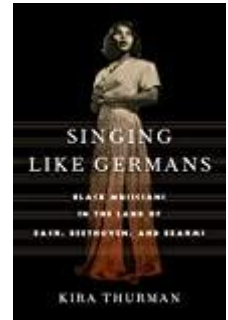


Kira Thurman. *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. 368 pp. \$32.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5017-5984-0.



Reviewed by Jeremy Zima (Wisconsin Lutheran College)

Published on H-German (January, 2023)

Commissioned by Matthew Unangst (SUNY Oneonta)

A good deal of recent historical and musicological scholarship on German musical production during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has been dedicated to challenging the persistent myth that the works of Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, and select others lay claim to a kind of universal transcendence, an artistic and aesthetic purity that exists completely separate from social, economic, or racial conditions. By deconstructing the claims of German critics and writers to musical universality, we begin to see how the construction of musical meaning for performers, audiences, and critics over time was anything but stable and neutral; rather, it was highly fraught, contingent, and often inextricably tied to evolving notions of nationhood and national identity within and outside of Germany.

Kira Thurman contributes to this complex discourse by tracing the history of Black musicians in German-speaking Europe from roughly the 1870s (the abolition of slavery in the United States and the unification of Germany) down to the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961. Thurman draws on

a vast body of archival and print sources to render visible the experiences and reception of Black German musicians in central Europe during this critical period, something that has been largely invisible or peripheral to our understanding of German musical identity. Using case studies of musicians like Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Aubrey Pankey, Thurman seeks to demonstrate that “by virtue of what they performed, where they performed, and how they performed it, Black classical musicians consistently challenged their audience’s ideas of Blackness, whiteness, and German national identity” (p. 4). The paradoxical formulation of German art as simultaneously universal and essentially *German* was tested each time a Black performer sang Schubert or performed Brahms in Vienna or Berlin, and audiences and critics alike listened with a racial ear, whether they were praising or condemning Black performances. “One thing was certain,” she writes, “musical Germanness was defined along racial lines, even during moments of international support and universalist aspirations” (p. 16).

Thurman's study is divided into three parts, which are in turn divided into chapters. Each section corresponds to a major division in German political history: 1870-1914, 1918-45, and 1945-61. Despite these neat chronological divisions, Thurman attempts throughout her book to make explicit the continuities in the construction of Blackness and whiteness and its relationship to Germanness over the course of different political and social contexts. Her decision to treat the Weimar and Nazi periods as a kind of unit is particularly effective, illustrating that many of the modes of racial thinking applied to Black performances of German music under Hitler were grounded in a biological and cultural essentialism whose origins were in place long before 1933. Moreover, she argues, those racialized modes of criticism and reception did not disappear after 1945 in East or West Germany.

Chapter 1 relates how African Americans first came into contact with and began to study German music despite the many structural impediments in place in the United States. German immigrant music teachers were critical to this story, spreading far and wide the principles of musical universalism. Black musicians—whether they studied at “white” institutions like Oberlin or at historically Black colleges and universities like Fisk or Howard—were educated largely by German teachers or their students in curricula that emphasized the artistic superiority of German composers and works. Mastery of German music functioned within a politics of racial uplift and middle-class respectability. German music teachers helped their students form transatlantic social networks as they encouraged them to study in Germany and Austria, where Black students hoped to (and did) earn places in conservatories and private studios based on their musical merit.

Chapter 2 details the experiences of Black musicians and intellectuals who traveled to Germany and Austria during the Kaiserreich. Using the reflections of Will Marion Cook, W. E. B. DuBois, and

others, Thurman demonstrates how Black travelers imagined and mostly experienced Europe as a liberating space free of the inequities of Jim Crow. Thurman is quick to complicate this narrative, however, by pointing out that these mostly affluent, educated, and (importantly) American travelers were recipients of a cultural privilege denied to Black German citizens or Black members of its colonial empire, a phenomenon that went mostly unnoticed by African American visitors.

Chapter 3 deals with the construction of race and its relationship to music in German before the First World War. Then-current notions of biological racism and a simultaneous hardening of racial and ethnic categories gave audiences and critics “the tools to begin to articulate classical music as a white medium” (p. 61). Blackness itself, therefore, was marked as incompatible with German music, causing audience and critics to hear with their eyes, interpreting the performances of singers like Hazel Harrison or instrumentalists like the Jiménez Trio in a racial key. Audiences expected Black musicians to perform spirituals or popular music, and were often confused when they heard excellent performances of Bach or Brahms by Black performers.

Chapter 4 describes how an increasingly transatlantic discourse surrounding race generally and Blackness in particular shaped the experiences of Black classical performers, specifically the singers Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson. During the Weimar years, elites in Germany and Austria provided performers like Hayes and Anderson financial support and access to social networks that translated into artistic and economic opportunities that were impossible in America and that far outstripped what white American musicians could expect in Europe. Yet, despite this idealism, this period also saw the creation of virulently anti-Black tropes: the Black Horror campaign, the “Jonny” character (immortalized in Ernst Krenek's wildly popular 1927 opera *Jonny spielt auf*), and the racial fantasies spun around

the figure of Josephine Baker. The experiences of Hayes and Anderson presented in this chapter reflect how they navigated this complicated and often contradictory reality.

Chapter 5 keeps the spotlight on Hayes and Anderson, now examining their reception as singers of German *lieder*, considered to be one of the most demanding and specifically “German” genres. This chapter in particular places in stark relief the inherent contradictions of constructed categories of race and gender. Depending on how an audience or critic felt about a performance, Thurman argues, the Blackness of Hayes or Anderson could be either a help or a hindrance. Nevertheless, the practice of reinforcing racial boundaries persisted despite the attempts of Black performers to collapse them.

Chapter 6 details the fate of Black musicians during the Nazi period, as Black performances represented to far-right ears, in Thurman’s words, “a sonic form of miscegenation, which could only be understood as a threat to the German nation and a danger to the future of the white race” (p. 147). In what amounts to a damning indictment of racial politics in the United States, many African American musicians chose to stay in Germany and Austria in the years immediately following 1933 rather than return home or seek asylum. Some, like Anderson, left late in the decade. Others faced hardship and internment in concentration camps. One of the grand ironies the Thurman illustrates in this chapter is that the demand for Black musicianship persisted even in the concentration camps.

The final section of the book considers how racial categories of thinking persisted in the aftermath of the Second World War, both in West Germany (chapter 7) and in East Germany (chapter 8). Thurman documents how “cultural notions of race, music, and talent in Germany remained stubbornly entrenched in historical notions of Black authenticity,” despite the fact that both East and West Germany officially decried any sort of racial

thinking (p. 189). Chapter 7 describes how the incomplete and perhaps misguided project of denazification allowed many of the same people who upheld the racism of the Nazi years to simply continue in their positions, providing them with a kind of plausible deniability. In detailing these continuities Thurman joins in the discourse of those scholars challenging the “zero hour mythology” (p. 188). Of particular interest in this chapter is the ways in which received racial categories and stereotypes informed operatic casting decisions in West Germany under Wieland Wagner and others. Black performers were engaged to play “exotic” or “primitive” roles in huge numbers, but were still largely excluded from traditionally “white” roles. This in turn created a difficult professional situation for singers like William Warfield or Leontyne Price. Opportunities abounded in German opera houses, but only in roles that conformed to preconceived notions of Blackness.

Chapter 8 considers the differences between official racial dogma and practice in East Germany. East Germany relied on Black musicians (as did West Germany) to distance themselves from their racist pasts. With its commitment to socialist and antiracist ideals, “East German musical culture, released from the bonds of capitalism and fascism, maintained a civic duty to uphold the great musical masters of Central Europe and share their music with the world” (p. 251). And yet, as Thurman points out, East German operatic casting decisions employed much of the same racial essentialism as they did in West Germany. Thurman’s case study of Aubrey Pankey’s objections to this sort of treatment using the official language of the East German state is of particular interest here.

Singing Like Germans is an impressive, well-researched, and truly interdisciplinary work. Thurman writes with clarity and precision, which makes this book enjoyable to read. Furthermore, despite the apparent largeness of her topic—something she acknowledges at the outset—Thurman

maintains a remarkable discipline in her arguments. There are several moments of internal summary within each chapter; some may find this redundant or pedantic, but I thought it was useful given the sheer amount of information that she narrates in a relatively compact space. Although this book has plenty to offer professional academics, especially historians and musicologists, it is also very accessible to the nonspecialist. While Thurman's work is well grounded in diasporic, postcolonial, and critical race theory, she avoids the use of jargon or opaque prose. She draws on an impressive body of primary and secondary research to bolster her claims. The length of the text, roughly 280 pages before endnotes or bibliography, is both a strength and a weakness. This relative concision renders the work readable as a text and useful as a quick resource; there are times, however, when some more explanation or context would be useful. One of the more compelling aspects of this work is Thurman's use of case studies in her narrative. She renders seen what has gone unseen for far too long, acknowledging the humanity and agency of performers both famous and forgotten. Thurman's book makes meaningful contributions to our understanding of transatlantic race relations, the experiences of Black musicians in German-speaking Europe, and role that race played in the competing notions of the universal and the national in the construction of German musical identity during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Jeremy Zima. Review of Thurman, Kira, *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. January, 2023.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=58351>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.