

AMERICA'S EARLY BLACK MUSIC HISTORIANS

Presenter

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ABSTRACT

The American black music historiography tradition began in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Three black music historians, James Monroe Trotter, Maud Cuney-Hare, and Alan Locke, wrote the first influential documents of American black music history. By examining the, (a) heritage, lineage, musical training and education, (b) socio-cultural events pre and post to each publication date, (c) intended audience, (d) available readership, and (e) the focus of each author, one may gain understanding of black music history and its documentation.

James Monroe Trotter

While living in Hyde Park from 1880 to 1892, a high socio-economic, elite, white neighborhood, Trotter continued his race consciousness and activism as an author. In 1878, he drew on his musical training, wealth, life experience, and published a book, *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, a tribute to black's musical achievements in the United States. In the preface, Trotter remarked that "the haze of complexional prejudice has so much obscured the visions of many persons" that they do not see that musical abilities "are not in the exclusive possession of the fairer-skinned race."¹

Trotter hoped his work would serve as a landmark and guide for others and establish between blacks and whites "relations of mutual respect and good feeling."² Trotter devoted his book to a collection of biographical sketches of black composers who specialized in Western art music. In the appendix of his book, Trotter illustrated a 152-

¹ Stephen R. Fox, *The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter* (New York: Atheneum, 1970) 13.

² Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., "Cosmopolitan or Provincial: Ideology in Early Black Music Historiography, 1867-1940," *Black Music Research Journal* 16 (spring 1986) 16.

page collection of thirteen vocal and instrumental pieces written by black composers that shows the ability many of them had to originate and arrange music in a Western European style.³ In addition to his discussions of Western art music, Trotter discussed the Fisk Jubilee Singers, The Georgia Minstrels, and minstrel singer Sam Lucas, who ranked as the best black minstrel performer “in the world.”⁴ Trotter’s book was well received.

Trotter was very well educated and in some ways was privileged in his life. Trotter was not a musician, but had studied music earlier during his education. His publication in 1878 was an enormous feat during that period in history. Trotter wanted to inform all Americans that blacks were musical and could perform Western art music as well as sing the spirituals. In reading his publication, one could gather knowledge of black performers after the Civil War.

Cuney-Hare

The fulfillment of Trotter’s hope that *Music and Some Highly Musical People* would serve as a guide for future black music historians did not occur until approximately fifty years later with the appearance of another black music history book by a black author. That book was *Negro Musicians and Their Music* (1936), and the author was Maud Cuney-Hare.⁵

Cuney-Hare was very interested in the African roots of blacks in America. To conduct research, she traveled to the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Mexico, Haiti and Louisiana in search of African cultural continuities that were often seen and heard in

³ Ibid., 17.

⁴ Robert Stevenson, “America’s First Black Music Historian,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 26, no. 3 (1973) 400.

⁵ Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., “Cosmopolitan or Provincial: Ideology in Early Black Music Historiography, 1867-1940,” *Black Music Research Journal* 16 (spring 1986) 25.

American music and dances.⁶ Maud used her African findings and discusses the relationship and influence of Africa on Western culture in her book. She discusses African American folk music, early minstrelsy, origin of Negro songs, idiom and rhythms. She addresses the role played by nineteenth century African American performers and composers, musical progress, music in war service, world musicians of color and their contributions. Maud hoped that a national American musical tradition of symphonic, operatic, and ballet, based on black musical idioms would develop in this country. Cuney Hare's nationalist agenda seemed to have been promotion of Classical music.

Cuney Hare grew up very privileged and lived the same kind of life as an adult. She was educated at the best schools including the New England Conservatory. With her background in music, she wrote her book from a different perspective. Cuney Hare's publication was written at the decline of the arts movement, The Harlem Renaissance in 1936. She researched music from other countries and was interested in the African influence on American music and dance. Cuney Hare was also interested in informing Americans that blacks were capable of performing Western art music.

Alain Locke

In the same year that *Negro Musicians and Their Music* appeared, Alain Locke published *The Negro and His Music*, advancing many of the same ideas as Cuney Hare. Locke shared Cuney Hare's philosophy about the potential of black folk music and encouraged its use as the basis for "great classical music."⁷

⁶ Tera W. Hunter, introduction to *Norris Wright Cuney: A Tribute to Black People* by Maud Cuney Hare (New York: G.K. Hall & Co. 1995) xix.

⁷ Ibid.

In 1936, fifty years after Trotter's book, *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, Locke wrote *The Negro and His Music*. In his book, Locke stated that folk music, spirituals, blues, and jazz, was the greatest contribution to American culture. He believed black music as the only true original folk music of the United States.⁸

Locke argued for black Americans developing into "a class of trained music lovers who will support by appreciation, the best in the black's musical heritage. Locke's nationalist agenda was intellectual as well as cultural. The ideals in *The New Negro*, and other literature during the Harlem Renaissance, succeeded in defining a Renaissance, a cultural movement, which laid the foundation for all subsequent depictions in poetry, fiction, and drama of the modern black American experience, including music.

Locke was the most well educated of the three authors having studied at Oxford. He came from a long line of educators and he continued this heritage by teaching for over 40 years. He was not a trained musician, but had studied both piano and violin at a young age. Locke was exceptionally good as a writer and wrote about blacks as the "New Negro" in the 1920s at the peak of the Harlem Renaissance. In 1936, he published his book on black music. Locke understood the arts and wanted Americans to know that blacks were capable of appreciating and performing the Western art music.

Implications for Music Education

Each of the early black music historians, had similar backgrounds and education, but each one used a different approach for his publication. James Monroe Trotter, Maud Cuney Hare, and Alan Locke, wrote documents that served as vehicles to create awareness of the large amount of information on blacks and their music. With these

⁸ Russell J. Linnemann, ed., *Alain Locke: Reflections on A Modern Renaissance Man*, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University, 1982). 131.

books, music teachers had documentation of black music history to use in music education classes. With so few publications documenting the history of black musicians and black music, these black history books played an important role in documenting this history. The information provided insight and answers concerning genres and topics that are so important to music education.

Music education involves many aspects of music learning including vocal performance, instrumental performance, composition, music theory, music appreciation, and music history. “Music education history must be concerned with the development of musical styles and forms, with trends in education generally, and with events and conditions in the culture. While other disciplines are obligated to explain how simultaneous developments in these three areas relate to one another at any given moment in time, historians must primarily explain them as they unfold. Sequence is fundamental to history.”⁹

By providing a vast amount of documentation on black music history, the books provide invaluable material on black music topics with a variety of perspectives. Music educators may find many ideas for introducing students to characteristics of genres of music. Lessons may further develop into activities such as listening, analyzing, performing on instruments, creating melodies, improvising, movement, and learning the history of each genre as well as the history of many black performing artists of each genre.

For many years, black music history was not included as part of music education. Many American historians did not value black music as viable or worthwhile music,

⁹ George N. Heller, “On the Meaning and Value of Historical Research in Music Education,” *Journal of Research in Music Education* 33, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 5.

therefore, that music, nor was black music history included in textbooks. These books began to fill the void and opened others to the worthiness and value of black music.

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