Thomson and was cast in the revival of his *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Immediately following, the young girl was signed to sing Bess in a two-year world tour of Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. In 1955, *Tosca* was aired on a major television network with Price playing the leading role opposite a white man.

Price’s roles included Aïda, Bess, Tosca, Leonora, Mimi, Liù, and Donna Anna. In 1961, Rudolph Bing cast Price as Minnie in the new production of *La Fanciulla del West* with Robert Tucker as her costar. Although critics were sympathetic, the experiment was not a success. After the opening night performance, the Broadway columnist Dorothy Kilgallen, who was often politically incorrect as the times reflected, told her readers that she had attended the Met the previous night and saw the most peculiar Italian opera in which a Jewish cowboy fell in love with a black cowgirl.

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A dozen years later, in 1973, Price confessed that the cost of fame had taken its toll and the pressures surrounding her were as much racial as they were artistic:

My career was simultaneous with the opening of civil rights. . . .what I was as an artist, what I had as ability, got shoveled under because all the attention was on racial connotations. I didn’t have time to fight back as an artist except to be prepared and do my work. . . .because I was the only person allowed the opportunity. That is what it meant being black then. . . .If you get in the door, you have to accept and almost gobble up everything that comes with it.\(^9\)

By the 1970s, the African-American opera singer had moved from complete rejection to partial acceptance. Impressive voices of African-Americans like Martina Arroyo (b. 1936), Grace Bumbry (b.1937), and Shirley Verrett (b. 1931), the smaller but no less important careers of singers, such as Mattiwilda Dobbs, Reri Grist, Gloria Davy, Felicia Weathers, and so many others, made critics and audiences alike stand up and notice the African-American prima donna. Though black classical singers effectively made a place on the concert stage by the turn of the twenty-first century, questions still remain surrounding the lack of roles for the African-American opera singer. Will the new millennium bring about an opening of minds among the American opera public or will a disparity of salaries, management, and venues remain?

It would appear too much of white America that many of the present black opera singers have broken the racial barriers that so tightly bound those who preceded them. Many of these singers now have websites, and most, at some point, have been interviewed by various journals, magazines, and periodicals, whether in the arts or related studies. A look at the individual struggles of these singers, however, offers much insight on the existing topic and proves that although the racial milieu has improved, there is still much work to be done.

Unlike her predecessors and even some who followed, Harolyn Blackwell (b.1960) seemed to not experience racial injustice in the operatic industry. In an article entitled “Broadway Baby/Opera Diva: The Worlds of Harolyn Blackwell,” managing editor and author, Robert Wilder Blue asked Blackwell had her race been a factor in her career? Blackwell responded that race has been a positive aspect for her. It’s not just about being black, the soprano commented, it is about being an opera singer. Blue continued asking Blackwell does opera really matter to the public today. Due to television, the singer stated, there is little audience participation. In fact, American audiences receive entertainment in a passive and uneducated way: “the greatness of society is measured by its contribution to the arts.”  

Described as a singer of agility, spunk, charm, and silvery tone, African-American soprano Harolyn Blackwell has established herself as one of the brightest stars on the American stage. Recognized for her expressive and exuberant performances, as well as for her radiant voice, she is making a wide and varied career in opera, concert, and recitals performing with some of the most prestigious companies in the world. Blackwell’s career was solidified when she stepped in at the last minute for an entire run of La fille du régiment at the Metropolitan Opera. Unfamiliar to her predecessors, the type casting of roles seems to have been lifted, at least to some extent, in this singer’s career. Perhaps, the difference in fach from the other singers helped to change the

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stereotype since most of the American public associates a black singer with a large voice of dark timbre.\footnote{11}

Much like Blackwell, mezzo soprano Denyce Graves (b. 1975) has experienced her own struggles toward the operatic stage.\footnote{12} Receiving her education from Oberlin College Conservatory of Music and then the New England Conservatory of Music, Graves made her debut in 1995 as Carmen at the Metropolitan Opera. First singing in the gospel choir of her local church, the Faith Bible Church, Graves believes the institution of the black church was responsible for saving her family and keeping them together. The singer also acknowledges that the church provided a sense of community and offered a place she, and others of her race, could go to be heard and understood. Even today, she speaks of her unshakable faith in God and her involvement in the church.

Graves’ recitals now include various genres including Broadway, German lieder, French and English songs, and Latin classical songs. Like Blackwell, the singer did not abandon her roots, but instead glorifies them through a compact disc devoted entirely to Negro Spirituals. Indeed, the church was a stepping stone for this singer’s career.

Although the \textit{Wall Street Journal} referred to Graves as the “hottest Carmen on the opera circuit today,” Graves claimed in this interview that the roles for African-Americans are still limited and submerged deep in stereotypes. “I’ve had other black artists say to me, they will allow you to sing Carmen. It’s easy for them to see you as this

\footnote{11}{Program from “The Peggy M. Rockefeller Concerts, Rockefeller University, Caspary Auditorium,” 1/22/1997, \url{www.rockefeller.edu/pubinfo/blackwell}. Accessed March 2004.}

\footnote{12}{Though several interviews were set up with Ms. Graves via phone and email correspondence, due to her hectic schedule (as she is only in the country a few months out of the year), the interview with the singer never materialized. Throughout this research many questions have emerged for this remarkable achiever, but for now one must rely on already published information.}
wild, out-of-control, sexual being;” a direct correlation to the “red hot mama” idea so prevalent earlier in the century. In fact, the singer stated that she believes she has been rejected for several roles because of the color of her skin. In addition, when she is reviewed she is usually compared to other black concert and operatic singers, not her white counterparts. The area of the country in which this rejection occurred is not known, but for reasons of comparison to the experiences of the early divas and why this singer believes that stereotyping of roles still exists, are questions that remain unanswered.

Similar to her predecessors, Graves believes she has received more attention than the average singer because of her race; a statement which may hold true for all black concert singers. Perhaps the novelty of hearing an African sing operatic repertoire does still exist. Regardless, as Graves revealed, she does not want to be stereotyped as a black opera singer, but instead an opera singer who happens to be black.

"I know my mother's experience as a black woman has been different from mine. I acknowledge that hate and injustice exist. But I do not want to be a professional African-American. I know people get angry when I say that, but I don't want to carry the burdens of my ancestry on my back. Anger eats at you. It destroys you. You have to let it go."

Indeed, a comparison of nineteenth-century African-American salaries to their white counterparts revealed there was a huge discrepancy in the sums the white singers were being paid compared to the blacks. In an article entitled “Red Hot Diva,” Graves was noted as saying that she now makes more money than the President of the United

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13 Wall Street Journal, www.deniecegraves.com, accessed December 2003. It is interesting to note that ticket prices for Graves in Carmen ranged from $33.00 - $190.00, while her recital prices for 2003 ranged from $24.50 - $59.50 in the average city. Amazingly, the Swedish Nightingale, Jenny Lind, who performed over one hundred years prior, was receiving higher profits per ticket than Graves.

States.\textsuperscript{15} To the average American, this $400,000.00 salary would be astonishing. But sadly when compared, once again, to the European divas of the nineteenth-century, this African-American singer is still lagging behind monetarily.

In addition to the role of Carmen, Graves has also been cast in the following roles: Dalila in *Dalila*, Charlotte in *Werther*, the High Priestess in *La Vestale*, Giuletta in *Tales of Hoffman*, Dorabella in *Cosi fan tutti*, and Maddalena in *Rigoletto*. Interesting assortments of roles, as none of them are considered stereotypical roles for African-American singers. Perhaps the turn of the century is bringing about a more open mindedness in regards to stereotyping of roles.

Does Graves believe she will also be seen one day as paving the way for other African-American women on the concert stage in the new millennium? Or, is she simply a woman, regardless of her race, working toward recognized achievement? Moreover, does this singer believe that America is finally ready to overlook the color of her skin and simply hear her voice?

From the information obtained on the website, Graves has performed in Atlanta, Tampa, Houston, and Dallas. What was the response of the public, critics, producers, and venues, in these Southern cities to the singer’s race and/or her gender? Additionally, was it difficult for Graves to secure adequate management, as in the case of Greenfield and the others, because of her color or gender? Lastly, as an operatic superstar, what would this singer like the world to know about the struggles and rewards of being an African-American prima donna of the new millennium? Nonetheless, at the turn of the century, several influential magazines reviewed and critiqued the upcoming diva. *USA Today*

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identified Graves as one of the singers most likely to be an operatic superstar and *Ebony Magazine* named the prima donna as one of “Fifty Leaders of Tomorrow.”16

By the end of the twentieth-century, and in spite of a substantial amount of racism and stereotyping, the American singer, whatever her ethnicity, was still striving to be heard. Opera, the beloved art-form of European composers for over 300 years, had lost most of American audiences to more popular American art-forms, such as jazz, blues, and rock-n-roll.

The voice of the prima donna of the twenty-first-century reflects not only the influence of various African-American genres and styles, but more importantly, the social, psychological, and cultural upheaval of a great race. The struggles these African-American women faced in the nineteenth-century, due to their gender and race, have continued throughout the twentieth-century as evident in the interviews found in Appendix A. As history has proven, however, the twenty-first-century singer will also persevere and rise above mediocrity to achieve a career in the arts.

Little has changed for the black concert singer of the new millennium. The great strides achieved by Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones seemed to have left little to no mark on the American public. Nevertheless, the requirements for establishing a career in a world where the white prima donna (whether European or American) still reigns, continue to rely on similar qualities shared by these nineteenth-century singers. What distinguishes the concert singer of today from her predecessors is not her creativity or extraordinary talent, nor her ability to achieve exorbitant salaries or acquire adequate management, but rather her ability to persevere and succeed with an entrepreneur spirit in

a merciless industry. Indeed, not all great singers, regardless of their race, have made their mark in the classical world. Many singers have walked the long road to a singing profession. Many have succeeded and many more have failed. Their success, after all, is not related to their talent, for talent is not rooted in a race, but an individual.\footnote{Petrie, “The Negro in Opera,” \textit{The Afro-American in Music and Art}, 171.}

**Conclusions**

Since several historians have researched and written on the narratives of these African-American opera singers, the purpose of this project was to go beyond these narratives and to place these women socially, politically, and culturally in a biased and racist nineteenth-century environment. This, in turn, included comparing various aspects of Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones's available training, management, United States touring cities, repertoire, and disparity of salaries, with their European counterparts.

Several questions emerged from this research pertaining to the social, political, and cultural upheavals of the black artists discussed herein. How did these singers achieve any type of career in a culture where women, not to mention African-Americans, were given few opportunities for education or employment? What methods of self-promotion did these women have to employ in order to have careers? What was the level of difficulty for these singers in obtaining training, adequate management, and venues based on their race and gender? To what extent were these singers instrumental in the abolition, feminist, and entrepreneur movements which eventually led to Booker T. Washington’s racial uplift? Moreover, African-American singers of the twentieth- and twenty-first
centuries were interviewed with the hope of determining whether the prejudices and disparities, apparent in the nineteenth-century, were obsolete for the new millennium.

The nineteenth-century black singer who did succeed fell well behind the European prima donna. Even the length of her career was much shorter than her European colleague, due mainly to the public’s lack of interest. In the last half of the nineteenth-century, white America became very interested in band music, opening the doors for great black musicians like Frank Johnson to quickly rise to fame. Why this attitude did not exist for the vast and eclectic number of African-American musicians working outside of band music remains a mystery. Was it the possibility that the classical genre kept the African-American classical singer from obtaining roles in operas, or even the minute stardom Frank Johnson achieved? Were the operatic arias considered aristocratic and elite and, when sung by an African-American, deemed improper? After all, Africans should sing African songs. Yet, male instrumentalists, regardless of color, continued to have an easier time obtaining venues and management. White America’s low opinion of the black still lingered and haunted most black’s careers.

The blossoming of the black classical musician’s career was stagnated due to most of the American public believing that African-Americans should only sing African based genres - spirituals. Likewise, few white Americans saw spirituals as true art and even fewer imagined that the voice singing them might also be qualified to sing opera. Thus, the black church not only offered one of the few performance stages for these women, but also funded benefits to aid in their careers.

Several questions concerning the African-American worship, in the North and South, surfaced during the project. For example, why did Southern blacks closely
associate the ideas of spiritual and political freedom with their worship experience, while simultaneously the Northern blacks, freed, and educated, became more careful to present their views as traditional white Protestant? What did it mean in practical terms to be spiritually free, yet still owned as property? It became apparent that evangelical religion was ultimately a haven for the African-American, both Southern and Northern. More than likely this conversion only helped to inculcate obedience in the face of white oppression. What role did the church have on Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones and has this continued for those African-American singers of the twenty-first century? Did the average black church member know of these four singers and were they allowed or did they choose to attend the concerts? If so, were the expectations of the singing style based solely on the style they had become familiar with in the church?18

As the nineteenth-century came to a close, and white America was no longer interested in the vogue of black classical singers, many of these women turned to the minstrel stage, building, producing, and managing their own traveling companies. The combination of minstrel songs and operatic arias became a popular form of entertainment and therefore a continued venue of employment for the African-American musician.

The pre-requisites for being labeled a “prima donna” in the nineteenth-century were displayed and accompanied by a startling chart that showed the differences in training, salaries, management, venues, and available touring cities between the nineteenth-century European and the African-American singers. Likewise, the difficulty encountered by an American classical singer trying to acquire training and management, regardless of race, was discussed.

In the nineteenth-century at the beginning of the country’s newly established art-form of opera, competition from abroad arose and became fierce. The difficulty of the language, the ridiculous plots, and the outlandish scenery and costumes made this genre difficult for some Europeans to grasp. Yet, in Italy, France, Germany, and later in the nineteenth-century, Russia and Bohemia, opera maintained a place of distinction among wealthy and privileged. In contrast, however, in the United States, practically everyone struggled with this new kind of theater. Thus, America produced even fewer native singers of the art. If society frowned upon women performing in the arts, then what kind of women excelled under such adversity? In the midst of a world where business was becoming the foundation of the country, women played virtually no public role in the establishment and rapid expansion of the economy. And yet, some women were so driven and ambitious that they considered the possibility of choosing a profession outside of the home. Since singing in the parlor was encouraged as a maidenly accomplishment, only the few who demonstrated aggressive, spirited personalities, combined with vocal talent, entertained the idea of becoming an opera singer.

Lastly, one would think that the black press and community would have been supportive of these individuals. Rather, criticism for accommodating the white audience was often more negative in the black press and community than among the white critics and public. Did these black women knowingly cater to the white audience, placing a barrier between them and their own community? Did the black community and black press see these women as “selling out” in order to have operatic careers?

**Results of the Research**

The most obvious observation of this research was the blatant disparity in salary, training, roles, venues, and management between the nineteenth-century African-
American classical singer and her European counterpart. Conclusively, some of the singers discussed in this project were able to acquire adequate management, or so it seemed. Most of the white managers who were interested in representing black talent, were not always honest and forthright in their representation. The “P. T. Barnum’s” of the classical world were definitely interested in taking advantage of the black female singer and pocketing a large percentage of the income and leaving the artist with little.

Based on the information received from black singers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, African-American women are still finding herself their salaries are significantly less than their white counterparts. Due to their gender and/or race, the stereotyping of roles and the difficulty in obtaining adequate management is still a noteworthy part of their struggle. Arguably, it appears that the bar for receiving training in America has been lifted for the African-American.

Due to continuing to fall way behind their European colleagues, Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones often employed methods of self-promotion and advancement whether through patrons, managers, teachers, or their local church. The investigation regarding the black church proved that this institution still remains a vital part of the black community and plays a very important role in the nurturing of young black talent, including the four singers discussed herein. Most importantly, however, many black singers seek monetary help through benefit programs and other services, which are educational for the entire community. In the past, and still today, a direct correlation exists between the nineteenth-century and the present black church in that the pulpit still serves as a stage for the black singer.
Many musicians turned to minstrel shows, traveling opera companies, and vaudeville when the operatic stage no longer offered acceptable employment. The women discussed in this project displayed their entrepreneurial spirit and determination through sheer strength of spirit and character by building, functioning, and managing their own traveling companies. Though, similar to their individual careers, the companies they formed were often under-funded and typically did not last as long as those of their white counterparts; yet, these women still managed to gain acceptable employment in the arts by organizing anywhere from fifteen to fifty employees into traveling shows and becoming effective spokespersons for the various popular movements of the day.

One would expect the entire black community to stand behind these women in their endeavors; regrettably, research proved otherwise. At times, these singers were isolated, ridiculed, and laughed at by both the white and black community. Their willingness to accommodate white America was in part a forced act, as most blacks were not allowed into the theaters, or could not economically participate. The lack of education and economics, combined with the sheer dislike of the genre (as America has never reached the level of love for opera that Europe achieved) for most African-Americans this immediately placed a barrier between the black concert singer and her people. Paradoxically, however, most of these women continued to strive to educate and nurture young black talent by opening studios, inventing singing devices (such as the phoneterion that Mitchell invented), and participating in community events. Certainly, the detailed narratives of these women displayed their unique talents and unyielding desire, in spite of
their gender and race, to make their mark on the operatic stage, but to also participate in
the abolition, feminist, and education movements of the day.

The kind of woman who excelled under such adversity can be seen in the lives of
Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones. These four women persevered and overcame
obstacles in a day when all odds were stacked against them. Booker T. Washington often
stated one of the most difficult things for him to grasp was seeing a black man full of
happiness and pride and involved in activities to uplift the race, yet ashamed of Negro
Spirituals, African dances, or any other activity which was directly related to African-
Americans. Though most of these women were working long before Washington’s
movement for racial uplift became popular, each of them played a very important role in
preparing twentieth-century America for this movement.

The Need for Further Research

It has now been over 350 years since the first field holler was “hollered;” a course
in the history of music that has encompassed almost as much time as opera itself. The
new popular music of the twenty-first century reflects not only the influence of various
African-American genres and styles, but more importantly the social, psychological, and
cultural upheaval of a great race. Yes, it is true in previous years music has been used for
protest and self-expression, but the African-American’s music is tied in closely with
family and communication, as it was and still is in their ancestral home. The social and
cultural struggle of these people has always been and will continue to be connected
closely with music. The dream that America will one day rise up and give well-deserved
praise to these women, and those who follow, will hopefully be fulfilled in this decade.
On the surface it would appear that there is little one can do to change the prejudice and
racism of many in this country. In fact, though pioneers such as Price and Graves studied
at prestigious American music schools, little has really changed for the African-American concert singer. Nonetheless, every effort must be made to dispense of this attitude beginning with the implementation of music history courses into public schools. Likewise, society must find a way to enable the disadvantaged to experience events such as the Metropolitan Opera.

One can only speculate what would have been the situation for Greenfield, Mitchell, Williams, and Jones had they been allowed to sing in a full opera. Certainly no European careers reached any level of stardom without such an event. Of course, without recordings, the level of talent these women possessed remains unknown. What is certain, however, is that when the ignorance surrounding race is completely dispensed of and the barriers are fully broken, the public, both black and white, will hear the resounding voice of the black prima donna.
In addition to Graves, several other African-American singers were contacted, via email, letters, or phone, in hopes of obtaining their perception of how the world of classical music has changed, or not changed, for the aspiring black singer. Despite their busy and hectic schedules, several women did respond and below are their opinions, struggles, and views of working in the classical world.

The first singer interviewed, Luvada Harrison, (b. 1956) was a native of Baltimore, Maryland before her Carnegie Hall debut with the Manhattan Philharmonic in Tanayev’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Harrison has performed in various roles with the New York City Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Opera Ebony, New York Verismo, and Baltimore Opera Companies. As a winner of the Bel Canto Foundation of Chicago Competition, the singer spent several months in Busetto, Italy studying with world renowned tenor Carlo Bergonzi. In 1999, Harrison appeared as soloist with the New York Choral Society at the Lincoln Center and twice in that same year she appeared with the Mexico Symphony. Because of her high interest in the project, the singer graciously agreed to answer pertinent questions.

**Question #1: What is your education and training?**

I have a Bachelor of Music in Vocal Music Education from Towson State University, Towson, Maryland. My masters is from Binghamton University (aka SUNY Binghamton, New York) and I am currently working toward my doctorate at Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.
• Question #2: Have your touring cities included the South? If so, what was the response?

I toured in *Porgy and Bess* with the Houston Grand Opera in 1986 and the main thing I remember about that tour was the stop we made in Louisville, Kentucky where the cab driver thought that we would be safer in a poor white neighborhood versus a poor black neighborhood. There were also those black audience members who were offended by the content of *Porgy and Bess*. In Houston, Texas we had a problem getting cab drivers to take us to the theater (and these were black cab drivers!) Mainly, I found that blacks in the South decided that we were uppity or snobbish because we performed classical music.

• Question #3: Was it difficult to find management due to your gender and/or race?

Yes and no. While it was difficult for me to find management, the real difficulty was keeping the management.

• Question #4: One chapter of the dissertation compares nineteenth-century African American salaries to their white counterparts. Unfortunately, there was a huge difference in what the white singers were being paid compared to the blacks. Do you believe there is still a disparity in fee based on race and/or gender?

Yes, there is still a disparity in fees based on race and/or gender, as well as whom your management is. ICM (International Creative Management) and CAMI (Columbia Artists Management, Inc.) are going to garner higher fees for their clients versus Dispecker or some other medium size management.

• Question #5: Did you begin your performance career in the church? If so, which church? (please include city and denomination) Did they sponsor benefit concerts for you?

I had a church job if that is what you consider to be a performance career. I began singing in the choir at St. James Episcopal Church in Baltimore, Maryland. No, St. James never sponsored benefit concerts for me. I was the soprano soloist at Govans Presbyterian Church where a benefit concert was sponsored.

• Question #6: In which operatic roles have you been cast? Do you believe a stereotype of roles still exist? For example, Selika in Meyerbeer’s *L’Africane* has always been an “acceptable” role for the African-American.

Professionally I have been cast as Aida, Nella in *Gianni Schicci*, Leonora in *Trovatore*, Serena and Clara in *Porgy and Bess*, First Lady in the *Magic Flute*, Annina in *La Traviata*, Countess in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Donna Anna in *Don Giovanni*, and Maddalena in *Andrea Chenier*. Non-professionally I have been cast as Suor Angelica, Clotilde in *New Moon*, Fiordiligi in *Cosi fan Tutte*, and Mimi in *La Boheme*.
Yes, there is definitely still a stereotyping of roles in this business.

• Question #7: What opera companies have you worked with? What barriers, if any, due to your race or gender did you have to overcome?

Baltimore, Houston Grand, Opera Ebony, Florentine, and New York City Opera, as well as some companies that are no longer in existence.

• Question #8: Do you privately teach? If so, which city? How much do you charge per hour?

I do not teach presently. However, I have taught in New York a couple of years ago and charged $30.00 per lesson.

• Question #9: Do you own, produce, or manage an opera company? If so, does it employ African-Americans? Which operas are performed? Do you have problems in funding and/or obtaining venues?

No

• Question #10: Singers of the nineteenth-century, both black and white, tended to conclude their concerts with ballads such as Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home.” What repertoire do you use for a finale or encore? Do you include spirituals and if so, is it due to the history of the genre?

The venue usually determines the encore. I will encore with spirituals, arias, or Broadway standards. I encore with spirituals because I adore their honesty and beauty and because I grew up in a very high Episcopalian Church so I had to learn how to sing a spiritual [classically]. To realize the freedom of expression these gems allow us, to move out of the way of this music and its content, and allow it and my soul to take flight.

• Question #11: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Marie Selika Williams, Matilda Sissieretta Jones, Nellie Brown Mitchell, and Anna and Emma Louise Hyers, were outstanding African-American singers of the nineteenth-century.

Unfortunately, until now these women have not received the attention they deserved.

• Question #12: As a 21st century African-American singer, are you familiar with any of these names? What would you like the world to know about the struggles and rewards of being an African-American prima donna of the new millennium?

I am familiar with a number of the names you listed, although I’m ashamed to say not all (something I hope to change). I most credit my awareness of those that I do know or are familiar with to Rosalyn M. Story’s And So I Sing.
First, I must say that I do not see myself as a “prima donna.” I am a human being who was blessed by God with an incredible gift, and who over the years of cultivating and enhancing my knowledge, [with] respect and understanding of this blessing, [I] have acquired a level of stubbornness and determination to continue to honor God by not letting negativity and ignorance deter me from becoming the best that I can.

The struggles of being in this business are financial, bad or lack of planning, racism, economics, perseverance, continuing to believe in yourself and your abilities, learning not to take things personally, solitude, the challenge to do justice to a composer’s work, and politics. The rewards: the joy of music, the ability to express your soul, opportunities to share your gift, travel (I’ve seen parts of the world I know I would not have seen had I not been a singer), the people and colleagues you meet and collaborate with, and the joy and blessing of doing something you love and cherish.¹

Attention should be drawn to a few of the above statements. First, the singer’s answer to question #2 certainly displays that, just as in Greenfield over one hundred years ago, the African-American singer’s willingness (at times mandatory) to accommodate a classical audience, that even today remains mostly white, puts a barrier between her and her own race. Indeed, to the average twenty-first century black, the knowledge that some African-Americans have chosen classical careers should not be shocking. After all, the twentieth-century produced several influential classically-trained black singers who had substantial careers through the years. Yet, many question whether the African-American community takes a direct interest and awareness in supporting these remarkable women. Does the public view these singers as “uppity or snobbish” and possibly “white” at heart?

An attendance to Kathleen Battle’s recital in February 2004 at the Atlanta Performing Arts Center, proved that the above statement, at least at this concert, held true; over half of the audience in attendance was African-American.

¹ Interview via email correspondence, January 2004.
Secondly, this singer admits that there is still a disparity among salaries and management, and the stereotyping of roles still exists for African-American operatic singers. As a researcher of this topic, the answer to question #11 sparked a need for further research to conclude why even those African-Americans involved in classical music have not heard of these black female singers from the nineteenth-century. It lies in the hands of the twenty-first century musicologist to ensure that America is aware of these women’s contributions to the American operatic stage.
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BIOPGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Sonya Gable-Wilson received a Master of Music in vocal performance in 1999 under the tutelage of Elizabeth P. Graham, head of the voice area at the University of Florida. She received a Bachelor of Arts in vocal performance from the University of West Georgia in 1988, under the tutelage of Inge Manski-Lundeen, with a minor in piano. Ms. Gable-Wilson has continued in the musicology area, under the instruction of David Z. Kushner, head of the musicology area at the University of Florida.

Ms. Gable-Wilson is presently on the faculty at Mississippi State University as an Instructor of Voice and has held an adjunct voice position at Lake City (Florida) Community College, where she implemented a studio voice program and worked closely in the choral program. She has taught both voice and piano privately for sixteen years and served as a graduate teaching assistant in music history and voice.

Ms. Gable-Wilson has presented papers at various forums including the University of Florida Musicology Lecture Series, College Music Society—Southern Chapter, Nineteenth-Century Studies Association, and American Musicological Society—Southern Chapter. She has received awards in a number of areas during her graduate career at the University of Florida including: Outstanding Achievement in the Study of the German Language and Literature, and outstanding academic achievement in the Graduate School. She is an active member of the above named professional organizations as well as the National Association of Teachers in Singing and the National Association of African-American Studies.