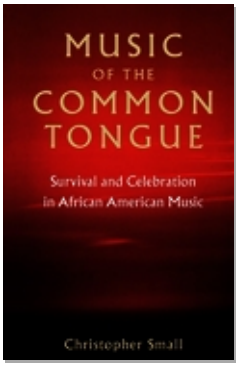
Music of the Common Tongue

Christopher Small

Published by Wesleyan University Press



Chapter 9

STYLES OF ENCOUNTER II: ADJUSTING TO WHITE CULTURE

In all musical performances in which notation has been available to aid memory, musicians have always been as literate as they have felt they needed to be. As we have seen, notation is not automatically of use to a musician; it depends on what he wants to play and how he wants to play it. We have seen, too, how while high-status European classical musicians have become completely dependent on notation, the majority of Afro-American musicians have tended not to become so, and to treasure the independence and the creative role which non-literate musicking allows to the performer. Nonetheless, where black musicians did encounter the European classical tradition they have not hesitated to make use of it, and to enter the literate tradition in various ways and in varying degrees.

For the black slaves, making music within their own community, status was not a consideration, nor for the most part would it have been among the poor whites with whom they lived in close proximity in the southern colonies and states. For them, musicking was a tool for survival, for keeping alive their sense of who they were and their feelings of belonging to a community. Similarly, later, with blues and with 'hillbilly' music; these were affirmations of identity by poor and oppressed people at the bottom of American society, strategies for making the unbearable bearable, 'that stoic feeling' as James Cone said, 'that recognizes the painfulness of the present but refuses to surrender to its historical contradictions.'[1] These people had little use for notation in their musicking.

It was a different matter when the slaves came into contact

with the literate tradition of European music, as did those who played for dances and other occasions on the plantations and in the drawing rooms of American colonial homes. These musicians, as we have seen, must have constituted an important two-way channel of communication, if not acculturation, as they played for the dancing of both masters and fellow slaves and brought elements of each style of music, and of dance, from one group to the other. How literate these musicians were is not clear, but they probably followed the rule I have proposed, and were as literate as they needed to be, in order to play, for example, from the printed collections of dance tunes which were commonly to be found in the great houses of the plantations and in the towns, not to mention those European songs and salon pieces they were also called upon to perform.

One group of people who played an important role not only in the acculturation of blacks and whites to one another but also in the formation of black American culture itself were the free blacks, who by 1860 numbered about a quarter of a million in the south and rather fewer in the north. Their position was always precarious; not only were they feared and distrusted by the slavemasters as potential fomenters of revolt, or, more simply, as embodiments of black autonomy and independence, but also they were liable to be seized and taken into slavery if they were unable to prove their status. Many, however, even in the slave states, prospered and even came to own considerable amounts of property. Others attained eminence, as did Frederick Douglass, Martin R. Delany and Sojourner Truth, as writers and editors in the campaign for the abolition of slavery, while some entered the professions. Many became clergymen; the comment by Manning Marable, about the post-Emancipation period, applies also to free blacks in the times of slavery: 'Black faith was crucially important for Black social protest movements in the U.S. . . . Racial segregation and the imposition of racist constraints in electoral politics meant that the majority of politically conscious, aggressive Black males often went into the clergy as a means of expressing their activism . . . The Church itself became a major institutional power-base from which racial inequality could be attacked'.[2]

Well before Emancipation the movement for black equality had begun, and it was blacks themselves who were the most active campaigners, often finding themselves having to confront the racism, conscious or unconscious, of those white men and women who were the official leaders of the abolitionist movement; then as now, it was quite possible for white people to be against slavery while continuing to believe in the genetic inferiority of black people. A vital aspect of that struggle was, and still is, cultural, the fight for the legitimation of black culture, not only in the perceptions of whites but even in those of blacks themselves. For those who have been the victims of cultural putdowns it seems that there is a need to pass through several stages in their evolution towards cultural autonomy. The first seems to be a need to show, both to themselves and to the members of the dominant culture, that they are capable of practising the forms of that culture in an acceptable way, and finally that they are masters of them. It is not only black Americans who have had to go through that evolution; black British and indeed all colonized peoples seem to have followed it in one way or another — we shall see later how Jamaicans in their own country did so in a very interesting way. Only when that stage has been worked through, usually ending with the discovery that nothing they can do will prove acceptable to the guardians of the dominant culture, can the attempt be abandoned, or, rather, superseded by the repudiation of that culture's ideals and the acceptance of their own. It is when the colonized come to affirm and celebrate their own culture (that is, themselves) as anyone's equal that the cultural struggle can be said to have begun in earnest. Such a process has taken place innumerable times even in recorded history; Charles Keil draws many parallels between the development of blues and of polka music during the present century as representing emergent identities of this kind among black and Polish Americans respectively.[3] There is a major difference, of course; the polkas have remained more or less within the Polish-American community, while blues is at the centre of a musical culture which has taken over the world. It is therefore of importance to our discussion that we look not only at the ways in which black Americans entered into the literate tradition but also at the nature of the

European literate tradition as it evolved in North America.

We have seen that among those who came to the British North American colonies in the seventeenth century, even those members of the lower orders of society who came as indentured servants, musical literacy was not uncommon. In the harsh conditions of early settlement, it understandably declined; even after the colonies were well established in the eighteenth century, congregations continued to prefer singing by heart rather than by note, resulting in often remarkable musical effects, but the development of that peculiarly American institution, the singing-school, kept a kind of literacy alive through the use of Fasola* and, later, shape-note notation. As the rough-and-ready communities of the early days gave way to stable villages, towns and even cities (the first census, taken in 1789, showed that of some four million people in the US, Philadelphia had a population of 42,000, New York of 33,000, Boston 18,000, and Baltimore 13,000) a more formal and 'cultivated' musical life began to emerge, largely modelled on what was still the metropolitan centre to which white Americans looked.

Not only did they follow closely musical events in London, even during and after the Revolutionary War, but they also modelled their musical institutions on the London style; in particular, the pleasure gardens which were a feature of London social and musical life had their counterparts in New York and other cities from the 1760s onwards, until well into the nineteenth century. These must have been agreeable places, to which admission could be gained for a modest charge, where the finest musicians of the day were pleased to appear and some of the best musicking could be heard by all regardless of social class, not as a solemn ritual but as part of an enjoyable social scene which included eating, drinking, promenading and, occasionally, watching fireworks. They catered for a public that was not at all selected in terms of class, and this single public enjoyed a single repertory which was known to all — folk music, songs, operatic and orchestral music alike. From the pleasure gardens the music found its way into the homes of Americans. As secular music publishing got under way in America in the 1770s (only church music had been published there up to that time) American taste began to

* A simple method of sight reading for singers.

diverge from the English, showing a tendency to the serious, even the tragic and sentimental. American musicians seized the opportunity created by publication to compose an enormous number of songs, piano pieces and the like, most of it intended for use in the home by amateurs; this made good commercial sense, since, despite the growth of public performance in the larger towns, mainly by combinations of amateurs and professionals, and, from 1735, of opera (mostly ballad operas rather than the grander works of the European stage), the vast majority of Americans lived in villages and rural areas, and their musicking took place within the home or the community. Many of the items in this repertory must have found their way into the hands of slave musicians in the great houses, as well as into the homes of the more prosperous of the free blacks.

In innumerable collections of songs, piano music and concerted music of all kinds published in the early nineteenth century, some of them still in circulation, we may well find songs by Stephen Foster, folk song arrangements (Thomas Moore's Irish Melodies were enduringly popular) and the productions of hundreds of now forgotten musicians rubbing shoulders with songs by Schubert and Mozart and some of the most florid arias of Bellini and Rossini. Charles Hamm comments that such collections 'were purchased by amateur musicians who considered all these songs to be part of a single repertory and performed in American homes by the same singers and accompanists who loved all this music . . . Who is to say that these people did not have sufficient musical background to comprehend these songs fully? Perhaps they understood them better than modern-day American audiences, who hear them sung in large concert halls in a language most of them do not understand.'[4]

As the nineteenth century progressed, however, the single repertory split into two, of high and low status, in a way with which we are today all too familiar. Perhaps the first 'popular' composer of any significance, who aimed deliberately at a mass taste, was Henry Russell, an Englishman who toured the United States extensively and successfully between 1833 and 1841, singing his own songs and leaving us such enduring weepers as *Woodman, Spare That Tree*, *The Old Bell*, and *The Old*

Armchair, as well as such rousing numbers as *A Life On the Ocean Wave*. Russell, and his host of imitators and successors, were despised and ridiculed by the growing musical middle class (who were encouraged in their more exclusive musical tastes by a large number of, especially German, immigrant musicians who had come to the United States after the European social disturbances of the mid-century). But, in collaboration with the burgeoning music-publishing business, they prospered nevertheless and established a musical genre which still survives in corners; songs with a simple melodic line, often with a touch of Italian-opera brilliance or Irish softness, with words that express directly (a cynic might say, exploit) a single, strong and unambiguous emotion or situation, with a piano accompaniment suited to performers of modest technical accomplishment. Such songs, printed and often selling in millions (one of the most popular songs of all time, Charles K. Harris' *After the Ball*, published in 1892, sold over ten million copies), gained their currency through the medium of sheet copies and collections, and were to be found in piles in every home that boasted a piano. Apart from those that were drawn from the minstrel shows, these songs, fascinating as they were, form no part of our study here; they did, however, as Nicholas Tawa says, 'supply a great majority of these [white] Americans with a structure for living and answers to the riddles of their existence even as [they] recreated them.'[5] They thus formed an important element of the musical environment in which those black musicians who worked in white society moved; as we shall see, there were also black composers who worked successfully within the genre.

Another important element of that musical environment was the piano itself. The ubiquity of the piano in nineteenth-century America is a subject of its own; Arthur Loesser tells us that in a single year, 1860, one piano was manufactured in the United States for every 1500 Americans.[6] Even more than to contemporary Europeans, the piano was to Americans the emblem of middle-class prosperity, respectability and culture, and it was thus strongly linked with the tradition of literate musicking. In the United States in particular, playing the piano was regarded as not a suitable occupation for men — at least, not for white, middle-class American men; it was

suitable for women, especially for young girls in the marriage market, for visiting European virtuosi — and for blacks. This market was met by a huge volume of sheet music and albums — dance music, marches, battle pieces, descriptive pieces and variations on popular songs; one composer of piano music, Charles Grobe, reached his Opus 1500, while the 1867 catalogue of the publishing house of Oliver Ditson listed no less than 33,000 pieces of music for piano.[7] Pianos were to be found, not only in the growing towns and cities, but as America moved west, in the frontier settlements as well, and in lumber and turpentine camps and mining towns. A piano or organ (that is to say an 'American organ' or harmonium) was one of the first items sent for after the bare needs of survival had been met; how they were carted into such often inaccessible places must be a story of endurance and persistence in itself. In such places the names of Chopin and Beethoven, or even of Charles Grobe, were more or less unknown, and sheet music rare because the formally trained literate pianist was very much an exception. A species of itinerant piano players grew up, very much in demand in remote camps and settlements, often idiosyncratic in technique and used to playing loudly on any out-of-tune, beaten-up instrument that happened to be around; usually their performance was a matter of belting out popular songs, often with embellishments, the melody in the right hand and the bass notes on the strong beats, while the rest of the chords were filled out on the offbeats in the middle of the keyboard — what became known as 'stride' style. A large number, perhaps a majority, of these piano players were black musicianers and songsters, following the tide westwards; they were also in demand in the burgeoning river cities of the midwest — St Louis, Kansas City, Sedalia, Nashville, Cincinnati among many others — as well as in the Atlantic seaboard cities. Before we look further at the art of this remarkable tribe of men, and occasionally, women, in whom the literate and non-literate traditions were to fuse and create an enduring art, we need to examine some other strains in the literate tradition in the United States.

Symphonic music came late to the United States, and it has had remarkably little contact with vernacular music; up to the

beginning of the present century classical music was a mere province of the European tradition, with its own colonial identity problem. It has been possible to detect from the mid-nineteenth century a distinct hostility among ordinary Americans to imported European culture, but surprisingly, opera did not, at least up the mid-nineteenth century, suffer in anything like the same degree from this hostility; the English ballad operas of the eighteenth century had found a ready response among all social classes, and even Italian opera, provided it was properly Englished, was popular entertainment in the first half of the nineteenth. Rossini's *Cinderella* is still, in terms of number of performances, one of the most popular works ever to have been given on the American stage. It was in this period, too, that certain operatic excerpts and especially overtures, such as those of *Poet and Peasant*, *Semiramide*, and, above all, *William Tell*, established themselves in any number of arrangements as part of the vernacular culture that was splitting itself off from the 'highbrow' culture of the urban middle class. After about 1850 opera became increasingly part of the identity of that class and its vernacular popularity a victim of the increasing class tensions of the time. But it is curious that, while opera as a whole was no longer popular entertainment in the second half of the century, certain excerpts retained their hold on popular imagination, not only staying in print in large numbers of copies but also crossing the literacy line and becoming a kind of folksong, to have considerable influence on the styles of popular music, from Stephen Foster to the present.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century the place of opera on the American popular stage was taken by operetta, which was closer to the ballad operas of a century earlier in having the action carried mostly by spoken dialogue. The first operettas were imported, from France (Offenbach), England (Gilbert and Sullivan) and Vienna (Johann Strauss), each bearing the imprint of its national style. The first generation of American operetta composers, Victor Herbert, Sigmund Romberg and Rudolf Friml, were all European born and trained, and their work contained no hint of 'American' (i.e. black) inflection; it was into that environment that *Clorindy*, *In Dahomey* and the other all-black shows exploded in the first

decade of the present century, demonstrating not only the vigour and the beauty of their black singers and dancers but also a whole new set of indigenous resources for the musical theatre, only hinted at previously in the minstrel shows. This was also the decade of ragtime, and of the first published blues songs, all of which were taken up by the white composers of musicals, so that when H. Wiley Hitchcock, in his history of American music, writes that in the 1920s musicals became 'more brash and brassy, lively and spicy, colloquial and earthy; they incorporated more identifiably American elements of dance and music; and they mirrored faithfully the optimism and hedonism, the motoric energy and the devil-may-care attitudes of the postwar boom era,'[8] he is speaking, essentially, of the incorporation of black idioms, black earthiness and black energy into the idiom of the American popular stage.

The modern musical is a curious hybrid of European operetta and American vaudeville and minstrelsy, with the black influences well assimilated if not actually concealed, a musically fertile but dramatically perpetually unsatisfactory form despite the 'revolutionary' new musicals that seem to appear about once every fifteen years. *Showboat* (1927), *Oklahoma!* (1943), *West Side Story* (1957) and *A Chorus Line* (1977), all in their time hailed as heralding a new seriousness and dramatic depth, have each with the passing of the years revealed a soft-centredness, even a sentimentality, which suggests an origin not so much in the urge to explore and to celebrate identity as in businessmen's calculation and market research. I do not recall any musical, other than the zaniest and most irresponsible, in which I did not feel I was being manipulated by a story line which was designed to feed urban middle-class fantasies. This is what lies behind a comment by John Lahr: 'Musicals are America's right-wing political theatre because they reinforce the dreams that support the status quo.'[9]

It is not only the storylines of musicals that celebrate the values (the 'dreams' of which Lahr writes) that legitimize and underpin the modern industrial state, not even only their assimilation, without acknowledgement, of black cultural forms (especially dance), but also the mechanical perfection of

their scenic effects, of their song and dance routines and even of their jokes. Whatever elements of Afro-American idiom may still be present, there can be no other musical form from which the spontaneous creativity and improvisation that are the lifeblood of the Afro-American tradition have been so thoroughly banished. Nothing in a modern musical is left to chance or to the inspiration of the moment; once a few 'out-of-town tryouts' have established the show in all its details, nothing can be changed, and it will be exactly the same show whether it is presented on Broadway, in London's West End or in a remote town in Australia. To attend any one of perhaps thousands of identical performances of a musical is to be caught up in a ritual which, even more clearly than does a symphony concert, celebrates the corporate industrial state; it does not even make a pretence of acknowledging the autonomy of the individual.

The other literate musical body which we should notice here is the wind band, of which Hitchcock says: 'By the early twentieth century hardly an American hamlet was without its village band; hardly a public procession passed without the sound of the brasses, woodwinds, drums and cymbals of a band.'[10] These are not of course the all-brass affairs of the British tradition, but have extensive woodwind sections as well, as well as much and varied percussion. Their performances are usually from notation, and their repertory consists not only of marches and outdoor music but also dance music, selections and pot-pourris from opera and operetta, overtures and specially written concert pieces, usually of a programmatic or impressionist kind. They have for this reason been an important medium by means of which literate music making has become widely disseminated, since most wind bands are composed of amateurs and there is about them little of the social exclusiveness of the symphony orchestra.

Finally, literate music making has always been strongly cultivated in the Protestant churches. The role played by those churches in the propagation of literacy in general is too big a matter to consider here; it has to do with the belief in the need for each person to confront the godhead personally, and thus for him to be able to read the sacred text of the Bible for

himself, but it has also to do with the wider matter of the Protestant commitment to the subduing of the emotional, sensuous and instinctual processes of human life and to the rigorous maintenance of the religious life on the conscious and the rational level. I mentioned earlier the decline of literacy in the early days of the American colonies and the efforts made by men of the churches to promote what they called 'regular singing', through methods such as fasola and shape-note notation which were as ingenious as they were apparently effective. Their success can be seen not only in the elaborate anthems and choral singing of the large churches in middle-class areas but also in the large number of hymnals in circulation, and very much in use, today in the poorer regions of the south, often printed in shape-notes, with names like *The Virginia Harmony*, *The Kentucky Harmony*, *The Missouri Harmony*, *The Western Lyre*, and, most famous of all, *The Southern Harmony* and *The Sacred Harp*, the last-named having been first published in 1844.

The pressures on black musicians to adopt literate ways of music making were twofold. The first was that urge to perform within the forms of the dominant culture which we have seen to be a characteristic of the early stages of the fight for cultural autonomy by an underdog or colonized group. In this case it can be seen as part of the more general movement for what was termed 'Negro improvement' which was under way before Emancipation under the leadership of white educators. Its aims were the eventual complete assimilation of blacks into the main stream of American life and the elimination of all trace of 'primitive' and 'ignorant' African ways and of the culture of slavery. It must have been an attractive idea at the time, and, not surprisingly, had the support also of a number of black intellectuals. Here, for example, is James Monroe Trotter, one of the first black officers in the Boston Post Office and an amateur musician, writing in the preface to a collection he made of music by black composers, published in 1878:

> '. . . I shall here make mention by name of none but persons of scientific musical culture; of none but can read the printed musical page, and can give its contents life and expression . . . The singer or player 'by ear' merely,

> however well favored by nature, will not be mentioned. This course will be followed, not because persons of the latter class are regarded contemptuously — not by any means; but because it is intended that the list given here shall be, as far as it goes, a true record of what pertains to the higher reach and progress of a race, which, always considered as *naturally* musical, has yet, owing to the blighting influences of the foul system of slavery, been hitherto been prevented from obtaining, as generally as might be, a *scientific* knowledge of music.'[11]

(Trotter was of course using the word 'scientific' here in accordance with the general usage of his day, to mean simply 'learned' or 'knowledgeable'.)

The second pressure was much more immediate, and concerned the musician's ability to earn a living; one who could read was clearly going to make a better living, other things being equal, than one who could not, especially in a society in which music was of the few occupations in which blacks had any advantage over whites. There is evidence, for example, of a considerable fraternity of black singing masters and music teachers in the northern towns and cities from the late eighteenth century. One Newport Gardiner, for example, African by birth, had been lucky enough to win a lottery prize with which he bought his freedom; he studied in Newport, Rhode Island, with the eminent musician Andrew Law and became well known in the area as a music teacher as well as composer of a large quantity of both sacred and secular music. He was only one of many whose careers went mostly unrecorded.

The black churches also encouraged the formal practice of music and musical literacy. We have already noticed the hymnal which was published in 1801 by the Rev Richard Allen, a formidable and articulate man who was founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia; it went through several editions and in 1818 was issued with melodies, many of which must have been written by himself or members of his congregation. Again, it was one of several such hymnals. Eileen Southern says of the black separatist churches in general:

> '. . . the church played the important role of patron. It sponsored singing schools of children and adults and offered showcases for the display of talent within the black community through its promotion of concerts and artist recitals. It fostered the development of talent among the young, even to the extent of raising money for necessary musical study. Perhaps most important of all, it provided a place where blacks could experiment with composing all kinds of religious music, from the lowly spiritual to formal anthems and similar set pieces.'[12]

The black churches even sponsored sacred music concerts in which the major works of the European oratorio tradition as well as large-scale choral works by black composers were performed. In the early years of the nineteenth century they must, as Southern suggests, have been a major medium by means of which blacks, both slave and free, were acculturated into literate musicking, and in particular into the classical tradition. Not that literate musicking ever took over completely in most black churches; many accounts tell with how much more love and conviction the congregations sang when it was their own hymns and spirituals they sang, free from the restraints of 'regular singing'. The modern efflorescence of gospel song in black churches gives us ample evidence of the survival of the black styles through several generations of 'improvement'.

Another important medium of acculturation was the army bands into which black musicians were recruited from colonial times onwards. Initially comprising only fifes, drums and, occasionally, trumpets, these bands were enlarged into full military bands by a Congressional order of 1792, and the names of many musicians known to have been black are recorded in their archives. As Southern points out, the number of civilian bands consisting entirely of black musicians which appeared after the War of 1812 suggests strongly that many of them acquired their skills — and even in all probability their instruments — in the army during that war. It was at that time that the first black American musician to win international fame came to public notice as leader of the all-black Band of the Third Company of Washington Guards in Philadelphia. This was Francis Johnson (1792–1844), whose

successive bands excelled alike at parades, dances and concert performances; he spent some time in London, where his band's accomplishments gained them a command performance before Queen Victoria, and, on his return to Philadelphia he promoted and conducted a series of promenade concerts that were from all accounts both musically superb and fashionably successful. He was a successful composer, especially of dance and programmatic music; he was, however, only the best-known of many fine black composers and band leaders who enjoyed local or national fame in the years before the Civil War. Indeed, it seems that at that time black musicians enjoyed a virtual monopoly in the provision of dance and other functional music for white urban society. It is interesting to note that the musicians in most of these bands were able to double on both wind and string instruments, using the latter when needed for indoor performance and more polite occasions generally; this versatility would no doubt have increased the demand for their services.

But even with these accomplished musicians whose skills in the literate tradition were clearly outstanding, we can detect an attitude towards the notated score that sets them apart from white colleagues. Of Johnson himself, for example, it was said that he had 'a remarkable taste for distorting a sentimental, simple and beautiful song into a reel, jig or country-dance;'[13] as Southern points out, his compositions as notated and published do not seem at all remarkable in relation to the conventions of the day, so that it must have been in the provision of material for a brilliant performance that the brilliance of his compositions lay, as well as in the rhythmic inflections which his band brought to the music as it was played. One wonders how similar his way of working could have been to that of Duke Ellington a hundred years later.

It was in the peculiar circumstances of New Orleans that not only band music (the citizens of that city were famously devoted to band music for all possible social and civic occasions), but all kinds of concerted music, both literate and non-literate, flourished among black people. The ample opportunities for contact between the various traditions of European and Afro-American musicking were of course to

bring forth in the first decade of the twentieth century the style we know as jazz, but even before the Civil War there was a large number of black musicians in the city who were able to play in whatever style was required of them. Henry Kmen[14] even reports a Negro Philharmonic Society which flourished there in the 1830s, with its own symphony orchestra of members, which engaged visiting European artists to play with or for them, and even employed white musicians in the orchestra when needed to make up any deficiencies in instrumentation.

On the North American mainland, such an organization could exist only in New Orleans; elsewhere it was wind bands, ranging in strength from half a dozen to thirty or more musicians, that represented the literate tradition; doubtless, like Johnson's, they frequently took considerable liberties with the notated texts. They played not only for white social occasions — parades, society dances and balls, assemblies and the like — but also within the black community, often accompanying church choirs at concerts and even for services. They must have served as training grounds for generations of musicians, who learned not only reading and instrumental skills but also composition, arranging and direction, which they were to apply in a variety of contexts.

The Civil War itself provided a powerful stimulus to those activities; large numbers, out of all proportion to the total number of black troops, served as musicians in the Union Army. After the war, many of these musicians found employment also in the bands of the minstrel shows which, as we have seen, gradually became all-black institutions which gave black artists the opportunity to show their musical and theatrical skills. Music directors, we are told, often had difficulty in sorting out literate from non-literate musicians, so well did they all know the traditional repertory of the minstrel show.

There has always been a small but significant number of black musicians who have acculturated completely into the European classical tradition, as composers, singers (especially, of course, in opera) and instrumentalists (the latter almost always as soloists — even today it is difficult for a black musician to find employment in symphony orchestras).

Despite the considerable achievements of these musicians, not least in their struggle with racial stereotypes, they must remain outside the scope of this book. There were , however, many black musicians who worked in the field of the popular song, many of them hugely successful. Such were Gussie Davis, composer of comic and religious, but above all of sentimental vaudeville songs such as *The Fatal Wedding*, and *In The Baggage Coach Ahead* (the latter an early million-seller) and, most successful of all, James Bland (*Dem Golden Slippers* and *Carry Me Back To Old Virginny* are two of his most enduring songs). It must be remembered that these, like countless now forgotten colleagues, were highly skilled musicians of all work — conductors, instrumentalists, pianists, arrangers, even actors and dancers when the need arose. It is instructive to consider the repertories which all these remarkable musicians encompassed.

Eileen Southern tells us that the repertory of Francis Johnson's band during its London seasons included 'arias from operas by Bellini, Rossini and Hartmann, instrumental pieces by Mozart and de Beriot, and arrangements of English and American patriotic songs', and, conversely, that his own compositions 'found their way into collections along with pieces of Beethoven, Braham, Bergmuller, Czerny and arrangements of Bellini, Donizetti and Weber.'[15] Again, in his introduction to W.C. Handy's *Blues: An Anthology*, Abbe Niles tells us that in the 1890s 'All minstrel bands were expected to play the *William Tell* and *Poet and Peasant* overtures, and some selections from *The Mikado* and *The Bohemian Girl*, plus a medley like *Plantation Echoes*, interspersed with solos for piccolo, trombone or trumpet. In the theater, the soloist would probably offer the latest tune from Broadway, from Paul Dresser or Charles K. Harris. Mahara's [the Mahara Minstrel Company] star performer, Billy Young, had a repertory that ranged from a selection from Shakespeare to a Chauncey Oleott song — depending on the audience — but his specialities were the tear-jerking songs of Gussie L. Davis such as *Fatal Wedding* or *Picture 84*.'[16] Of the 'coon songs' which were the staples of the black minstrel show, Niles comments: 'These were dutifully undertaken by the musicians, who were obliging or subtle enough to put them over with gusto and get

their laughs. But their private opinions of such burlesques were something else again.'[17]

And, from Blesh and Janis's *They All Played Ragtime*, there is this account of the repertoires of ragtime pianists around the turn of the century: 'On the instrumental side, neither individual ragtime players nor groups restricted themselves to ragtime. Light classical overtures were played straight with precise spacing and beautiful counterpoint, and marches were either rendered 'legitimately' or syncopated in the way Buddy Bolden's ragtime band was currently playing them at tough old Masonic Hall in New Orleans. And there were the concert waltzes, slow and dreamy in the age-old fashion of those pieces, tantalizing in their syncopations of three-quarter time, later merging into the hesitation waltz, but a lost art today. The ragtimers' repertory, finally, included descriptive overtures.'[18]

It seems, in fact, that for black musicians there were not two repertoires but only one. Black American musicians have approached the European classical tradition, like any other way of musicking, with respect and love but not with subservience, according it no specially privileged status but simply its legitimate place among the material of their musical experience and performance. Their matter-of-fact musicianship and versatility would appear closer to the true spirit of Mozart or Liszt than does that of today's superstar classical composer or performer; further, if today the classical tradition finds itself cut off from its true sources of nourishment and confined to a gilded ghetto, it is not the fault of the musicians of the Afro-American tradition. Here, for example, are Blesh and Janis once more, this time talking about Thomas 'Fats' Waller: 'The time he and the Cathedral organist played alone in the loft of Notre Dame in Paris is one such memory. When the reporters asked him about it, Waller would only say, "First Mr Dupré played the God-box and then I played the God-box". There are persistent rumours of grand organ recordings made for Victor that are said to begin with superb recordings of Bach chorales and go into dazzling transformations in African ragtime rhythms.'[19]

It could be that these musicians were faithful to an older tradition of musicking akin to that of the eighteenth-century

pleasure gardens, a tradition which continued in Europe into the nineteenth century with the public concerts of virtuosi such as Paganini, Liszt, Thalberg and, in America, Gottschalk. The public repertories of those musicians consisted for the most part of operatic fantasies, variations on well-known melodies, programmatic pieces and dance studies, and their concerts were as much social as they were purely musical occasions. As Henry Raynor tells us: 'It was possible to smoke, eat and drink between the items and the seats were arranged so that the audience could move at ease about the auditorium. Liszt would go to the piano and play for a time; then he would descend into the auditorium and talk to friends lucky enough to be presented to him. Then he would play a little more, interspersing the entire programme with socializing descents into the auditorium.'[20] There is clearly a somewhat different kind of social event, a different ritual, taking place here from a modern piano recital. Such 'serious' works as the sonatas of Beethoven and Mozart and the preludes and fugues of J.S. Bach were not played in public concerts; they were intended by their creators, not for public exhibition, but for the enjoyment of connoisseurs in their homes.

Those artists were figures of popular fame not unlike today's rock stars, and they inspired comparable responses in their audiences; they were the 'Philistines' against whom Robert Schumann and his highminded friends did battle in the interest, as they saw it, of 'serious' music making. The reason for this new and, I believe, ultimately destructive solemnity in public music making is suggested by Arthur Loesser in a passage which I suggest should be read against my earlier comments on musicking as social ritual:

> 'During the middle of the nineteenth century, in truth, the *bourgeoisie* was slowly achieving a sophistication of artistic leadership. The showier purchasable habits of the rich could mostly be copied plausibly by people not nearly so rich, thus destroying their distinction . . . Special groups of educated music lovers now became assertive, especially in German cities; they were worthy people of bourgeois background, imbued with intellectual rather than with pecuniary snobbery . . . art pietists, worshippers of the audible God, grown bolder and more influential with

> Germany's remarkable economic and political rise, and breaking into outright arrogance after 1871. They were increasingly able to impose their standards of taste on larger circles of people and partly through the prestige of thousands of emigrated German musicians, they even succeeded in persuading some of the rich and powerful of other nations to climb out with them on their not always comfortable little penthouse porch. Furthermore, they imposed a ceremonious solemnity, a kind of churchly decorum, upon the concert hall, replacing the 'club' atmosphere of earlier German concerts or the 'show' atmosphere of the Paris-heated virtuoso exhibitions.'[21]

It was of course in particular to the United States that those thousands of German musicians emigrated in the nineteenth century; their arrival, coinciding with the growth of a white middle class with aspirations to European culture, completed the takeover of 'cultured' public music-making that had been started by educators such as Lowell Mason earlier in the century. As has so often happened, the older, more informal habits of public musicking passed into the hands of a socially inferior group, and it is quite possible that Liszt, Thalberg and Gottschalk would have felt themselves more at home in the world of W.C. Handy, Scott Joplin and Fats Waller than in that of the modern concert pianist.

Handy, who did more perhaps than any other single individual to bring the distinctive sounds of the blues to the attention of a white audience (and is thus about as much entitled to the sobriquet 'Father of the Blues' as is Haydn to that of 'Father of the Symphony') did not grow up in the blues tradition. In his youth in Alabama in the 1880s, he received a thorough formal training in classical music from a remarkable itinerant musician who had settled by chance in Handy's home town of Florence, and, according to Abbe Niles, 'eternally drilled his classes in singing by the sol fa system until they could perform unaccompanied choruses from Wagner, Verdi and Bizet'[22] (this at a time when Wagner, even in Germany, was a controversial modernist!) Handy became in time an all-round musician, cornettist, singer, composer, arranger, conductor and publisher, who was for a time music director of the famous Mahara's Colored Minstrels. It was

during southern tours in the 1890s that he first became aware of the wealth of black folk music, in particular that form which we cannot be sure was yet called blues. Finding himself in Memphis in 1912, and called upon to compose a campaign song for a local politician, he dug into his recollections of the form and produced what was called first *Mr Crump Don't Allow* and later *Memphis Blues*. It may not have been the first song in blues form to have been written down and published, but it was the first to make much of an impact; its publication was a tremendous success. For the purpose of notation Handy evolved what is now the conventional usage of making the flatted third or sharped second, depending on context, represent the ambiguous blues third; as the published versions were for voice and piano accompaniment this was sufficient anyway, since there is no way that the 'true' blue third (if there is such a thing) can be found on the keyboard.

Defrauded by the publisher of his share of profits on the song, he entered the publishing business on his own account with the firm of Pace and Handy, first of Memphis and later of New York. The firm prospered, and Handy saw to it that his subsequent songs, including the famous *St Louis Blues*, remained firmly in his own hands. These two were the first of a stream of successful blues publications, of both traditional material and of his own compositions in blues form, which were to prove deeply influential on succeeding generations, up to and even after the issuing of the first blues recordings by a black artist in 1920. It was Handy who, by systematizing the blues inflections and harmonies, and devising ways of notating them, made them available to popular-song composers. The device of beginning a song with a blue third followed by a major third, as in *St Louis Blues* (*"Oh, I* hate to see . . .' and *'Got the* Saint *Lou-is* blues . . .') became a cliché of popular song, most memorably perhaps in Harold Arlen's *Stormy Weather*. Moreover, it was through the medium of Handy's published versions that many black musicians made their first encounter with blues; even so great a performer as Willie 'The Lion' Smith confessed that that was how he had first encountered the style and the culture (Smith had grown up in New York, which was never a centre of blues culture).

It was Handy's *Blues: An Anthology*, in particular, published in 1926 and still in print today, which disseminated the essentials of the style, its notes if not its performance style, fixing the forms and introducing the idioms into popular song. Looking through the piano arrangements in that volume, they seem today somewhat tame and conventional both in harmony and in rhythm; they are of course schematic, a springboard for the performer's own creation (one interesting feature, however, is the use of Latin rhythms in some blues, for example the habanera accompaniment to *St Louis Blues*). The act of writing did tend to 'freeze' specific blues and to diminish the improvised traffic between one blues and another; 'composed' blues, from *Memphis Blues* onwards, had a much sharper and more individual profile, a permanence of form and content which sets them apart from the older, oral blues. Published blues became objects rather than processes, and writing them down shifted them towards the world of commercial popular song, a process that was helped by the fact that the same publishers and distributors were involved in the dissemination of both. It is fair to say that notating the blues changed its character and took away that fluidity which is characteristic of oral blues; this was the price that had to be paid for the wider availability of the style, especially to musicians who were not otherwise in contact with the culture.

Whereas blues is quintessentially a vocal art, even though it passed into the hands of instrumentalists, ragtime was from its beginning instrumental. The race of itinerant pianists I mentioned earlier is described by Blesh and Janis: 'There existed in Sedalia and throughout the country a large class of Negro — and some white — pianists, many of them gifted and all of them close to the sources of folk music. Drifting from one open town to the next, following the fairs, the races and the excursions, these men formed a real folk academy. After the tonks and the houses closed, they would meet in some hospitable back-room rendezvous and play on into the morning. Ideas were freely exchanged, and rags, true to one meaning of the word, were patched together from the bits of melody and scraps of harmony that all contributed. Among the tribe were men of great potentialities who created complete and beautiful rags and songs, yet the feeling of

proprietorship scarcely existed; commercial rivalry had not yet entered this Eden . . . This was all to be changed in time, but during the formative years a player had but two aims: the making of music and the achievement of a personal playing style. Under such circumstances ragtime developed naturally and rapidly.'[23]

The ragtime style, with its rhythmically complex, flowing melodies in the right hand over a simple one-two left hand, must have been around for a long time; not only is it documented in descriptions of the cakewalk dances back in the 1870s, but also, in the compositions of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, from about 1860, one can hear clear pre-echoes of both the melodic style and the rhythms of ragtime. In its brief trajectory (it surfaced in the 1890s, became the basis of a world-wide dance craze around 1900 and was in eclipse by 1920) ragtime underwent a complete evolution, from non-literate 'folk' style to fully literate published compositions to, finally, a completely commercial music.

The early centres of activity were not so much the great cities of the east or New Orleans in the south, as in the midwest, especially along the great river systems which flow into the Mississippi; its roots were in the jigs, coon songs and dances of the minstrel shows, as well as in the music of the wind bands that were ubiquitous throughout the United States but especially popular in the midwest. Ragtime can be seen as a fusion of the rhythmically complex melodic lines of the former with the oom-pah bass of march music. As Blesh and Janis suggest, early ragtime, like blues, was non-literate, and trasmitted orally from one performer to another, with all the fluidity of form and content that belong to non-literate musicking. As its popularity increased and the music spread across the country, writing down and publication ensued quickly. The first rag was published in 1897, about the same time as the first recordings and piano rolls were made of the music. It is interesting that, whereas the writing down of blues remained secondary to its oral transmission, ragtime rapidly became essentially a literate music with very little room for improvisation.

With notation and publication came a number of significant changes within the music itself. Notation tends to produce

standardization, and we find in the first place that ragtime became standardized into the same form as the march, with separate, repeated strains and a trio section usually in the subdominant key. Nearly all published ragtime pieces are in this form. But a second, more subtle change was also more profound. Descriptions of ragtime melodies usually tell us they are 'syncopated', that is to say, that they have strong accents on what are naturally weak beats and, conversely, they have rests or tied notes on what are naturally strong beats. But this 'syncopation' is in fact a misnomer brought about by the nature of the traditional western notation that is perforce used to notate the pieces. Ragtime is not in fact a syncopated music at all, but something much more interesting; it is a polyrhythmic music, in which the right-hand melodies are built on a different set of rhythmic concepts from the left-hand basses.

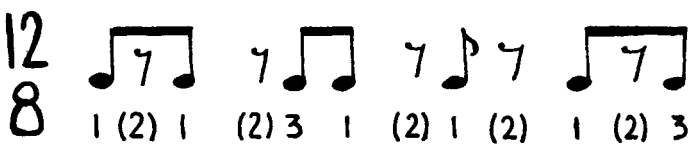
Whereas European musical practice tends to divide the units of duration into two and multiples of two, so that a bar of eight divides into either two groups of four or four groups of two, ragtime melody divides the eight semiquavers of the two-four bar into groups of two threes and a two — one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two (actually it is even more complex than that, for the composer often likes to make elegant play with the difference between the two rhythmic approaches, so that while one bar may divide up one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four, the next may divide up one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two). These 'additive' rhythms, which are opposed to the 'divisive' or 'multiplicative' rhythms of traditional European music, and their polyrhythmic relationship with the one-two bass, bespeak the survival, not of African rhythms, as is sometimes said (and is implied, wrongly, in Blesh and Janis's account of Fats Waller's organ playing), but of African *attitudes to rhythm*, of the liking for multiple patterns going on at the same time and for additive as well as divisive patterns. These patterns are concealed by the way in which they have been notated. This can best be explained by examining the effect of the imposition of European notation on certain West African rhythms.

A ubiquitous rhythmic pattern of West African drum orchestras is that of the timekeeping double bell, or *gangogui*.

Unlike a European timekeeper, the drummer in a brass band for example, the player does not give out a steady stream of equal beats, but himself plays a quite complex pattern which nevertheless serves to keep all the other players in time. The pattern is based on a cycle of twelve beats, divided up as follows (it is very fast indeed, around 200–240 to the minute:

> ONE-(two), ONE-(two)-THREE, ONE-(two), ONE-(two), ONE-(two)-THREE

As played by an African musician the sound is smooth and without accent, other than the marking-off of the first beat of the cycle by playing it on the larger bell while the rest is played on the smaller, and it races ahead like an express train, giving a powerful impetus to all the other layers of the music. I first encountered it written down, however, on the back of a record sleeve, in traditional European notation, thus:



In this rendition, although it preserves exactly the placing of the sounds in the time continuum, the natural additive rhythms are turned into displaced accents, or syncopations, which force the person reading them to feel them as bumps; instead of an express train we have an ancient freight train jolting over the points. It is not surprising that I was unable to associate what I read with what I heard on the record; for African musicians that is not their problem, since they do not require notation anyway.

Now the one-two-three, one-two-three, one-two of ragtime melody is a version of a rhythmic pattern which is virtually universal in Afro-American musicking from Buenos Aires to Maine; it is known in Latin countries as clavé (I shall have more to say of it later) and it seems to represent the black musician's neat 'truce' with the rhythmic concepts of European musicking. The twelve-beat cycle of West Africa

became transformed in the process of acculturation into the eight-beat four-four or two-four bar of Europe, but the unequal, or additive, subdivision of the eight remains; actually, two threes and a two, in various orderings, are the only ways in which it is possible to make an unequal subdivision of eight beats, so it is not surprising that it is ubiquitous. It is this additive rhythm which is to be found in the melodies of ragtime. There are also other apparent syncopations which arise from the equally natural tendency of Afro-American musicians to place important notes slightly ahead of the beat, a practice which ragtime composers systematized by anticipating the beat by the durational interval of a semiquaver. To call either of these practices 'syncopation' is to impose European concepts on a musical practice that has its roots elsewhere.

Notating the rhythms of ragtime (and to devise a way of notating them at all is an intellectual feat on the part of the ragtimers which has passed without comment) imposed on the smooth additive rhythms of the melodies, and their delightful polyrhythmic play with the bass, a series of bumps and jolts that is alien to the style but which one hears all too often faithfully reproduced by performers. To play ragtime stylishly it is necessary to re-translate the symbols into the original additive rhythms which their composers heard and played; for the classically-trained pianist it is deeply rewarding to make the effort, to submit oneself to the rhythms and eventually feel the melodies flowing as they should.

The complexities of the ragtimers' relationship with the literate European tradition do not end there. We have already noted that they were perfectly familiar with classical music, which they did not appear to feel was in any way alien to them; in particular, the harmonic idioms of classical music, its chord progressions, voice leading and bass-lines, are in ragtime pieces all treated with scrupulous correctness. The harmonies do not have the extreme complexity of those of their contemporaries Strauss, Mahler and Schoenberg, but resemble rather the simpler, more open harmonies of those nineteenth-century Italian operas which formed an important part of the repertory (one might almost say, the mental furniture) of most vernacular musicians of the time. Most of

all, unlike blues musicians (and of course blues also formed part of the repertory of the ragtime pianists) they retained something also of the European function of harmony in the creation of surprise and even drama, even if of a fairly mild variety — for example, the descent onto a flatted-sixth chord in the fifth bar of Scott Joplin's *Maple Leaf Rag*. But harmony, being concerned with the succession of chords in time, has also a rhythmic dimension, and tends to reinforce the regularity of phrase and accent, the balancing of antecedent and consequent phrases, which has characterized European music from the earliest days of harmonic music. The ragtime composer, then, has not only to conceive his melodies against the background of the one-two of the bass but also to make them conform to the regular chord progressions and the harmonic rhythm, bringing them to rest in such ways as to coincide with the cadences; this introduces further tensions into the music, but also gives the composer the chance to demonstrate his ingenuity in the ways in which he deals with them. It is in fact the elegant and airy way in which he plays with these tensions and problems that accounts for the fascinating difficulties of playing ragtime.

Confirmation of these features of ragtime comes, in a negative way, from the work of two contemporary musicians of the classical tradition who attempted to write in the ragtime style, namely Debussy and Stravinsky; both, being who they were, made interesting compositions but neither came within earshot of it. Debussy's *Golliwog's Cakewalk*, on the one hand, uses throughout only a single simple syncopated figure, revealing a poverty of rhythmic invention that would have caused ridicule among the ragtimers. Stravinsky, on the other hand, in his *Ragtime* and *Piano-Rag Music* (the former published with a drawing by Picasso on the cover, of what looks like a pair of nigger-minstrel musicians, showing a complete incomprehension of the music), apparently misled by the visual syncopations in the written scores he had studied, and doubtless wishing to show his mastery of this simple vernacular music, piles syncopation upon syncopation until the underlying beat almost disappears, submerging in lumpish and inelegant cleverness the clarity and grace which marks the best ragtime melody, while the relation between his

melody and its bass remains stubbornly monorhythmic.

Scott Joplin, probably the greatest and certainly the best-known figure of ragtime, seems, like so many artists, not to have noticed that his art belonged in a pigeonhole, and strove constantly to expand its range while at the same time seeking its acceptance by middle-class music lovers as a serious form of expression. In his hands, ragtime became something akin to European concert music; his later pieces, like the dance pieces of Chopin, are not so much music for dancing as abstractions of dance music which create in the mind of the listener, without causing him to move a muscle, images of dance and of its gestures. It is possible to feel very ambivalent about Joplin's ambitions for his music; in these pieces and in his two operatic ventures, *A Guest of Honor* and *Treemonisha*, one can perceive something of that siren call towards the respectability and the social status of classical music which has affected many vernacular musicians whose mastery of their own style was already complete. On the other hand, those pieces, like the 'serious' works of Mozart and Haydn, in no way deny the validity of the vernacular tradition from which they spring, but rather celebrate and treasure it. And no doubt, feeling nothing of the fatal discontinuity which today divides the western tradition against itself, he would be surprised at our surprise that, with only fairly elementary formal training and never having seen an opera in his life, he should have ventured to create not one but two works in this medium. *A Guest of Honor* is lost, but in *Treemonisha* Joplin is clearly addressing, not a middle-class white audience but his own people, with a message which is loud and clear: abandon your traditional ways, your superstitions and beliefs, and educate yourselves to become part of the world which is dominated by white values.

It is in fact the message of 'Improvement'; however questionable such a message may seem today, however questionable may seem the use of the operatic medium to convey it, the piece stands as a testimony to one man's greatness of spirit and intellectual audacity in what he undertook, and almost brought off.

Ben Sidran has observed that 'Black culture in America has been shaped by the amount of psychic energy it has spent

adjusting to white culture.'[24] While it is possible to see this process of adjustment at work in all the black musicking described in this chapter, it is perhaps ragtime which shows it most clearly. It is an elegant and poised art, in some ways the most complete and subtle in the whole history of Afro-American music, which affirms with clarity and precision a particular kind of accommodation to European culture at a particular point in the history of that relationship, and the emerging black affirmation of identity. It was the first black music which had the nerve to affirm that identity, not just as a strategy for survival within the black community, but in a way which also signalled to white Americans the presence and the identity of black people. As a declaration of independence, however, it proved insufficient, too tied to European ways of musicking, especially in its reliance on notation, and thus its finitude and denial of a creative role to the performer, to satisfy for long the need for an affirmation of black American identity. And, perhaps even more important, it was too easy for classically-trained, non-improvising musicians to take it over; the creation in recent years of a ballet, that most European and abstract of dance forms, on the ragtime pieces of Joplin by the British Royal Ballet would suggest that his assimilation by the classical-music establishment is well under way.

Many writers have attributed the rapid eclipse of ragtime after about 1914 to a development that was taking place at the same time as the art became more 'classical' — it also became commercialized. But one wonders how crucial a factor this was in a ragtime's decline; other black musics have survived commercial takeovers and have even thriven on them for as long as those who first evolved the style retained enough interest in it to continue contributing their creative energy to it. Ragtime may have dried up simply because those black musicians who were its powerhouse moved on to other, more open, forms of musicking, notably jazz, which was better fitted to act as a medium for the growing black urge to affirm an identity, not just to themselves but to the world at large.

It is nonetheless true that the evolution of ragtime coincides with the development of American music publishing as big business — the growth of Tin Pan Alley — and that ragtime

did become for a time the biggest money-spinner of all. As publishers' hacks ground out rags by the dozen, their quality and interest diminished as reliance was placed on a bag of rhythmic tricks and melodic clichés. There came into being the genre of the ragtime song, in verse-chorus form, with a lightly syncopated melody over a simple one-two accompaniment. The histories of ragtime, vaudeville (which had replaced the minstrel show in popularity from about 1880 onwards), and of Tin Pan Alley, were all more or less contemporaneous. Charles Hamm says of these songs: 'Ragtime songs differ from other Tin Pan Alley songs more in spirit than in musical style; they are brash, spirited, slightly syncopated, breezy, almost always humorous — characteristics they share with many of the songs of George M. Cohan. And, almost without exception, they were written and performed by whites. A pattern was established with the ragtime song that was to recur time and time again in the twentieth century: white popular music skimmed off superficial stylistic elements of a type of music originating among black musicians, and used these to give a somewhat different, exotic flavor to white music.'[25]

It was in this way that both the rhythmic inflections of ragtime and the melodic inflections of blues passed into American popular song; in fact, virtually all the features of American popular song which we are able to recognize as specifically 'American' come from the black influence, either directly, from blues and ragtime, and, later jazz, or indirectly through minstrelsy. Certainly those songs which were composed up to about the first decade of the present century — such hugely popular songs as *After the Ball*, *Bird in a Gilded Cage, Good Old Summertime, Daisy Bell, Sweet Adeline, Meet Me In St Louis* and hundreds of others — could, apart from the American references in the lyrics, have been composed as well in Europe as in America. A surprising number of them are in waltz time; virtually all use a simple harmonic language, harking back to the Italian operas of the nineteenth century, and show in their melodic lines occasional traces of Italian floridity. All are verse-chorus songs, which as we have seen is a European form; it is interesting that as black idioms started to creep in over the years the verse slowly atrophied so that in

most popular songs up to the 1950s it is the chorus that is the most memorable part of the song, with the verse reduced to a mere ad libitum scene-setting appendage.

It was ragtime rhythms that first found their way into the armoury of Tin Pan Alley songwriters; the young Irving Berlin, for example, wrote many 'ragtime' songs before his first great success of 1911, *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, a song that despite its undoubted pep and catchiness contains no trace of ragtime rhythms. But it was the melodic inflections of blues allied with a harmonic sophistication that was strictly European (nearly all the Tin Pan Alley writers were white and a surprising number of them of Jewish immigrant stock), that was responsible for the characteristic style of the American popular song from about 1920 to the re-emergence of a strongly black idiom with the rhythm-and-blues of the early 1950s. It was remarkably strict in form; after a perfunctory, usually four-line, verse, there was a chorus which in the vast majority of songs consisted of an eight-bar strain repeated, a contrasting eight-bar strain (the 'bridge' or 'release' or simply 'middle eight') followed by a reprise of the first strain. Within that restricted compass of thirty-two bars the lyricist and composer (increasingly writing lyrics became a separate specialization, so that composers such as Cole Porter who wrote their own lyrics were exceptions) presented a tiny drama, generally of love either requited or unrequited, in tone comic, pathetic or ironic, often indulging in high-flown conceits concerning a love that would outlast the Rockies or that had survived ridicule comparable to that which had supposedly greeted Columbus, the Wright Bothers and Marconi. Some lyrics, such as those of Ira Gershwin or Lorenz Hart, were tiny masterpieces of precision and wit, but the situations they depicted were lacking in context or the specifics of a relationship, and dominated by European notions of romantic love; one element that was never taken from either blues or ragtime songs was black sexual realism. The lack of context was deliberate; it was intended that the listener should supply his or her own. The hints of high life and the sly allusions to European high culture were never strong enough to prevent anyone who was listening from applying the song's mood to his or her own situation. The

lyrics were, in fact, not only highly literate; they were quite self-consciously 'literary' with their roots deep in the European tradition of romantic poetry.

Musically, the popular song from the 1920s to the 1950s was much closer to classical music than to black music. Black elements which, as we have seen, were absorbed in the teens of this century from ragtime and from blues as well as through the black Broadway musicals, were now also assimilated through jazz, but they remained what they had always been — a gloss on what were essentially European closed forms (though jazz musicians were to take up those forms in their improvisations and turn them once more into open forms). The degree of jazz inflection in both melody and rhythm was widely variable; a song like Gershwin's *I Got Rhythm* of 1930 was full of the accents of ragtime and, to a lesser extent, blues, while not a trace of either is to be found in Jerome Kern's *All the Things You Are*, written as late as 1939. Melodies could be quite open and diatonic or heavily chromatic; harmonies tended to be quite complex, both in the chords themselves, with seventh, ninth and eleventh chords as well as chromatically altered chords, and in the progressions — most songwriters liked to indulge in at least one striking key change in the course of the song. Each song tended to be a small drama, the onward thrust of the harmonies leading to a climax and resolution in a way that not even the earlier Tin Pan Alley tunes had done; one is not surprised to learn that many of the so-called Broadway masters such as Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Jerome Kern and Cole Porter were classically trained.

When these songs were recorded, the arranger made of them an equally strict closed three-minute form, extending the tune by repetition of sections in a traditional European way with varied orchestration, and, generally, one sung chorus, to fill the ten-inch, 78-rpm record. But despite the popularity of records (sales of records overtook those of sheet music sometime in the 1920s), sheet music remained the principal medium through which a song was transmitted to performers. Sales of not only voice-and-piano versions but also of a variety of arrangements for everything from small combos to big bands, with written parts, some obbligato,

some ad libitum, were still big business; it took the coming of rhythm-and-blues in the 1950s to undermine that market and signal the demise of Tin Pan Alley. It was taken for granted that every home that had a piano would have its pile of sheet music for the home pianist to play the latest hits, and each sheet copy would have in large letters, usually with a blurred photograph, the name not of the composer — his was in small letters at the bottom — but of the artist who had recorded it; then, as now, it was performing artists, not composers, who sold songs among the wider public. Up to about 1950 records and sheet music remained in a symbiotic relationship, with the record making the song known but the sheet copies making it available to those who wanted to perform it. It was thus essentially a literate music, made by whites for whites; black idioms, if they were present at all, were, in Charles Hamm's words, 'several quite superficial aspects of "negro" music . . . skimmed off by songwriters of the 1910s, '20s and '30s to add a touch of exotic seasoning to their products.'[26]

There were large numbers of Americans to whom these songs made no appeal, especially poor whites and blacks, who both had their own ways of musicking, in particular what was known as 'hillbilly' and blues. Their music was orally transmitted, often through records, and thus for the most part of little interest to publishers; what was the sense in trying to sell written music to people who could not read it? But even a non-literate person could and did play the gramophone, and hence there was a proportionately greater impact made by recording on non-literate musics such as blues and country music, in which the medium of dissemination was records. This impact was to carry over into the era of rhythm-and-blues.

It is impossible to say how many of these thirty-two-bar songs were composed, published and recorded in the years between 1920 and 1955. They were the mainstay of stage and film musicals, and the most successful of them sold records and sheet copies alike in millions. They suggested a world which was essentially adult, glamorous, sophisticated and moneyed, with sentiments that were free-floating, ready to attach themselves to any listener and cover him or her with stardust, lifting the hearer, for the duration of the song, into a

world of glamour and opulence, as represented not only by the lyrics but also by the rich harmonies and lush orchestrations; these, not coincidentally, made frequent allusions to the gestures of European classical music, with dramatic introductions and codas, and used soaring strings, warm wodges of horn sounds and cascading harp glissandi.

These songs retain their appeal; many people, especially in difficult times, remain as susceptible today to the allure of the appurtenances of wealth as they did then. But, like the European classical tradition whose progeny they are more than black America's, they are living on the past; very little of any great popular appeal has been added since about 1950. New arrangements, new recordings, even new orchestras and singers, but not new songs — or, at least, there is nothing that has achieved anything like the earlier popularity with a wide audience.

What displaced these songs from their pre-eminent position in vernacular music was the music of those despised non-literate musicians whom the publishers and the major record companies had found it possible to ignore. How that happened is a matter for a much later chapter, but we notice that from that point musicians of the main stream of Afro-American musicking have become almost aggressively non-notation-dependent. Nonetheless, such musicians have continued to rub along with the literate tradition and to interpret it in their own way, to use its resources when they want them and ignore them when they do not. The coming of microchip technology may well make considerable differences to the function of notation, but it is difficult to imagine how it might disturb the perennial desire of musicians to establish relationships within their idiom that are direct and unmediated by notation.

NOTES

1. CONE, James H.: *The Spirituals and the Blues*, New York, The Seabury Press, 1972, p 117.
2. MARABLE, Manning: *Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson*, London, Verso Books, 1985, p 35.
3. KEIL, Charles: 'People's Music Comparatively: Style and Stereotype, Class and Hegemony', *Dialectical Anthropology*, Vol 10, 1985, p 125.
4. HAMM, Charles: *Yesterdays: Popular Song in America*, New York, Norton, 1979, p 194.
5. TAWA, Nicholas: *A Music for the Millions: Antebellum Democratic Attitudes and the Birth of American Popular Music*, New York, Pendragon Press, 1984, p vii.
6. LOESSER, Arthur: *Men, Women and Pianos: A Social History*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1954, p 511.
7. *ibid.*, p 506.
8. HITCHCOCK, H. Wiley: *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 2nd edition 1974, p 186.
9. LAHR, John: 'Jean Seberg', *New Society*, Vol 66, No 1096, 17 November, 1983, p 280.
10. HITCHCOCK, H. Wiley: *op. cit.*, p 116.
11. TROTTER, James Monroe: 'Music and Some Highly Musical People', in SOUTHERN, Eileen (ed): *Readings in Black American Music*, New York, Norton, 1983, p 144.
12. SOUTHERN, Eileen: *The Music of Black Americans*, New York, Norton, 2nd edition 1983, p 82.
13. *ibid.*, p 108.
14. KMEN, Henry A.: *Music in New Orleans: The Formative Years 1791–1841*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1966, p 234.
15. SOUTHERN, Eileen, *op. cit.*, p 113.
16. NILES, Abbe: 'The Story of the Blues' in HANDY, W.C. (ed): *Blues: An Anthology*, New York, Collier Books, 3rd edition 1972, p 24.
17. *ibid.*, p 25.
18. BLESH, Rudi and JANIS, Harriet: *They All Played Ragtime: The True Story of an American Music*, London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1958, p 59.
19. *ibid.*, p 208.
20. RAYNOR, Henry: *Music and Society Since 1815*, London, Barrie & Jenkins, 1976, p 62.
21. LOESSER, Arthur: *op. cit.*, p 424.
22. NILES, Abbe: *op. cit.*, p 24.
23. BLESH, Rudi and JANIS, Harriet: *op. cit.*, p 17.
24. SIDRAN, Ben: *Black Talk*, New York, Da Capo Press, 1981, p 31.
25. HAMM, Charles: *op. cit.*, p 321.
26. *ibid.* p 358.