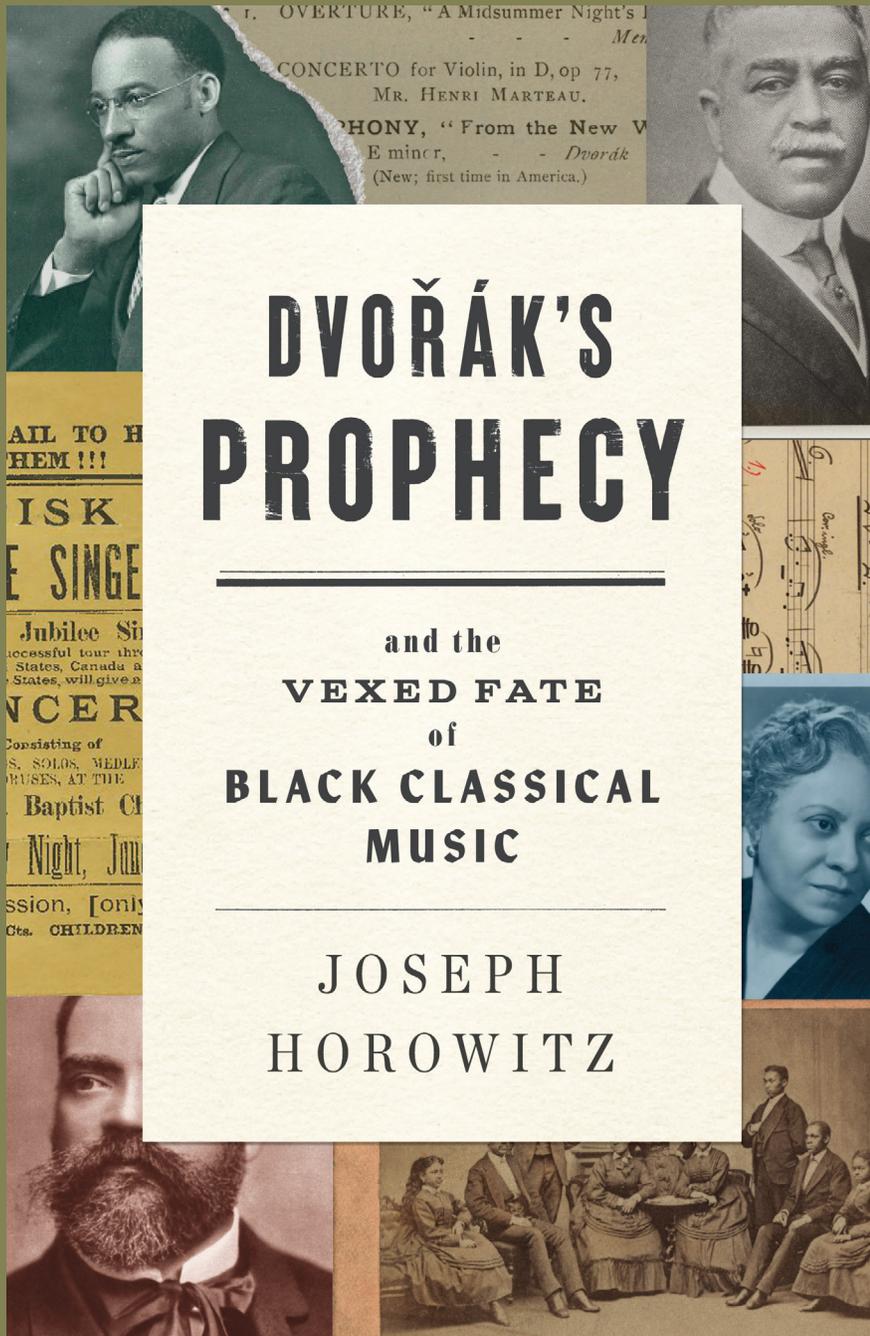


Aiming for a More Inclusive Canon



In 1893, composer Antonín Dvořák predicted that American classical music would incorporate and celebrate music by Black artists. That didn't happen. *Dvořák's Prophecy and the Vexed Fate of Black Classical Music*, by music historian and cultural critic Joseph Horowitz, offers a provocative new interpretation of why classical music in America “stayed white” and failed to become more inclusive, more expansive, richer. An excerpt from the foreword gives a look at the themes and variations of Horowitz's latest book.

Dvořák's Prophecy and the Vexed Fate of Black Classical Music will be published this November by W. W. Norton & Company. Excerpts used with permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. Copyright © 2021 by Joseph Horowitz. All rights reserved. Learn more about the book at <https://wwnorton.com/books>. To learn about the companion series of six *Dvořák's Prophecy* documentary films that Joseph Horowitz has produced for Naxos, visit <https://bio.to/DvoraksProphecyEL>.

In 1893 the Bohemian composer Antonín Dvořák, residing in New York City, predicted that a “great and noble school” of American classical music would be founded upon America’s “negro melodies.” This prophecy was famous, influential, and controversial. In retrospect, it was shrewd, compassionate—and naïve. The Black musical motherlode migrated into popular realms: the music that defines America to this day. But classical music in America stayed white. How and why that happened is a central thread of this book. The barriers to integration were both institutional and aesthetic.

My larger theme is a failure of historical memory. Classical music in the United States, I argue, is crippled by a condition of “pastlessness.” A misleading narrative, popularized by Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, and Leonard Bernstein, maintained that there was no American music of consequence before 1910. During interwar decades when literary historians and writers identified a “usable past” that included Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman and Herman Melville, American composers decided they had none. This act of amnesia was supported by a clean modernist aesthetic that devalued Emersonian “mud and scum.” It mistrusted the vernacular. It distanced American composers and institutions of performance from Dvořák’s prophecy and from the astonishing sorrow songs that Dvořák esteemed as folk music protean with melody, rhythm, and sentiment. The same amnesia overlooked the music of Black concert composers in Dvořák’s wake. And it diminished the reputation and influence of two great creative talents—Charles Ives and George Gershwin—whose music found deep roots in vernacular song and dance. To this day, classical music in America remains Eurocentric. American orchestras and opera companies mainly perform foreign repertoire. The anchoring American canon Dvořák anticipated never materialized.

Additionally, there exist new impediments to recovering our musical past. These include misplaced accusations of “cultural appropriation.” With the

passage of time, appreciating Dvořák’s prophecy, and the era in which it occurred, seemingly becomes harder, not easier.

As a cultural historian specializ-

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ing in the history of classical music in the United States, I have spent three decades immersed in the Gilded Age and *fin-de-siècle*, 1865 to World War I. For American classical music, this was a period of brisk ascent and peak achievement. What came after was an equally swift downward slope forecast by wartime Germanophobia and sealed by the failure to secure a native canon. (This two-part trajectory is the central premise of my *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall* [2005].) In American historiography generally, my fifty-year swath is oddly volatile, subject to radically different interpretations. A melee of historical actors, trends, and events—political, social, cultural—has been variously explored or neglected, used or abused.

This book argues for a new un-

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derstanding of the history of classical music in America—one that strives to “use the past” with open ears. I begin by focusing on a pair of seminal pre-World

War I achievements by Mark Twain and Charles Ives. *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and Ives’s Symphony No. 2 are twin landmarks in defining a distinctively American style in fiction and concert music via vernacular speech and song.

I next consider subsequent readings of the same prewar period, beginning with the search for a usable past influentially undertaken by [cultural historians] Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford beginning around 1915, and subsequently by Copland, Thomson, and Bernstein (acting as music historians). I observe that the quest for literary forebears, revisiting 1865–1915, led somewhere, and that the musical quest did not. Pastlessness does not notably afflict American literature or visual art; there exists a viable canon of American novels and poems, and also of American art and architecture. Mark Twain’s achievement led to Hemingway and Faulkner. Ives’s, however, was not “used” by Copland and his contemporaries: modernists attuned to the future. Their mistrust of all possible forebears discouraged honest retrospection.

This Oedipal predilection equally overlooked the sorrow songs in which Dvořák discerned “music that suits itself to any mood or purpose.” Dvořák’s perspective—“there is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source”—was shared by important American musicians and musical thinkers around the turn of the century. And yet the post-World War I bifurcation of American music—“popular” versus “classical”—was an unhappy bifurcation of Black versus white. Indeed, an aversion to jazz, less virulent abroad, became a defining feature of the interwar musical high culture of the United States. An aversion to Gershwin among American-born classical musicians was part of the same skewed picture. So was the unjust obscurity cloaking William Dawson’s Negro Folk Symphony, Nathaniel Dett’s *The Ordering of Moses*, and Florence Price’s Symphony No. 3—formidable creative achievements whose lineage is indeed traceable to Dvořák and his milieu.

My excavation of a past denied

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and forgotten ultimately yields a new paradigmatic narrative for American classical music, starting with the sorrow songs and privileging Ives, Gershwin, and other Americans for whom vernacular resources seemed vitally proximate, and whose democratic largesse resonated with a capacious cultural saga that includes Twain, Whitman, and Melville. Stressing nineteenth-century beginnings, I discover an unexpected convergence of musical and literary pasts. In effect, the vexed fate of classical music in the United States generally, and of “Black classical music” specifically, furnishes a case study of how generations of chroniclers, cumulatively burdened with inherited assumptions, can fail to use the past profitably. Freshly revisiting Dvořák’s prophecy of 1893—a prediction that was also a diagnosis—yields opportunities to reexamine how the New World went about importing Old World musical traditions that Americans have fitfully attempted to make their own.

In fact, I believe that Americans in general are losing touch with the past, with our history and cultural inheritance. We live in an age of instant gratification. We no longer know our forebears. This is one reason we feel so fractured today.

Dvořák was bent on excavating roots. This exercise has never seemed more timely.

Ultimately, *Dvořák’s Prophecy* is a

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call for action—for better understanding the American past, and hence better appreciating the challenges and opportunities of our fraught contemporary moment.

The story of American music imposes a dense nexus of culture and race, of historical, political, and moral reckonings. We are a nation stained with twin original sins. What was done to the indigenous Americans who came first, and to the enslaved Africans who came after, can neither be undone nor—it increasingly seems—wholly overcome. How should such bitter knowledge

infect historical understanding and interpretation?

After three decades of experience producing concerts, I find that I am more than ever disposed to use music to poke at the fissures of the American experience. This exercise can be cathartic; it also invites opposition and frustration. Above all, it reveals how little we know our musical past and the uses, constructive or otherwise, to which it may be put.

In effect, I have treated classical music in America as a case study of how the past has been remembered, distorted, or denied. My governing conviction is that the past greatly matters. **S**

The author of ten previous books about American music, JOSEPH HOROWITZ is co-founder and executive producer of PostClassical Ensemble, an experimental chamber orchestra based in Washington, D.C. He has also served as an artistic consultant to more than two dozen American orchestras. An annotated playlist for his inclusive “new paradigm” for American repertoire may be found at http://josephhorowitz.com/content.asp?elemento_id=71.



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