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Robert Nathaniel Dett and the Music of the Harlem Renaissance

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Robert Nathaniel Dett and the Music of the Harlem Renaissance

by

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A Thesis in History

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Abstract

While the contributions of writers and poets to the period of American cultural history known as the Harlem Renaissance are relatively well defined and understood, assessing the contributions of musicians has been more problematic. The topic has been covered indirectly through works of American music history and African American history, but there have been comparatively few works linking music directly to the goals of the movement. Much of the insight into music's place during this period derives from contemporary writers such as Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson, both of whom featured discussions of music in their writings. Relatively unknown today, Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943) was one of a group of composers whose work reflects the goals of Locke and other Renaissance writers. This thesis will explore the work of Robert Nathaniel Dett as a composer and educator in the larger context of the Harlem Renaissance. With in-depth biographies of Dett's life already available, this thesis will focus on the period of his greatest activity during the 1910s and the 1920s while concurrently attempting to establish a larger context for his work by situating it within the course of American music history of the period. Specific topics will include: Dett's education at Oberlin College and subsequent employment as Music Director at Hampton Institute; how characteristics of Dett's music aligned with the goals of the Harlem Renaissance; and, Dett's response to criticism that he was neglecting the authentic heritage of African American music.

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Introduction: Music of the Harlem Renaissance

In his foreword to Nathan Huggins's *Harlem Renaissance*, the 1971 landmark study of African American art and culture during the early part of the twentieth century, historian Arnold Rampersad recognized Huggins's neglect of the music of the period as one of the book's few weaknesses. Rampersad immediately added the qualification that: "one can lodge this complain about every book in existence about the Harlem Renaissance."¹ Why is music so difficult to relate to this period—a period traditionally delimited to a single geographical location during the decade of the 1920s? As the career of Robert Nathaniel Dett demonstrated, the ascription of musical meaning is possible, as long as the notion of the Harlem Renaissance is not constrained geographically and chronologically in this manner. Dett never had any significant connection to Harlem as a physical location, and he was active as a composer from about 1901 to his death in 1943. Yet, his music is considered to be one of the most representative reflections of what the "Father of the Harlem Renaissance," Alain Locke, advocated as a new assertiveness in embracing the rural folk elements of African American nineteenth-century life and transforming them into enduring art forms. As they pertained to music, the artistic goals of Locke and other Renaissance commentators primarily centered on reconciling a European conception of concert music with the musical materials of nineteenth-century black folksongs, primarily the spiritual. Dett accomplished precisely that in compositions such as *Listen to the Lambs* and *The Chariot Jubilee*.

¹ Arnold Rampersad, Foreword to Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (1971; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), xxx.

The paucity of music in writings on the Harlem Renaissance can be partly attributed to the fact that it did not appear with the suddenness of prose and poetry. In the intervening years between Paul Laurence Dunbar's death in 1906 and the 1922 publication of Claude McKay's *Harlem Shadows*, only three major works by black authors were published.² In the realm of visual arts, it was not until the 1930s that any significant stylistic school of painting or sculpture began to flourish among black artists. Henry O. Tanner and Meta Warrick Fuller were highly regarded artists, but both were bound to a European tradition that was now out of fashion even among European artists. Consequently, they were not in a position to inspire any younger artists to go beyond that convention.³ African American music, already with at least a fifty-year history in the mainstream of American culture by the 1920s, did not share in the newness of a fledgling literary and visual art style. Possibly for this reason, it has come to be taken for granted when recalling its contributions to the whole period.⁴ By the same measure, 1929 would seem to be too arbitrary an outer boundary. Even after the Great Depression had severely compromised the productivity of the late Renaissance by destroying the financial foundation of artistic patronage that had flourished during the 1920s, musicians continued to produce a consistent output with achievements such as Dett's oratorio *The Ordering of Moses* (1932), and the premier and

² David Levering Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), xv. These were: *Pointing the Way*, Sutton Griggs (1908); *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, W.E.B. DuBois (1911); and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, James Weldon Johnson (1912).

³ Allan M. Gordon, "Interactions Between Art and Music During the Harlem Renaissance," in *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 141.

⁴ Samuel A. Floyd Jr., "Music in the Harlem Renaissance: An Overview," in *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 4-5. Dett commented on the different rates of progress for music and other art forms when he cited the lack of suitable literature that might be used as inspiration for or as a libretto to musical compositions. In this way, he believed that a lack of authentic African-American literature was impeding the development of dramatic music among black composers.

publication of William Grant Still's Symphony no. 1 ("Afro-American") in 1930, referred to by Samuel A. Floyd Jr. as the "crowning achievement" of the Harlem Renaissance.⁵ Still, along with later composers William Dawson and Florence Price, built his success on the foundation Dett provided over the preceding twenty years.

Just as difficult in determining music's place in the Harlem Renaissance—one of the term's first appearances in print was in a *New York Herald Tribune* article in 1925—is defining the episode itself.⁶ It meant different things to different people; one could make a generalization that it was a surge in the production of written, visual, and musical art by and about African Americans. The historian Jon Michael Spencer offered this analysis: "[T]he Negro Renaissance can be generally characterized as an epoch in which art and letters with an inner-African 'mood and spirit,' derived significantly (if not principally) from the remnant of African rhythm, found expression in European 'form and technique' and flourished for the purpose of providing an adequate new answer to the old problem of racism."⁷ This serves as an apt summation of what Robert Nathaniel Dett was attempting to accomplish in music composition. Countee Cullen and Claude McKay were pursuing parallel goals in poetry; both were exploring what it meant to be African American in the twentieth century through traditional European poetic forms. Spencer's definition, though, is less applicable to a wide range of artists including Louis Armstrong in music, and Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown in letters. These artists pursued highly individual statements that made only minimal reference to European techniques.

⁵ Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 107.

⁶ Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, xxvi

⁷ Jon Michael Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of the Harlem Renaissance* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 26.

The notion of the Harlem Renaissance as an artistically successful epoch containing any significant degree of originality has come under criticism from historians including Huggins and David Levering Lewis. Huggins's definition essentially lined up with Spencer's, but for him the dependence on European influence crippled artistic imagination. Lewis's criticism centers on the idea that the Harlem Renaissance was rushed and unnatural. He characterized it as a "generation-skipping phenomenon in which a vanguard of the Talented Tenth elite recruited, organized, subventioned, and guided an unevenly endowed cohort of artists and writers to make statements that advanced a certain conception of the race..."⁸ Spencer argues, however, that the Renaissance may be viewed as an artistic success if its chronology is expanded to include later achievements that occurred in its wake. Spencer believes that the 1890s saw the first noteworthy outpouring of African American art with an assertive character—one which had been lost since the abolition era. Harry Burleigh, Will Marion Cook, and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor were this era's notable contributors. The 1920s was simply one manifestation of an ongoing Renaissance; as for its conclusion, Spencer argued that it is, in fact, ongoing. In the context of this thesis, Spencer's argument that Dett's work was vital to the success of the Harlem Renaissance is noteworthy.⁹

Lewis splits the literary Harlem Renaissance into three stages: The so-called Lost Generation's discovery of Harlem in the late 1910s-early 1920s; the ascendancy of the "Talented Tenth" in the mid-1920s represented by the *Crisis* and *Opportunity* awards ceremonies for artistic recognition. These were the publications of the NAACP and Urban League respectively;

⁸ Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, xxiv.

⁹ Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*. Spencer frequently cites the writings of Alain Locke as primary support for his case for an expanded chronology for the Harlem Renaissance.

the final stage materialized in the late 1920s-early 1930s emergence of a reaction against the Civil Rights Establishment's artistic dictates of the second stage.¹⁰

In the immediate post-World War I years, the Greenwich Village-based white writers of the Lost Generation found in black cultural expression a viable alternative for a new artistic and cultural foundation which could replace the Victorian values of the pre-war years. From this first stage of the Renaissance, the tone was set for what Huggins would cite as the interdependence of black and white cultures. In the sense that this interdependence was largely dictated by the hegemonic role of whites as consumers and patrons, it contained a direct lineage from minstrelsy. Huggins described it thusly: "Harlem in the 1920s gave to this interdependency a sophistication and charm, but at its very core the game of masks remained the same."¹¹ This issue also reflected the different, and nearly contradictory, goals of the patrons and the artists. Both were ostensibly working to aid African American progress, but were often at cross-purposes. Lost Generation artists viewed "the factory, campus, office, and corporation" as representative of the society they set out to critique. For many African Americans, however, these institutions represented a significant means towards societal integration. Lewis concluded: "For the whites, art was the means to change society before they would accept it. For the blacks, art was the means to change society in order to be accepted into it."¹²

Although music cannot be held neatly to Lewis's three chronological stages, Robert Nathaniel Dett, and the style in which he composed, is undoubtedly a reflection of the second. This rather

¹⁰ Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, xv-xli. Langston Hughes, so representative of the third stage, in fact won first prize at the inaugural *Opportunity* awards ceremony in May, 1925 for his poetry collection, *The Weary Blues*.

¹¹ Huggins, 85.

¹² Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, xxi.

short phase of the Harlem Renaissance (1924 to mid-1926, according to Lewis) is, moreover, strongly reflected in the career of Alain Locke. Like Dett, Locke did not live in Harlem. He was nevertheless considered to be the “Father of the Harlem Renaissance,” and the diverse collection of literature and poetry produced under his editorship, *The New Negro*, was its “Bible.” Locke’s career and overall outlook are tied to that specific era even more so than the otherwise more-famous W.E.B. DuBois. Never as explicitly political as DuBois, Locke preferred to focus on the uplifting values of artistic production as a means to “bridge the chasm between the races.”¹³ In a decidedly non-populist manner, Locke eagerly tried to effect a rapport among intellectuals of both races under a common agreement of what constituted lasting art. Locke was teaching philosophy at Howard University when approached by *Opportunity* editor Charles S. Johnson to compile and edit the special issue of the progressive *Survey Magazine* which would become the basis for *The New Negro*.¹⁴ Up until this assignment, Locke was “drifting... [but] once chosen to edit the special number...he acted with the daring and vision of a man who had been awaiting his chance.”¹⁵

Locke espoused a conception of art which would transcend political concerns, as well as be psychologically uplifting to the black race. Especially among the younger generation, art could provide a means to reevaluate the race and promote a “spiritual awakening.”¹⁶ Locke saw his promotion of art in terms of external and internal goals in much the same way as Robert

¹³ Huggins, 5.

¹⁴ Arnold Rampersad, Introduction to *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (1925; repr., Simon & Schuster Inc., 1997), xi.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹⁶ Winston Napier, “Affirming Critical Conceptualism: Harlem Renaissance Aesthetics and the Formation of Alain Locke’s Social Philosophy,” *The Massachusetts Review* 39, no. 1 (Spring, 1998): 95. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25091404> (accessed December 25, 2012).

Nathaniel Dett applied a similar dual analysis to his assessment of music. On a basic, external level, a fundamental awareness of potential in black artists by cultivated members of white society might impel them to question assumptions underlying the prevalent social discrimination. At the internal level though, Locke believed this must be preceded by a re-assessment of the race by African Americans themselves—in Winston Napier’s terms, “a self-determined reformation of black identity.”¹⁷ For Locke, large-scale art forms derived from proven European models represented the surest path to this reformation. Translated to music, one could find no better example than Dett’s large-scale choral works. Given the opportunity to advocate this message in what would be a widely-circulated document, Locke chose to write about the spirituals for one of his own entries in *The New Negro*. Throughout the course of his introduction, as well as this essay, Locke often defined his goals in terms of what they were not: In agreement with DuBois, Locke hoped to distance the mainstream politics of the Harlem Renaissance from anything that could be seen as radical. This referred primarily to socialism and communism, as well as the separatism of Marcus Garvey; the musical models to be avoided as abhorrent to Locke’s goals were those that offered a sentimentalized view of African American life, and those which sprang from commercial goals. Reflecting Dett’s views on the correct manner of arranging spirituals, Locke emphasized the importance of balancing certain elements as crucial to producing a proper musical statement. Too much emphasis on melody would lead to “only the sentimental ballad...[or] a cloying sentimental glee” Too much attention given to rhythm would convey the commercialized dance music then quickly gaining in popularity.¹⁸ Locke also strove, as did Dett,

¹⁷ Napier, 98.

¹⁸ Locke, *The New Negro*, 206.

to maintain equilibrium between presenting “authentic” folk practices, and an awareness that only through the compromise of capturing oral tradition through the medium of written notation could this folk legacy be preserved and memorialized. There are also passages in *The New Negro* which help to clarify the accusations that many in the Harlem Renaissance were over-reliant on art as a cure-all for racial issues of national import. At times, Locke implies that, through the simple existence of talented artists, the worst of the problems were over: “By shedding the old Chrysalis of the Negro problem we are achieving something like a spiritual emancipation... The multitude perhaps feels as yet only a strange relief and a new vague urge, but the thinking few know that in the reaction the vital inner grip of prejudice has been broken.”¹⁹ And further, “The especially cultural recognition they [African American artists] win should in turn prove the key to that revaluation of the Negro which must precede or accompany any considerable further betterment of race relationships.”²⁰ Such passages likely led Huggins to describe the era as having “all the character of a public relations promotion.”²¹

A mixed legacy emerges from these pronouncements. Music based in an African American heritage is seen as one of the prevalent images of the era, as is a self-determined awareness evincing the strongest break to date with ideas and practices based in minstrelsy. It is, however, generally not the music of Robert Nathaniel Dett which is connected in the public mind with these breakthroughs. Artists working in many genres—a few of whom would become leading twentieth-century figures such as Langston Hughes—reinvigorated forms which were beginning to be seen as stagnant. It is unavoidable, however, to look past an elitism inherent in the writings

¹⁹ Ibid., 4.

²⁰ Ibid., 15.

²¹ Huggins, 64.

of spokesmen such as Locke and Dett. It has been argued that Robert Nathaniel Dett's music has been unfairly ignored as it is mentioned in only a passing manner, if at all, in most discussions of American music. One reason may be that, "Jazz Age" associations have obscured Harlem Renaissance associations. When it is written, as it often has been, that music does not occupy as central a role in the Harlem Renaissance compared to prose and poetry, it should be remembered that many of the spokesmen of the movement, even as they promoted art as a potential cure-all, disregarded the jazz that is now remembered as the most representative music of the era. Any perceived failure of their visions for large-scale choral and orchestral works based on nineteenth-century spirituals appears accurate only in light of the commercial success of jazz, ragtime, blues, and musical theater.

The most historically recognizable pre-Harlem Renaissance musical developments were those which coalesced into these latter genres by the early 1920s. To those who espoused DuBois's "Talented Tenth" theory however, popular music tended to be linked with the traditions of minstrelsy. This was a major factor behind the promotion of the spiritual as art music to be heard in a classical concert setting; it was to balance what was seen as the often degrading and exploitative, albeit economically advantageous popular tradition.²² The advances of the commercial and technology industries, primarily the phonograph and radio, also fed the desire to re-assert a racially-based music tradition that was independent of mass audience appeal.

²² The lines between the two styles were not always so clear though; one of the most ardent supporters of spirituals arranged as art songs was James Weldon Johnson, who was involved in both the popular and classical styles of the time. In 1899, he wrote the poem "Lift Every Voice and Sing", later set to music by his brother J. Rosamond. The Johnson brothers, along with Bob Cole, in producing such musical comedies as *The Shoo-Fly Regiment*, were at the forefront of a push towards greater sophistication in the current popular music, which would also have the effect of downplaying minstrel traditions. The Johnsons' most significant contribution to the promotion of the spirituals was the publication of two volumes of new arrangements issued in the mid-1920s with extensive commentary by James Weldon.

Appropriating the spiritual as a means of artistic and social advancement was built on an interest in academic folklore studies that took hold in the immediate post-Civil War era. One of the definitive early spiritual anthologies was the 1867 *Slave Songs of the United States*, compiled by William Allen, Charles Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison.²³ Its appearance signaled the beginning of a series of publications of collections which culminated in the works of Henry Krehbiel, James Weldon and J. Rosamond Johnson, and John W. Work. Allen, Ware, and Garrison's format of combining criticism and history with transcriptions of the music and lyrics provided a model for these later publications, although the musical arrangements had drastically changed by that point, due largely to the work of composers such as Burleigh and Dett.²⁴ Four years after the publication of *Slave Songs*, the Fisk Jubilee Singers undertook the first of many tours which introduced and popularized the genre internationally, spawning many similar ensembles. In 1893, the spiritual's potential for serious artistic growth and recognition was given an additional boost when the Eastern European composer Antonín Dvorák issued a call to consider the spirituals as a basis for America's future classical music. Dvorak was then in the midst of his tenure as director at Jeanette Thurber's National Conservatory of Music in New York City. The composer's awareness of the genre came about through discussions with his National Conservatory student Harry T. Burleigh, who Floyd noted was Dvorak's "chief source of American music...[and] his copyist and private singer of the spirituals."²⁵ Of black and Native

²³ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 152-153.

²⁴ Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., "Cosmopolitan or Provincial?: Ideology in Early Black Music Historiography, 1867-1940," *Black Music Research Journal* 16, no. 1 (Spring 1996): 19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/779375> (accessed June 17, 2012).

²⁵ Floyd, "The Invisibility and Fame of Harry T. Burleigh: Retrospect and Prospect," *Black Music Research Journal* 24, no. 2 (Autumn, 2004), 182 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4145490> (Accessed August 30, 2012).

American folk music, Dvorak wrote: “These are the folk songs of America, and your composers must turn to them. All of the great musicians have borrowed from the songs of the common people...In the Negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.”²⁶

Dvorak’s statement was part of a wider trend in the world of nationalist thought in European classical music, in which composers were increasingly making use of their country’s folk songs as base material for larger compositions. W.E.B. DuBois attempted to sustain the interest in the spiritual initiated by these earlier developments when he included a chapter on the “Sorrow Songs” in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. This, according to Paul Allen Anderson, “helped lay the groundwork for later scholarship on music’s role in community-building and social memorialization.”²⁷

Reviewing the literature on this topic is particularly relevant to Robert Nathaniel Dett, because he was a participant in its evolution. In addition to his purely musical output, Dett provided a contemporary perspective in his writings that largely mirrored the aesthetic and critical viewpoints of Alain Locke. It was also a time early enough in its evolution that the framework for American musicology was still in a developmental phase—its study encompassing many subfields, including African American history and American musicology. Both of these fields were transitioning to a formalized, professional approach at the turn of the century. The historian Carter Woodson and the musicologist Oscar G. Sonneck were their fields’ respective leaders in making this transition, and the intellectual climate that they helped to create

²⁶ “Real Value of Negro Melodies,” *New York Herald*, May 21, 1893.

²⁷ Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 31.

would be a major point of consideration for early writers on the development of African American music. Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr. wrote that part of the professionalization of history in general was dependent on the adoption of an objective and scientific approach to research, and that this was something that Woodson and Sonneck strove for. However, they were writing at a time when race relations in the United States were growing progressively worse and this couldn't help but exert an equal counter-influence on their writings.²⁸

The earliest comprehensive study of African American music was James Monroe Trotter's *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, published in 1878. Trotter's work provides a valuable resource for preserving the names of many pre-Civil War figures in American music who may have otherwise been forgotten. Sources exist on black musical activity prior to the Civil War; however, these tend to be in formats that refer to music in a passing or incidental manner, such as "Travelogues, diaries, regional and national histories, letters, sermons, and political tracts..."²⁹ One of the major sources for the study of the history of African American music can additionally be found in descriptions of runaway slaves, which frequently stated summaries of talents and activities related to music.³⁰ Many of the subsequent histories of African American music were built on the foundation established by Trotter, which "[embodied] a blend of uncompromised black nationalistic thought and Euro-based aesthetic sensibility."³¹ These subsequent histories include those written by Dett, who cited *Music and Some Highly Musical People* at least once.³² Trotter's work demonstrates that the fundamental dichotomy of a vernacular as opposed to a

²⁸ Ramsey, "Cosmopolitan or Provincial?," 21-23.

²⁹ Ibid., 19.

³⁰ Richard Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2001), 106.

³¹ Ramsey, "Cosmopolitan or Provincial?," 18.

³² Dett, "The Development of the Negro Spiritual," in *The Dett Collection of Negro Spirituals* (Chicago: Hall & McCreary Company, 1936).

European basis for legitimate American music was being explored fifty years prior to the work of Alain Locke. Trotter constructs his narrative with a preference for prevailing European standards of artistic judgment and privileges those artists who focused their creative efforts in that direction. The subsequent development of American music would give preference to musical traits which were judged to be of indeterminate folk origin. Dett later called attention to the importance of these traits, which included call-and-response, pentatonic scales, and syncopation occurring over a strongly pronounced beat. However much they varied in what the use should be, everyone from Dett and Locke to Langston Hughes was in agreement over the value of these characteristics for use in modern American music. With this in mind, the antebellum musicians of a European-based artistic leaning covered by Trotter have been comparatively neglected. Francis Johnson is one of the most well-known African American musicians who flourished prior to the Civil War. Johnson, who “worked in a setting far removed from that in which the spirituals were created”, was a Philadelphia-based trumpeter and dance band leader who led a group of formally trained musicians. It cannot be known for sure exactly what his music sounded like or what performance characteristics his musicians employed. However, musicologist Eileen Southern pointed out that a first-person account of Johnson’s band observed them altering traditional tunes that they were playing. For Southern, this possibly suggested the presence of what modern listeners might label ragtime or jazz.³³ Richard Crawford further suggests the possibility that Johnson and his band added embellishments to the written music which reflected an African tradition of orally-communicated folk music.³⁴ *Music and Some Highly Musical*

³³ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 111-113.

³⁴ Crawford, *America’s Musical Life*, 425.

People downplays this tradition however, focusing specifically on musicians working in the Western art-music sphere, among them Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Thomas Bethune, and The Colored American Opera Company.³⁵ There would not be another work on African American music as comprehensive in scope as Trotter's for close to fifty years.³⁶

According to the introduction to Jon Michael Spencer's *The New Negroes and Their Music*, published in 1997, his is the first full-length study since Alain Locke's *The Negro and His Music* (1936), to focus on music during the Harlem Renaissance.³⁷ Locke's study appeared eleven years after his initial examination of the topic, a chapter in *The New Negro* (1925). Entitled "The Negro Spirituals," this essay advanced Locke's views on the musical value of the spirituals and his hope that a composer would take up the challenge of using its basic musical components as a basis for large-scale composition. Despite the critical nature of his own views, Locke made room for a wide range of perspectives in the collection as a whole. Writer J.A. Rogers offered a defense of the burgeoning genre of jazz, and Langston Hughes contributed two poems evocative of the music, "Jazzonia" and "Nude Young Dancer."

Hughes was one of the only significant writers to depart from the common artistic view of the "New Negro" phenomenon by unapologetically embracing folk, blues, and jazz in a mode of performance that was not dependent on European-derived forms and orchestration. Hughes's clearest statement of this is his essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." However, Hughes was not content to simply offer his views as a matter of criticism, but made a point of reflecting the traits of the working class and what was commonly viewed as a lower class of

³⁵ Ramsey, "Cosmopolitan or Provincial?," 17.

³⁶ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 261.

³⁷ Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*, xv.

music in his own work. Langston Hughes is the most visible case in point demonstrating that by the mid-1920s, after a noticeable divide had opened between the older generation who spoke out against any major deviation from European standards, and the younger generation who supported a more uncompromising individualism, the artists themselves often fell into the latter group.

In *The Souls of Black Folk*, DuBois made the qualification that although he understood the spirituals' cultural significance, he nonetheless knew "little of music and can say nothing in technical phrase," only that the songs were "the articulate message of the slave to the world."³⁸ With a few notable exceptions, a similar lack of musical background was an obstacle to many of the contemporaneous academic writings on the issue. Fortunately, Robert Nathaniel Dett was also an active writer. Dett won the Bowdoin Prize in 1920 at Harvard for his essay, "The Emancipation of Negro Music," and as early as 1911 had completed a book of poetry, *The Album of a Heart*. Throughout his career as a composer, performer, and teacher, Dett wrote reviews, program notes, editorials, and essays setting forth his artistic goals and defending the use of the spiritual in large-scale choral forms. In his writings Dett invoked matters of musical technique, while also drawing on his considerable educational background to give historical context and legitimacy to his musical practices.³⁹

In addition to the written contributions of Dett and his contemporaries, several authors have written about the era as a whole. These works, while privileging music in varying degrees, add an invaluable historical context to a greater understanding of Dett. As mentioned, neither of the

³⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Champaign, Ill., Project Gutenberg), 107. <http://proxy.buffalostate.edu:2249/Reader/> (accessed September 23, 2010).

³⁹ Dett's own life and career have been covered in two large-scale works: Vivian Flagg McBrier's 1967 dissertation, "The Life and Works of Robert Nathaniel Dett", and Anne Key Simpson's 1993 *Follow Me: The Life and Music of R. Nathaniel Dett*, (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993).

two standard histories of the Harlem Renaissance—Huggins’s *Harlem Renaissance* and Lewis’s *When Harlem Was in Vogue*—focuses on music. Nonetheless, both found a place for it within their respective outlooks. Huggins’s work was the first comprehensive, cross-disciplinary study of the era as a whole. It was also the first work published with enough years removed from the event itself to provide for a degree of objectivity.⁴⁰ It is difficult to come away from Huggins’s analysis with anything except a view of the period as a missed opportunity. Huggins believes that only jazz musicians, along with Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer in poetry and literature, were successful in developing a genuinely original artistic statement.⁴¹ It was the lack of attention given to musicians such as Dett, Burleigh, and tenor Roland Hayes, as well as the restrictive timeline, which led to Jon Michael Spencer’s charge that Huggins misinterpreted the Harlem Renaissance as a failure.⁴² In *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, as well as in his introduction to *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, David Levering Lewis also takes a negative view, characterizing the movement as somewhat contrived and elitist in nature.⁴³ Lewis gives more coverage to music than Huggins, including a fairly extensive background on key figures in the development of jazz and musical theater, most prominently James Reese Europe, a seminal figure in early ragtime and jazz.

Spencer takes a revisionist point of view in his *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of the Harlem Renaissance*. Spencer aims to show that the movement was a success even when including only the works which reflected the goals of the intelligentsia. In order for this to

⁴⁰ Rampersad, Foreword to *Harlem Renaissance*, xv-xxii. Rampersad also notes that Huggins did not allow the radical politics of his own era (late 1960s/early 1970s) to affect his objectivity. Jon Michael Spencer, however, believed that a general lack of historical objectivity compromised Huggins’s conclusions.

⁴¹ Huggins, 228.

⁴² Spencer, *The New Negro and Their Music*.

⁴³ David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), xvi.

be accomplished, according to Spencer, one needs to expand the time frame of the movement and focus more on the importance of post-1920s music. Despite the positive nature of Spencer's argument, it was narrowly centered on a critique of Huggins and Lewis, leading one review to label the book as unnecessarily "discursive and adversarial."⁴⁴ Paul Allen Anderson's *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* discussed the arguments regarding the validity of various interpretations of how cultural experience informs one's aesthetic views. Anderson presented chapters outlining the divergent views of Locke's more cosmopolitan thought and Langston Hughes's embrace of untouched, authentic black folk music. Additionally, there is an in-depth discussion of how DuBois's intellectual and educational background informed his promotion of the "sorrow songs." *Deep River* does not strictly align itself with one or the other school of thought, seeking instead to "understand how certain intellectuals, writers, and musicians of the Harlem Renaissance period pieced together, suggested, asserted, and argued for distinctive interpretations of music and social memory."⁴⁵

Samuel A. Floyd Jr., in addition to editing *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays*, contributed a comprehensive history of African American music, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History From Africa to the United States*. Floyd convincingly argued that several distinct and recognizable musical traits of African origin have survived and evolved into African American music. He goes on to provide a framework for evaluating the retention of these traits, the most important of which are the communal activity of call-and-response, contrasting as opposed to blending sounds, and the importance of the "how"

⁴⁴ John White, review of *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of the Harlem Renaissance*, by Jon Michael Spencer, *Journal of American Studies* 32, no. 3, Part 1 (December 1998): 537.

⁴⁵ Anderson, *Deep River*, 12.

as opposed to the “what” in evaluating performance practices. There is one chapter on the Harlem Renaissance and what Floyd labeled the Chicago Renaissance lasting from about 1935-1950.⁴⁶ His conclusion, recalling the earlier works of Huggins and Lewis, was that Locke and company turned their backs on the continuation of these traits in the promotion of a more universal cosmopolitanism and modernism, to the ultimate detriment of the music. A less critical, but highly comprehensive, survey of African American music history is Eileen Southern’s *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. Southern devoted one chapter to the Harlem Renaissance and is especially authoritative on documenting the activity of African American classical musicians during the period. First appearing in 1971, Southern’s study was a response to a drought in scholarship on African American music in the preceding years. Ramsey noted that *The Music of Black Americans* “broke new ground in its method and scope, inspiring others (both directly and indirectly) to similar inquiry and [helped] to establish black music as a scholarly specialty.”⁴⁷ In setting forth a range of assessments, the works cited above provide balance and context to the study of Dett. Even with the hindsight of several decades, many of the relatively recent secondary sources continue to reiterate the arguments prominent during the height of the Harlem Renaissance. The issues of musical representations of race remain controversial, and the career of Robert Nathaniel Dett provides insight into making sense of the varied viewpoints.

This thesis attempts to place the artistic contributions of Robert Nathaniel Dett in the context of the chronology of African American music and musicology and to locate them within the

⁴⁶ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 100.

⁴⁷ Ramsey, “Cosmopolitan, or Provincial ?,” 11.

context of the competing views of the Harlem Renaissance. Rather than reiterate a comprehensive biographical account of Dett's life, this thesis will focus on his musical and literary contributions during the era in which he was most active. Chapter 1 briefly covers the early years of Dett's life with a specific focus on the areas that informed his later works and writings. His experience at Oberlin College will be looked at in particular; Chapter 2 explores Dett's most important influences and predecessors, with an emphasis on the works of Harry T. Burleigh and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor; Chapter 3 deals more specifically with Dett as a musician and writer on music, and will look in detail at his motivations for working with the nineteenth century heritage of African American folk materials; Chapter 4 centers on the criticism that Dett faced from a counter movement in Harlem Renaissance thought which promoted a purist agenda for the presentation of authentic African American musical practices; the thesis concludes with a study of Dett's tenure as Director of the School of Music at Hampton Institute in Virginia (1913-1931). Inasmuch as Dett is known as an important figure in American music history, it is largely his work at Hampton which has contributed to this reputation.

Chapter 1: Dett's Education and Early Career

Born in 1882 in Drummondville, Ontario, Robert Nathaniel Dett was encouraged by his mother and his teachers in the relatively progressive North to pursue his artistic ambitions, and began receiving music instruction in the traditional repertoire of European classical music at a young age. Drummondville had been founded by former slaves and was eventually incorporated into Niagara Falls, Ontario. According to Dett's biographer, Anne Key Simpson, the situation for black Canadian citizens in the nineteenth century was comparatively positive: "By 1840 ... Negroes were particularly welcome there, where they were permitted citizenship, the buying of land and entrance into common schools, though various churches had established private schools for immigrants. Discrimination was largely social, evident in selection for jury duty, boat riding, and the purchase of spirits in public taverns."¹ During the mid-nineteenth century, the time period when Dett's maternal grandmother settled in Canada, the degree of discrimination experienced there would have been less severe than in the United States, but by no means was it nonexistent. Beginning in the late eighteenth century, the British colonial government began enacting laws that resulted in progressively greater legal freedom for blacks residing in their jurisdiction. This culminated in the official abolition of slavery in all British colonies in 1833. At the same time, it was also made illegal for Canadian Justices of the Peace to extradite fugitive slaves to their owners, punishable by a fine or imprisonment.² Sigrid Nicole Gallant saw the

¹ Anne Key Simpson, *Follow Me: The Life and Music of R. Nathaniel Dett* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993), 1.

² Sigrid Nicole Gallant, "Perspectives on the Motives for the Migration of African-Americans to and from Ontario, Canada: From the Abolition of Slavery in Canada to the Abolition of Slavery in the United States," *The Journal of*

advancement of civil rights for black citizens of Canada as less altruistic than it might seem. Although the end results were beneficial, Gallant wrote that the British administration was using the issue primarily as a pawn in its antagonistic relationship with the United States. In 1812, the British and the U.S. were at war, and as part of a military recruiting effort, the British promised freedom and property to any of its black citizens who served. Several additional factors supported the progressive increase of legal freedom and opposition to slavery: the Canadian climate rendered an agricultural economy less important, and there was a need for legal residents to settle the land and serve in the militia.³ Although all of this translated to official legal freedom by 1833, significant social discrimination remained. Somewhat in contrast to the quote by Simpson, Gallant focused on the social tension that existed at the time, both intra- and inter-racial.⁴

If Robert Nathaniel Dett encountered any major social obstacles growing up in Canada, he did not go into detail on the matter when he later wrote about his childhood. When he described his upbringing in Drummondville, and later Niagara Falls, New York, he constructed a positive narrative as it related to fulfilling his professional and personal ambitions. Dett credited his interest in music to both of his parents' interest and skill. Indirectly, his siblings' involvement in music provided the catalyst for Dett's initial study when, his first instructor took him on as a student after hearing him informally play at his brothers' lessons. Even though he began studying piano at a very young age, it does not appear that Dett seriously considered pursuing music as a profession until at least 1901 when he was nearly twenty years old. That year he began studying

Negro History 86, no. 3 (Summer 2001): 395-396. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1562457> (Accessed August, 17, 2012).

³ Gallant, "Perspectives on the Motives," 392-393.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 402-403.

with Oliver Willis Halsted at the Halsted Conservatory in Lockport, New York. Dett later wrote that Halsted was the first teacher who made a substantial impact on his progress. Halsted encouraged his student, but was also direct in pointing out where Dett needed improvements. At this stage in his development, Dett claimed that his greatest deficiencies were in his tendency to avoid strict interpretations of the notated music. From the inception of his piano studies, Dett had preferred to improvise and add embellishments where he thought they might improve the music. Halsted worked to improve Dett's discipline while also encouraging his strengths in improvisation. Dett gave his first serious recital at the end of his initial year of study with Halsted. The performance consisted of pieces from the classical and salon repertoire as well as original compositions. In 1903, after three years of instruction under Halsted, Dett took the first step toward a career in music by enrolling at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music in Oberlin, Ohio.

Lewis wrote that as late as 1917, nine years after Dett graduated, "there were 2,132 African Americans in colleges and universities, probably no more than fifty of them attending 'white' institutions."⁵ In the years leading up to this, Oberlin was a prime example of where an integrated educational experience might be obtained. In 1834, Oberlin Collegiate Institute, as it was known, became one of the first primarily white institutions of higher education in the country to admit black students, and eventually one-third of all African Americans who graduated from a primarily white college had graduated from Oberlin.⁶ The town itself had a history of progressive abolitionist sentiment, derived largely from the liberal religious reform

⁵ Lewis, *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, xiii.

⁶ Simpson, *Follow Me*, 17.

movement of Upstate New York rather than from more radical approaches. Oberlin's students, as well as its administration, tended to share a progressive endorsement of educational equality that lasted in its fullest force until Reconstruction.⁷ However, by the first years of the twentieth century, when Dett enrolled at Oberlin's Conservatory of Music, this reform sentiment had largely evaporated as the college's administration steered it towards a standardized approach that emulated mainstream educational institutions of the Northeast. The religious basis for the college's initial promotion of an integrated educational experience had subsided as newer generations of students less emotionally invested in the abolitionist movement enrolled. On the surface, the administration of the college still endorsed equal educational opportunities for its black students. However, as many of the students at Oberlin reacted against this and demanded segregated dining and housing facilities, the leaders of the college more frequently accommodated these demands. The transition that resulted in Oberlin promoting a more moderate version of racial equality, as well as a more standardized educational system, was symbolized by the change of name from Oberlin Collegiate Institute to Oberlin College earlier in the nineteenth century.⁸ Again, Dett recalled his Oberlin experience positively. This was despite such occurrences as the de facto segregation of the college's Literary Societies during the first decade of the twentieth century, which was demanded by its white members and corresponded to the time that Dett attended. In an alumni questionnaire conducted in the 1920s, Dett continued to

⁷ Cally L. White, "The Segregation of Black Students at Oberlin College after Reconstruction," *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no.3 (Autumn 2001): 344-346 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/369200> (Accessed August, 14 2012).

⁸ James Oliver Horton, "Black Education at Oberlin College: A Controversial Commitment," *The Journal of Negro Education* 54, no.4 (Autumn 1985): 487-488 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2294710> (Accessed August 14, 2012).

show an appreciation for his time at Oberlin when he named college president Henry Churchill King as one of his choices for “Most outstanding former students rendering public service.”⁹

By all accounts, Dett was extremely popular and productive on campus. During those years, his first significant piano works were published, and he performed a regular schedule of recitals both on and off campus. These activities were in addition to his regular coursework, his participation in the college’s work-study program in order to help pay his expenses, and his post as choir director at the Mt. Zion Baptist Church.¹⁰ Immediately following his graduation in June, 1908 as the first African American to be granted a Bachelor’s Degree in music from Oberlin College, Dett began receiving positive national attention. In the July 30, 1908 *New York Age*, it was noted that Dett “[r]ecently...was a guest of honor at a recital of his works in Warner Concert Hall. He received warm congratulations of the critical-minded people assembled there...And now the Oberlin authorities are so impressed with the genius of this young man that they contemplate sending him to Europe to go on with his career.”¹¹ Well into adulthood and his own teaching career, Dett continued to make his education a priority, studying at institutions such as Harvard during summers, and earning a Masters of Music at the Eastman School of Music in 1932.

Despite the encouragements offered by the *New York Age* article, Dett remained in the U.S., and after an initial, unsuccessful search for employment in the Washington D.C. area, he was appointed as music instructor and choir director at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. Lane was established with the support of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church in the year Dett was born. The school was founded with goals for its students that differed significantly from those at

⁹ Simpson, *Follow Me*, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹¹ *New York Age*, October 29, 1908, qtd. In Simpson, *Follow Me*, 24.

many of the Southern colleges established by Northern philanthropists, which emphasized industrial and manual-labor education. Lane's mission stressed religious character and intellectual achievement, offering four Bachelor's Degrees: arts, science, divinity, and music.¹² Dett characterized his experience there as one equally of learning as much as teaching. He learned the on-the-job skills required of an effective teacher, later put to internationally-recognized use at Hampton Institute. Furthermore, Dett later explained how his students at Lane provided him with additional exposure to African American folk songs, which later formed an important basis for his composing style. Dett maintained a busy schedule; in addition to teaching, he was pianist and organist at Mother Liberty Church in Jackson.¹³ In 1911, after three years at Lane, Dett took a position which tripled his salary at Lincoln Institute in Lincoln, Missouri. It was in these first few years of the 1910s that Dett saw some of the biggest professional advancements and transitions of his career. Three of the compositions upon which his reputation would rest were composed during these years: the piano suites *Magnolia* and *In the Bottoms*, and the anthem "Listen to the Lambs." "Lambs" was Dett's entry to the 1913 Colored Music School Settlement (New York) contest for a piece of music by a black composer. At the second annual Carnegie Hall concert held that year to benefit the school, Dett was awarded second place to the composer Carl Diton. He later described "Listen to the Lambs" as "an anthem in eight parts developed from a folk song of the same name, two measures of the folk song being used as a theme for the anthem."¹⁴ The occasion for composing "Lambs" was Dett's appointment to Hampton. He recalled that he wrote the piece for his students so that they would "have

¹² Simpson, *Follow Me*, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁴ Dett, "The Development of Negro Religious Music," in *Negro Music* (undergraduate essay, Harvard University, 1920).

something musically which would be peculiarly their own...”¹⁵ Dett’s time at Hampton as a music instructor, and later director of the music program was a crucial span of years in his career. It was during this time that he worked to fully implement his vision for the formal training of musicians who might later realize the high-art potential for African American folk material. First, however, it will be necessary to consider the developments in African American musical nationalism, and how those responsible for many of these developments influenced Dett.

¹⁵ Quoted in Simpson, 449.

Chapter 2: Influences and Predecessors

For an aspiring African American musician working during the early twentieth century, there were the practicalities of adhering to narrowly-defined notions of success. The musical and social limitations put in place by mainstream society could often amount to a significant set of obstacles. In pursuing his ambition to write concert music, Dett was charting one of the most challenging artistic courses that could be selected at that point in time. Among the many contradictory and ironic factors that he navigated was the fact that, while race relations in the country were generally poor at this time, African Americans for the previous fifty years had been accumulating successes and firsts in musical endeavors. These breakthroughs were occurring in the worlds of popular and theater music as well as black music criticism and analysis, and included significant financial successes as well.

By the first years of the twentieth century, the music publishing industry in the United States was, in part, comprised of the first of several black-owned music publishing companies, such as Cecil Mack's Gotham-Attucks Music Publishing Company, as well as the most successful example, the Pace and Handy Company, established in Memphis in 1908, which relocated to New York a decade later.¹ Despite a dearth of large-scale studies on black music history and criticism during these years, several prominent writers regularly contributed articles and essays on the topic to the African American press, among them Nora Holt at the *Chicago Defender*,

¹ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 308-309. Co-founder W.C. Handy was known as the "Father of the Blues," for his early efforts in publishing that genre in notated form, his most notable song being "St. Louis Blues."

Lucien White and James Weldon Johnson at the *New York Age*, and Sylvester Russell.² Writers and critics working for larger publications presented a wide range of views which foreshadowed many of the central debates of the Harlem Renaissance.

With encouragements such as these, Dett could be confident that a career in music promised at least the possibility of success. However, in nearly all aspects of life in the United States, these years were a low point for race relations. Racism in the country was acquiring a scientific basis that threatened to undermine what advances had been made. As the disciplines of sociology and anthropology were being formally established, a paternalistic and hierarchical view of races and cultures became an accepted viewpoint. George Cotkin wrote that racism was embedded within anthropological thought at this time. The view of mainstream American practitioners of anthropology was that the white race had a “fatherly responsibility to care for those less able.”³ Additionally, there was a simultaneous fascination with what were viewed as primitive and exotic cultures. Continuing in large part the nineteenth-century European fascination with non-Western cultures (as seen in the 1889 Paris Exhibition Universelle’s “Negro Village”), it found its way into American public displays of a similar nature. This perspective informed the outlook of many who were in a position to dispense artistic patronage and support during the Harlem Renaissance, most importantly Carl Van Vechten and Charlotte Mason. Van Vechten was the author of the sensationalistic 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven*. Many black writers, most prominently W.E.B. DuBois, criticized the novel at the time of its release for focusing on a stereotyped portrayal of what many imagined culture and life might be like in Harlem. However, Spencer

² Ibid., 308.

³ George Cotkin, *Reluctant Modernism: American Thought and Culture, 1880-1900* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 57.

noted that among several writers during the early twentieth century, including DuBois, it had become commonplace to put forth ideas that assumed a degree of inherently distinct African American qualities.⁴ Arthur de Gobineau's 1853 *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* provided a principal intellectual basis for this view. As this viewpoint pertained to music, although it often had the superficial veneer of promoting black efforts as worthy to be labeled genuinely American music, it remained largely a modern interpretation of de Gobineau's view of the races as insurmountably different. This perspective permeated the writings of many well-intentioned Harlem Renaissance writers, and could be found coming from the pen of figures as diverse as James Weldon Johnson, Langston Hughes, and Carl Van Vechten. As will be seen, Dett's views were more nuanced and based in more objective observations of music and history.

Natalie Curtis Burlin (1875-1921), an early practitioner in the field of ethnomusicology, reflected the prevailing racial viewpoint in a manner that sought to celebrate what she perceived as a natural African American gift for music. Her observations and fieldwork led to a firm conviction that African Americans were in possession of natural musical abilities that had not been and could not be taught to them in any way. Furthermore, traditional training would mean "certain death to the inspirational spirit of those superbly simple old Negro songs."⁵ Burlin had personally observed the choir at Hampton Institute at the same time Dett was making it his mission to provide exactly this training to his students. Despite this, Burlin related her observations with a viewpoint that, in addition to portraying what she heard in the music, also contained the notion that, as long as they were singing, African Americans would remain

⁴ Jon Michael Spencer, "The Emancipation of the Negro and the Negro Spirituals From the Racialist Legacy of Arthur de Gobineau," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 24, no.1 (Winter 1994).

⁵ Natalie Curtis Burlin, "Black Singers and Players," *The Musical Quarterly* 5, no.4 (October 1919): 499 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/738123> (Accessed August, 13 2010).

content: “The irresistible music that wells up from this sunny and unresentful people is hummed and whistled, danced to and marched to, laughed over and wept over, by high and low and rich and poor throughout the land. The down-trodden black man, whose patient religious faith has kept his heart still unembittered, is fast becoming the singing voice of all America.”⁶ Burlin also recorded her observations of the 1912 Carnegie Hall concert by James Reese Europe’s Clef Club Orchestra. Burlin described her astonishment that the musicians would, among other feats, spontaneously begin to sing as they played, sometimes in different registers than the instruments they were playing.⁷ Paradoxically, these Carnegie Hall shows were sponsored by the Colored Music School Settlement which Burlin had helped to establish in order to provide traditional musical instruction to black residents of New York City. Dett’s own opinion on this issue is difficult to discern with absolute clarity. Regarding the innate ability of African Americans to render music a certain way, Dett tended to lend his support to the idea in connection to the common psychology brought on by slavery and the religious feelings that he believed naturally followed. Based on his experiences conducting several community and college choirs over the course of his career, he emphatically denied the idea that one’s biological make-up had any bearing on musical ability.⁸

It will help to better fix Burlin in the overall context of the era to point out that her studies in folk musicology had a significant influence on Charlotte Mason, who, along with Carl Van Vechten, was one of the more notorious characters in the Harlem Renaissance drama.⁹ Mason

⁶ Ibid., 501.

⁷ Ibid., 501-502.

⁸ Dett, ed. *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute* (Hampton: Hampton Institute Press, 1927).

⁹ Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*, 15-16.

was a wealthy upper-class Manhattanite who is most famous for her financial underwriting of Langston Hughes's early artistic career. Mason fully subscribed to the unschooled, primitive stereotype of what African American art should be, and she expected her artists to produce art that fit with this image. According to Jon Michael Spencer, Mason "disdained" Dett. Into the 1930s, as she saw her vision of the Harlem Renaissance fading, she denigrated Dett in correspondences with Alain Locke, who was evidently a friend: "I was disgusted that Dett had to be on the same vessel with you...He began well in his work but letting the white man run him, and ending now going to Europe taking a 'Dett choir' and not a Negro choir is absolutely disastrous to establishing the Negro's real life where I have dreamed it can stand, a bulwark against loss to them."¹⁰ Although Mason would remain a patron to Locke and Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes eventually broke off his relationship with her, unable to conform to her exacting demands.

In addition to the restrictive racial thought put forth by Burlin, Mason, and others that was permeating national thought, Dett's ambition was impeded by the fact that it was not an easy time for any American to pursue a life as a composer. As Southern commented, the United States "generally ignored its own classical musicians."¹¹ Most often, Americans looked to Europe as the source of accepted musical standards and style, and only tolerated native composers who emulated these traits. Furthermore, there were the financial realities of the era, and these had several artistic consequences. Robert Nathaniel Dett would end up being known for his exceptional educational contributions more so than for his composing and performing activities.

¹⁰ Charlotte Mason Letter to Alain Locke, August 6, 1929, Locke Papers, quoted in Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*, 45.

¹¹ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 253.

Writing in 1918, after Dett had been at Hampton Institute for five years, May Stanley commented “His instructors [at Oberlin] expected that his brilliant pianistic gifts would lead him to the concert stage, but he turned his back on the more alluring prospect to take up teaching among his people in the South.”¹² For Dett as for many others, it was simply not possible to earn a living in the United States solely as a composer. During the first few decades of the twentieth century there was, however, a great proliferation of musical educational opportunities granted to aspiring African American teachers, composers and performers. For this reason, the greatest demand for musical professionals in the country was in education. As previously mentioned, Dett was the first African American to graduate from Oberlin’s music program. Additionally, Helen Hagan at Yale and Raymond Lawson at Fisk repeated this accomplishment at their respective institutions.¹³ Finally, Dett’s later output as a composer would be represented by only a few different genres, and this was again symptomatic of another restriction in America’s musical climate, in this instance the marketplace constraints of the publishing industry. As Eileen Southern noted, black American composers did not have to suffer as much exploitation as those working in popular music; however, they were restricted to the genres and forms that publishers thought would sell.¹⁴ Despite the influence of working as an editor at a publishing company, the composer and baritone Harry T. Burleigh was restricted to writing primarily short songs. Composers such as Burleigh rarely attempted large-scale orchestral compositions because there was little chance that they would become financially successful, or remain in the public

¹² May Stanley, “R.N. Dett, of Hampton Institute: Helping to Lay Foundation for Negro Music of Future,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 1, no.1 (Spring 1973): 67 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1214127> (Accessed August 6, 2012). (Reprinted from *Musical America* 6, 1918: 17).

¹³ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 284-285.

¹⁴ Southern, “America’s Black Composers of Classical Music,” *Music Educators Journal* 62, no.3 (November 1975): 46 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3394895> (Accessed August 24, 2012).

consciousness for a significant amount of time. For these same reasons, Dett composed primarily in only two genres—choral works, and short piano suites.

Although the climate for composing in the United States was discouragingly restrictive for an African American, examples of success were not completely unprecedented. From the 1850s to the 1890s, several African American classical performers had found artistic and professional success. Dett later wrote that, despite the stature of Dvorak and the weight it lent his ideas, “The development of serious Negro music lagged, and its slow pace seems the more remarkable when it is recalled that by this time the race had produced a large number of artists who had achieved world recognition.”¹⁵ However, the larger issue as Dett saw it was that nearly all of the musicians were “[playing] music already made familiar by others more famous...no matter how they excelled, they were but another edition of what already existed.”¹⁶ A prominent theme running through much of Dett’s writing is why – until a small handful of others (including Dett himself), working well into the twentieth century took up the challenge – African American musical characteristics were not developed in a serious manner.

A general pattern of the nineteenth-century concert stage was a more willing public reception of females as vocalists and males as instrumentalists. The most celebrated African American singers of classical music during this time were Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Selika Williams, and Sissieretta Jones. Notable male performers included pianists Thomas Bethune and John William Boone. In accordance with the public relations customs of the era, and reinforcing the novelty over artistry element of public perception, most performers were billed with nicknames

¹⁵ Dett, “Negro Music,” *Musical America* 28 (July, 1918).

¹⁶ Dett, “The Development of the Negro Spiritual.”

that emphasized race and background. Additionally in the case of Bethune and Boone, promoters made sure to distinguish that each was blind. Dett did not deny the significant breakthroughs made by these artists, and Boone did compose some early works based on African American themes.¹⁷ However, the fact that the first anthology of spirituals had already been published and the Fisk ensemble was making the genre known internationally, led Dett to ask why “the published spirituals did not immediately become the basis for serious experimentation and development.”¹⁸

Most accounts of American music of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cite a group of black composers who were the first to successfully blend elements of European and vernacular musical styles, thereby achieving major musical, social, and professional breakthroughs, while also providing examples of musical compositions that foreshadowed Harlem Renaissance thought. Along with Dett, the composers named include Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Will Marion Cook, Harry T. Burleigh, Clarence Cameron White, and James Reese Europe. However, two distinct generations are proposed, the first influencing the second. Part of an earlier generation than Dett, Will Marion Cook was an instructive example of an African-American composer who successfully incorporated some of the idioms of his race into his own compositions. Despite classical aspirations and an extensive education that included violin instruction at Dett’s alma mater Oberlin, three years in Berlin under the top European masters, and two years with Dvorak at the National Conservatory, Cook’s successes occurred largely in popular and theater music. According to writer Alex Ross, Cook “forms a direct link between

¹⁷ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 251.

¹⁸ Dett, “The Development of the Negro Spiritual.”

Dvorak and Duke Ellington. He was representative of the many black musicians who aspired to the classical world, were turned away, and then turned to popular music, first as a necessity and eventually embracing it.”¹⁹ Dett’s interest in classical composition prevented Cook’s musical output from exerting too much influence on his own. In particular, it was Harry T. Burleigh and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, of the older generation, who functioned as his primary influences. Until at least the mid-point of the twentieth century, Burleigh and the long-since deceased Coleridge-Taylor were still recognized as the leading black composers of art songs.²⁰ By the turn of the century, when Dett would have begun to take serious notice of the work of Burleigh and Coleridge-Taylor, the use of black folksong traits had a more substantial history in popular music than in classical music. Beginning in the 1890s, vernacular traits began to see additional development in musical theater. This was largely brought about through the first instances of African American composers such as Cook, as well as the creative team of J. Rosamond Johnson, James Weldon Johnson, and Bob Cole exercising more control over the production of the shows in which they were involved. Despite this clear progress, Dett, along with many Harlem Renaissance spokesmen such as Alain Locke, found the use of the African American folk heritage in popular music to be tolerable at best, and very often a social and artistic regression, as in the case of minstrelsy. Musical forms that relied on European techniques interested Dett most, and Samuel Coleridge-Taylor was one of the earliest models of success in this field.

¹⁹ Alex Ross, *The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 125-129.

²⁰ Doris Evans McGinty, “That You Came So Far to See Us: Coleridge-Taylor in America,” *Black Music Research Journal* 21, no. 2(Autumn 2001): 207 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3181603> (Accessed August 24, 2012).

Although he is seldom recognized among the pantheon of major composers, Coleridge-Taylor was one of the most respected and popular musicians of his time, initially in his native England, and shortly thereafter in the United States. Of African-British descent, Coleridge-Taylor attained a remarkable degree of popularity during his career, and exerted a formidable influence on Dett and later generations of African American composers. Until Coleridge-Taylor's initial appearance in Washington D.C. to conduct a series of concerts featuring his own works, and the subsequent publication of *Twenty Four Negro Melodies, Transcribed for the Piano*, Dett observed that nearly every conceivable development, with both positive and negative results, had been applied to black musical styles with the exception of a black musician utilizing nineteenth-century spirituals in a serious manner.²¹ In the case of Dvorak, his lasting importance to the development of American music was his promotion of the spirituals, and less so with the works he composed in America meant to contain elements of this style, such as his Symphony no.9 in E Minor Op.95 ("From the New World"). As much as Dett appreciated these attempts by the European masters to infuse their work with indigenous elements, ultimately their music was "too individual and eclectic to be racially representative, and so stand more as examples of finished musicianship than representative expressions of an unappreciated people."²² Dett went so far as to comment that contemporary popular music produced by African Americans exceeded the "New World Symphony" in the expression of "the medium of Negro folk idiom."²³ Although he too was a European working with a strong basis in classical forms, Coleridge-Taylor's importance was in providing an example of success for black composers in America to attempt

²¹ Dett, "Negro Music."

²² Dett, "Development of Negro Secular Music," in *Negro Music* (undergraduate essay, Harvard University, 1920).

²³ Dett, "Negro Music of the Present," in *Negro Music* (undergraduate essay, Harvard University, 1920).

to emulate. Ellsworth Janifer wrote that “At this time, it was practically impossible for a Negro composer in this country to approach the esteem and admiration which Coleridge-Taylor was enjoying so abundantly in England.”²⁴ It was his choral work *Hiawatha’s Trilogy* which led to his fame among the British public in 1898-1899. Janifer continued: “It is important to remember that it [*Hiawatha’s Wedding Feast*] once vied with Mendelssohn’s *Elijah* for the distinction of occupying second place to Handel’s *Messiah* in the affections of the British public.”²⁵ The work’s premier and subsequent frequent performances in America ensured that his fame preceded him when he appeared in Washington D.C. to personally conduct *Hiawatha* in 1904. Frederick Loudin, at the time the director of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, was an important point of contact in bringing Coleridge-Taylor to the United States. While the Fisk Jubilee Singers were touring England, Loudin introduced a group of Washington D.C. socialites and classical music enthusiasts to Coleridge-Taylor’s music, initiating a process that would culminate in the November 1904 performance of *Hiawatha* by the Washington D.C.-based Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Society. Coleridge-Taylor ended up making three separate tours of the United States before his relatively early death in 1912, all of them featuring the composer conducting his music, and received with enormous enthusiasm and popularity by the audiences and the musical establishment.²⁶

Many of the American performances of Coleridge-Taylor’s works featured the participation of the baritone Harry T. Burleigh. In a situation analogous to Coleridge-Taylor’s, Burleigh enjoyed significant critical acclaim and popularity during the early part of the twentieth century,

²⁴ Ellsworth Janifer, “Samuel Coleridge-Taylor in Washington,” *Phylon* 28, no.2 (2nd Qtr., 1967): 185. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/273562> (Accessed June 15, 2012).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁶ Janifer, “Samuel Coleridge-Taylor in Washington,” 191-196.

which subsequently diminished to the point of his becoming largely a footnote in the history of American music, mentioned almost always only in connection with Antonin Dvorak and the National Conservatory.²⁷ Floyd pointed out that Burleigh's "contributions to American music have been virtually absent in the tomes that document and extol that history."²⁸ In addition to his work as a concert singer, Burleigh was an editor at the G. Ricordi publishing company, and most importantly to the development of American music, a composer and arranger. His compositions include "140 solo songs, thirty choral works, and several collections of arranged African American folksongs, as well as his preservation of the spirituals for their use as grist for the mill of recital and concert hall."²⁹ It is the recital and concert hall performances of his piano and solo voice arrangements of spirituals that have contributed to the bulk of Burleigh's steadily improving historical recognition. The leading vocalists of the 1920s such as tenor Roland Hayes introduced spirituals arranged in the manner of Burleigh's model to their programs to be heard alongside the standard European song repertoire, and in doing so introduced one of the most significant breakthroughs in Harlem Renaissance musical ambition. As it pertains to the artistic growth of Robert Nathaniel Dett, however, Burleigh's comparatively smaller output of spirituals arranged for chorus likely provided a more immediate inspiration.

Burleigh did not use African American themes when he initially began to compose, around 1898. His work under Dvorak made him aware though of the early initiative in that direction and the possibilities it presented. Burleigh followed one of his best known compositions, 1914's "I Love My Jean," with *Jubilee Songs of the United States of America* two years later. *Jubilee*

²⁷ Floyd, "The Invisibility and Fame of Harry T. Burleigh," 179-182.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

Songs was the first collection of spirituals arranged in the European art song manner for solo voice.³⁰ However, in 1913, three years prior to the publication of *Jubilee Songs*, Burleigh's *Two Negro Spirituals*, namely "Dig My Grave" and "Deep River," was published for mixed chorus. Dett commented that, prior to this, he had "seemed apart [from his race]."³¹ The 1913 publication encompassed several significant developments, primarily pertaining to "Deep River." Burleigh modeled his arrangement on that of Coleridge-Taylor, which had been published in 1905 as one of the *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies Transcribed for the Piano*. These two versions established the standard version of "Deep River" which subsequently became popular with the public.³² Wayne D. Shirley noted an aspect of Burleigh's work which in retrospect transcended the specific development of "Deep River." Spirituals arranged for chorus had a history dating to the nineteenth century; however, with the publication of *Two Negro Spirituals* they found a wider audience through Burleigh's use of more modernistic composition and arranging techniques. Now, "we hear for the first time the full Dvorakian panoply of late nineteenth-century harmony applied to a mixed-chorus arrangement of a spiritual."³³ Dett located his own arrangement of this spiritual as a compromise between the original nineteenth century version and modernized versions, writing that while his "Deep River" was one of his only efforts which did not follow "traditional" harmonies, it was "[t]he first harmonized version...in which all of the original melody appears."³⁴ Dett's most significant choral contributions, such as "Listen to the Lambs" and "The Chariot Jubilee," would make full use of the more modern late-Romantic style

³⁰ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 271.

³¹ Dett, *Negro Music*.

³² Wayne D. Shirley, "The Coming of 'Deep River,'" *American Music* 15, no.4 (Winter 1997): 497-503 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3052384> (Accessed June 17, 2012).

³³ *Ibid.*, 504.

³⁴ Dett, *The Dett Collection of Negro Spirituals*.

pioneered by Burleigh, while continuing to draw inspiration from nineteenth-century folk practices.

Chapter 3: Robert Nathaniel Dett and the Harlem Renaissance: Dett's Music

Before beginning a more detailed look at Robert Nathaniel Dett's promotion and appropriation of the spirituals' base materials, it bears clarifying that as a product of the North, Dett's childhood environment did not allow for direct hands-on contact with the rural folk culture of the South and the accompanying performance practices of that region's amateur musicians. Throughout much of his early education, Dett did not give much thought to composing or performing music based in these traditions. He recalled that his grandmother sang spirituals to him as a child. However to him, "these primitive Negro songs sounded strange, weird, and unnatural." It was not until much later, as a student, at Oberlin Conservatory, that he was persuaded of the potential of this music. Dett attended a performance by the visiting Kneisel String Quartet, where he heard a slow movement from a Dvorak String Quartet known to be "based on traditional airs." This was likely the slow movement from the composer's String Quartet in F Major op. 96 ("American"), infused with African American and Native American themes. Hearing music familiar to him from the time of his youth, presented in a style designed for the concert hall, had a great effect on Dett. Despite the fact that he would later express the view that composers could improve on the authenticity of Dvorak's efforts, Dett related that it was at this point that he began to reevaluate the potential of music outside the European tradition.¹

Dett's initial reluctance to embrace the traditional African American religious songs of the nineteenth century was a viewpoint typical of the generation that came of age during the 1880s

¹ Robert Nathaniel Dett, "From Bell Stand to Throne Room," *Etude* 52 (February 1934).

and 1890s. The spirituals were seen as too redolent of the conditions of slavery to have a positive force in any way. Minstrel companies however, both white- and black-run, did not dispense with the idea of using African American music ,“but almost solely with the idea of obtaining comic and grotesque effects, so that the Negroes became more and more heartily ashamed of their own songs.”² The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ tours were meant to counteract this depiction, and while considered a success, the process of acceptance was slow. Once Dett did begin to appreciate the spirituals, he set an ambitious goal for spreading awareness and appreciation of them to the general public. Ideally, this would involve more than just admiration from a distance, which had arguably already been the case since the 1860s. Dett believed that the music was worthy of full adoption in the services of both black and white churches. As it stood in the early twentieth century, their full adoption in the formal settings of black churches was handicapped by the fact that, although they did admire the music from a distance, most Americans would be “scandalized” at the thought of using them in their own churches. As the mainstream standard of thought was viewed as a goal for many African Americans, the adoption of the spirituals was discouraged on this basis.³

With this goal in mind, Dett saw it as his and other composers’ job to bridge the gap of acceptance that currently existed: “It occurred to the writer that if a form of song were evolved which contained all the acceptable characteristics of Negro folk music and yet would compare favorably in poetic sentiment and musical expression with the best class of church music...it would save to the Negro and his music all the peculiar and precious idioms, and as a work of art

² Dett, “The Development of the Negro Spiritual.”

³ Dett, “The Development of Negro Religious Music,” in *Negro Music* (undergraduate essay, Harvard University, 1920).

would summon to its interpretation the best of his intellectual and emotional efforts.”⁴ Dett faced harsh criticism throughout his career from those who took issue with his composing and performing styles. One of his responses was to cite the work as a parallel instance of classical appropriation of folk materials in the name of European nationalism. This was the primary context for Dett’s use of spirituals in his compositions. His desire to adapt vernacular folk music was magnified by the success that Eastern European composers such as Dvorak found subjecting their own native musics to serious development. Dvorak’s 1893 endorsement and utilization of Native-American and African American elements in his compositions around that time is considered, along with the Fisk Singers’ tour, a turning point in the nation’s acceptance of the spiritual as serious music. In actual practice though, Dvorak’s pronouncement did not produce immediate results among African American composers. In fact, a specific school of composition could not be said to have thrived until several years later, and the majority who attempted to carry out the task were, at first, Dvorak’s white students at the National Conservatory.⁵ Eventually, by the turn of the century it was possible that a black audience for music, literature, and visual arts might have obtained a sense of its own earlier culture chiefly through works by white artists who possessed only a surface knowledge of that culture. As Dett explained: “There are some who, having been to a ‘show,’ read a Negro novel (probably by a white author), or who have seen a movie in which there are colored people appearing, usually in serio-comic parts, or who having had a colored cook feel themselves to have an advantage. Truly, these favored few are really at a disadvantage; for had they approached the music with an altogether

⁴ Ibid., 148.

⁵ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 268.

open mind, instinct would have guided them, more than likely, along the right path toward the solution of that which is itself elemental. But being blinded or misled by preconceived ideas, they go far astray, not realizing that though they may be enthusiastically in motion, they are not necessarily arriving anywhere.”⁶ From Dett’s point of view, the inherent musical qualities of the spiritual should have been sufficient encouragement for its development.

As two of the first composers to succeed in melding African American themes to European forms, Burleigh and Coleridge Taylor were two obvious influences on Dett’s subsequent achievements. There was, however, another equally important force that shaped Dett’s goals. In the late nineteenth-century culture of musical nationalism, the work of the Russian composers particularly caught Dett’s ear. The influence was found in three aspects: the specific musical effects, such as rhythms, harmonies, and a certain “pervading touch of pathos”⁷; the preservation of folk melodies in formal religious settings; and finally, the austere live presentation of the music—something Dett admired, and wished for his own choral concerts. This meant ideally no applause, and a performance setting as divorced as possible from theatrical and commercial presentations.⁸ In the late 1920s concert tours of the Hampton Institute Choir led by Dett, Russian liturgical anthems were featured prominently. Dett noted that his students at Hampton had identified strongly with the Russian works and favored them second only to the spirituals.

However much Dett appreciated and analyzed African American spirituals from a socio-cultural point of view, his primary focus was their intrinsic musical worth. The genre of

⁶ Dett, “Understanding the Negro Spiritual,” in *The Dett Collection of Negro Spirituals* (Chicago: Hall & McCreary, 1936).

⁷ Dett, Program Notes for “Concert by the Hampton Institute Choir A Cappella, Directed by Dr. R. Nathaniel Dett, Presented Under the Auspices of the Society of the Friends of Music of New York City, Carnegie Hall, New York, Monday Evening April 16th, 1928.”

⁸ Dett, “The Development of Negro Religious Music.”

nineteenth-century African American sacred song had a unique amalgamation of traits through which Dett viewed an opportunity to finally contribute to a national classical music. This approach necessitated a rehabilitation of the spiritual's public image; even given their musical value, they had originated in a "despised" condition, claimed Dett, referring to the conditions of slavery and the thriving of the minstrel entertainment industry. Dett saw it as the composer's goal to retain identifying characteristics while redefining the music's image in the public's view. With this accomplished, the inherent musical worth of the spiritual should be enough for audiences of all backgrounds to accept it.⁹

While Dett was working to place the spiritual on a higher artistic plane, he was also engaged in a concurrent debate over the spiritual's origins. He took a more uncompromising view of its African origins than most. Contemporary American composer Charles Ives (1874-1954), who was also trying to forge a nationalistic style in his own highly idiosyncratic manner, showed some ambivalence over the African American musical heritage. He contended that the spirituals were "exaggerated" early American white hymns; furthermore, American music could not be based solely on the contribution of one culture. Each composer had to look to his own culture as individual inspiration, and early American hymns could be just as fervent and inspiring.¹⁰

George S. Schuyler reiterated this argument at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in his 1926 article "The Negro-Art Hokum" when he claimed that a "contribution of a caste in a certain section of the country... [is] no more expressive of the Negro race than the music and dancing of the Appalachian highlanders or the Dalmatian peasantry are expressive or characteristic of the

⁹ Dett, "The Emancipation of Negro Music," *Negro Music Negro Music* (undergraduate essay, Harvard University, 1920).

¹⁰ Ross, *The Rest is Noise*, 134-135.

Caucasian race.”¹¹ On the point of exaggeration, Fisk University musicologist John W. Work granted that the spirituals and the early gospel hymns that pre-dated them shared characteristics, but that it was a matter of conscious “re-assembling” of words and music, not merely imitation.¹² Dett, however, asserted the almost completely African and African American origin of the spirituals by identifying many points of divergence between them and the European and early American works that were claimed as foundations. The convictions that Dett held on the development and value of the spirituals was all the more significant in the context of having initially dismissed them altogether. However sincere, Dett’s conversion in outlook could lead to a reliance on hyperbole and a dismissal of other varieties of indigenous American music—also seen in the writings of Locke, Johnson, Hughes and other Renaissance writers. Dett came to believe that the spirituals were the “one wellspring of spiritual issue...in a country given over to commercial enterprise.”¹³ Although working in isolation, and thus likely not known to most of the public, Charles Ives represented a contemporary example of Schuyler’s argument that lasting art was possible when composers embraced their own folk culture, regardless of its origins.

By the time that Dett was writing prolifically in the 1920s and 1930s, questions of how, when, and whether a truly nationalistic style could be defined were still at issue. Ives’s music was not known on a large scale, and when Dett and Locke made the case for music of African American origin, most by that time would have considered such music to be the popular variety of jazz. It was possible that the spiritual could fulfill this role, but the question for Dett was “what possibly

¹¹ George S. Schuyler, “The Negro-Art Hokum,” in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 96.

¹² John W. Work, *American Negro Songs: 230 Folk Songs and Spirituals, Religious and Secular* (Toronto: General Publishing Company Ltd., 1940), 6-10.

¹³ Dett, “*Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute*.”

could have become of the great wealth of music which...must have been parent to the spiritual and how is it that if such a wealth of hymnology ever existed and was in current use for a period long enough to develop another music of even more powerful expression, that America has always been rated the least musical of all the nations?"¹⁴ If the early hymns had such influence, why had they all but disappeared from the scene, and why were they not recognized as a potential source of American music when they were in use, finding recognition only when the spiritual was beginning to find a wide audience among the general public?

There were characteristics, acknowledged as being African in origin, which Dett elaborated on to further his argument. To the general public of the early twentieth century, long conditioned on the mainstream compositional practices of European composers, these characteristics represented something modern—and to many enthusiasts such as Van Vechten and Burlin, excitingly primitive at the same time. Like Alain Locke's efforts on behalf of African-derived visual art, Dett sought to provide the characteristics of African American folk music with historical and musical legitimacy that did not need to be characterized as modern, primitive, or exotic in order to be appreciated. Dett attributed the lag in development of African American music styles in classical settings to the fact that the majority of the public was simply not ready to accept this music as more than a passing vogue of primitive fascination. The first publications of notated spirituals demonstrated this reluctance. The editors of the earliest transcribed spirituals emphasized European traits and downplayed African traits in order to make these new songs palatable to the public. For Dett, these early arrangements were important from a historical

¹⁴ Dett, "The Authenticity of the Spiritual," in *The Dett Collection of Negro Spirituals* (Chicago: Hall & McCreary Company, 1936).

perspective, but the harmonizations were inauthentic and too beholden to “academic rule.” Even though the Fisk Singers’ tours introduced many Americans to the possibility that music indigenous to the United States existed with the potential for development, the immediate development of the music consisted of bringing it into alignment with rule-bound practices. This was felt by most to be an improvement on “the improvised chords of the folk singers.”¹⁵

Some of the most important specific characteristics to be found in music of African origin, and missing from the early notated examples, were the prominence of a sustained rhythm or pulse, the practice of call-and-response, and unique scale formations that did not correspond exactly to the major-minor tonal system. Early in the history of the Roman Catholic Church there was an effort to obscure rhythm in order to separate the sacred from the secular. Dett explained that, in the style of Palestrina multiple lines of equal importance sound, often overlapping each other, and rob the music of a clear underlying pulse. He attributed to the spiritual, however, an “unmistakable beat.” Often on top of the underlying pulse, a weak beat or off-beat is accented, a rhythmic practice known as syncopation. Syncopation figured heavily into Dett’s notion of rehabilitation as it applied to African musical characteristics. In the popular music of the era including minstrelsy, ragtime, jazz, and swing, the procedure had been “caricatured,” but in whichever form it appeared, “this one idiom is of itself, sufficient to stamp all Negro music as unique.”¹⁶ Dett translated this knowledge of the rhythmic aspect of the spirituals to his own

¹⁵ Dett, “Negro Music.”

¹⁶ Dett, “The Authenticity of the Spiritual.”

approach as a conductor. Favoring a minimalist approach, Dett preferred to let the consistency and steadiness of the rhythm dictate the performance of such pieces.¹⁷

In *The Power of Black Music*, Floyd gave prominence to call-and-response as one of the central performance practices transmitted from Africa to America.¹⁸ This arrangement, whereby a leader recites a line followed by a choral response, marked the spiritual as unique. Dett wrote about call-and-response as part of a defense against the charge that spirituals merely recycled Old Testament language and imagery. The construction of melodies using the church modes and the five-note pentatonic scale rather than the major and minor scales more typical of Western music, also contributed to an unmistakable identity and origin. Although not completely exclusive to spirituals—it is also found in the folk songs of Scotland, Asian musics, and much popular music—Dett estimated that nearly half of all spirituals made use of the pentatonic scale.¹⁹ John W. Work’s 1940 collection *American Negro Songs* reflects this with about 45% of the songs contained within using this scale, and many more having only one aberrant non-pentatonic scale degree.²⁰ As with syncopation, the church modes also played a role in Dett’s efforts to rehabilitate the spirituals. In particular, he observed that the Mixolydian mode, which was distinguished by a flatted-seventh scale degree, had been co-opted by composers “who attempt to imitate the Negro style.” This scale formation had a history though that pre-dated the current major-minor system, as well as current popular styles. Dett believed that it was in its most authentic setting in the spirituals—“Roll, Jordan, Roll” being one famous example.²¹

¹⁷ Dett, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute*.

¹⁸ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 44-45.

¹⁹ Dett, “The Authenticity of the Spiritual.”

²⁰ Work, *American Negro Songs*.

²¹ Dett, “The Authenticity of the Spiritual.”

In the mid-1920s, Dett wrote a review of *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamund Johnson which demonstrated some of his criteria for evaluating the progress of African American music towards a mature and idealized goal. Based on the inherent claim in its title of being “the” book of American negro spirituals, Dett placed a great deal of responsibility on the contents to live up to this designation.²² Although he praised James Weldon Johnson’s introductory essay on the history of the spirituals as something that would have succeeded even if published as a separate work, he had many reservations over J. Rosamund Johnson’s piano and voice arrangements. They had not followed through on the descriptions of them given in the preface, and were too often suggestive of popular and secular styles. Dett had developed a preference for choral forms early in his career based on what he viewed as an authentic performance practice. The arrangements in the Johnson brothers’ collection reflected the style of the leading African American concert singers of the 1920s, Paul Robeson and Roland Hayes, pioneers in the presentation of spirituals on the recital stage. These were the musicians with whom Alain Locke placed many of his ambitions for the success of the Harlem Renaissance. While not mentioning any singer by name, and with no explicit indication that he was referring to Robeson or Hayes, Dett was much more ambivalent in his views on contemporary singing styles as applied to the spirituals outside of an ensemble performance setting; “One must deplore much of the present-day singing of these songs on the concert platform. So few of the artists of either race seem willing to trust alone to the inherent beauty of the music to make its own appeal; still fewer seem to realize that music which has come from the

²² Dett, review of *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamund Johnson, *The Southern Workman* 54, (December 1925).

heart of one people, will go by its own strength to the heart of another; that such music needs no mannerisms or stage tricks to help it on its way.”²³ This outlook would necessarily influence his criticism of specific solo-voice arrangements. In this case, Johnson’s arrangements were not true to the spiritual’s meanings and intent, seeming to invite the possibility of the “stage tricks” mentioned by Dett. The melodies were inappropriately altered – the appearance of an accidental canceling the pentatonic flavor of *Swing Low Sweet Chariot* as one example. There was also an unfortunate presence of “jazz, the Charleston, and other dance-like motives... [which] threatens seriously the spirit of nobility and dignity of which the preface assures us.” Many of the treatments “suggest the theater or concert hall rather than the church.”²⁴ Dett did not have the same misgivings over all arrangements that strayed from his criteria. For example, Burleigh’s thoroughly sacred, though modern, treatments were “successfully presented in new and original harmonies... [the] refinement of treatment does not necessarily mean destruction of spirit.”²⁵ This likely refers to what Eileen Southern characterized as Burleigh’s more subtle approach, which “rarely overpower[ed] the simple melodies but rather set and sustain a dominant emotional mood throughout the song.”²⁶

Dett labeled these qualities the “externals” of the music, and he used them to justify his claims of the originality and folk-origins of the spiritual. Just as important as the externals, if not more so, to Dett’s notion of rehabilitation was the less precisely definable sincerity of performance—the “spirit” referred to in his review of Burleigh’s arrangements. The most

²³ Dett, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute*.

²⁴ Dett, review of *The Book of American Negro Spirituals*, 565. J. Rosamond Johnson was, in fact, known during his time primarily as a writer of popular songs meant for the musical stage.

²⁵ Dett, “Negro Music.”

²⁶ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 271.

noticeable quality that Dett took away from modern performances was the “indifference” caused by displacement of time and place.²⁷ As the conditions were no longer the same as when the spirituals were originally created, it would be difficult, though not impossible, for a modern performer to convey the appropriate emotions. It was possible because “its fundamental idea is not new...the love of nature, the desire for companionship, the pain of parting from relatives or friends, the joy of reunion, faith in a Divine Providence, a fervent but never despairing cry for deliverance of soul and body from fetters both concrete and intangible, the ballading of remarkable events – all this has been the common experience of bards of all races...” It would be difficult though to perform the spirituals with any degree of authenticity due to the sheer intensity of the above circumstances which led to the creation of these songs. In Dett’s view the music, as a reflection of religious belief, was the sole release of the pent-up emotions, not merely an incidental diversion. Through these songs, “emotions burst forth with an exuberance all the more terrific by reason of having been suppressed.”²⁸

Although it was the genre with which he was most identified, Robert Nathaniel Dett did not restrict himself to composing and writing solely about sacred music. However, his views on secular music did not display the same intensity of emotion and ambition. Simpson posits that, had it not been for the considerable influence of Dvorak and Coleridge-Taylor, Dett might have pursued a style more indebted to ragtime (see, for instance, his early-career piano piece “After the Cakewalk”).²⁹ In his prize-winning 1920 Harvard essay *Negro Music*, Dett wrote that had nineteenth-century minstrel shows only ridiculed black secular music, “the idea would not,

²⁷ Dett, “Understanding the Negro Spiritual.”

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁹ Simpson, 351.

perhaps have been so bad.”³⁰ Nevertheless, through his own compositions, it is clear that he took secular music forms seriously. Dett believed the nineteenth-century songwriter Stephen Foster made a positive impact capturing the African American cultural spirit, even though Foster was primarily a composer for minstrel shows.³¹ In *Negro Music*, Dett devotes an entire section to developments in secular music. Throughout, he shows an appreciation for figures working to develop the relatively primitive forms such as ragtime into standard orchestral arrangements. The most important in this respect was James Reese Europe, whose 1912 Carnegie Hall concert Dett referred to as a turning point for exposing and heightening the appreciation of black secular music.³² There were only indirect parallels between the music at this concert and the music that Dett was writing, but he assessed the performance by Europe’s Clef Club ensemble with admiration. In his later concerts with the Hampton Institute Choir, Dett programmed a variety of styles of music alongside his arrangements of the spirituals as a way of demonstrating the artistic validity of each. Writing about the Carnegie program, Dett observed that the programming of traditional waltzes and marches alongside the African American-derived styles of the Clef Club Orchestra which had “just enough of the minstrel idea to add piquancy,” served only to highlight the differences in quality and had the overall effect of making the more modern material appear stronger.³³

One of the greatest points of contention for Dett was the conflation in any way of secular and sacred music. Correspondences dating from 1926 concerning a potential commission between Dett and Carl Engel, musicologist for the Library of Congress, provide a good example of this.

³⁰ Dett, “The Emancipation of Negro Music.”

³¹ Dett, *Negro Music*.

³² Dett, “The Development of Negro Secular Music.”

³³ *Ibid.*, 141.

In his request Engel specified a suite in three movements scored for piano, violin, banjo, and saxophone. The piece “should have a uniquely racial flavor, and yet be in the truest sense first class chamber music.” Though it was to utilize banjo and saxophone, Engel further stipulated that it should not be a jazz work.³⁴ Dett’s response showed unequivocally that he was not comfortable composing under the requirements imposed by Engel, writing that anything he or anyone else composed would be “racial” in nature to the extent that it would reflect their ethnic background. Evidently inferring from Engel’s desire for “first class” music something religious in nature (even though that wasn’t specifically stated by Engel), Dett answered that religious traditions would not allow the use of banjo or saxophone in serious music.³⁵ The saxophone had acquired too many unsavory connotations by that point to be considered for such use. This only represents a specific example of Dett’s desire to separate the cultures of minstrelsy (or what he viewed as its modern equivalents) and black sacred music. Minstrelsy’s single greatest offense had been the denigration of African American religious conventions. Dett believed that it would be a highly counter-productive tactical error for a black composer to appear to endorse this practice through his own work, commenting that the most serious offense occurs when religious content was performed to the accompaniment of a dance such as the jig or polka.³⁶

One of the most well-known secular pieces by Dett was the 1913 piano suite, *In the Bottoms*. In an article on his roughly contemporaneous appointment to the music department at Hampton Institute, the *Cleveland Gazette* wrote that this suite, as well as Dett’s *Magnolia Suite* of one year earlier, were “both characteristic of the hopes and aspirations of colored Americans.” Dett tended

³⁴ Carl Engel, qtd. in Dominique Rene de Lerma, “Dett and Engel: A Question of Cultural Pride,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 1, no.1 (Spring 1973): 70-72.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 70-72.

³⁶ Dett, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro As Sung At Hampton Institute*.

to compose in a neo-romantic style that was often programmatic, and both of these early suites were also, according to the composer, sketches of Southern life.³⁷ *In the Bottoms* specifically “deals with the life of the many colored people living in the lowlands near the Mississippi River.”³⁸ The Prelude to “In the Bottoms” begins with an open parallel fifth motive that Dett considered characteristic of the harmonization of early black folk music. In *The Authenticity of the Spiritual*, Dett wrote “I am personally of the opinion, after much research, that there were many more open fourths and fifths than any of the records show.”³⁹ This sound contrasts with the system of thirds and sixths that characterized the full triadic harmonies present in European music since the Renaissance, as well as the earlier nineteenth-century spiritual anthologies that first introduced the genre to the public. Dett also harmonized his own version of “Go Down Moses” with open fourths.

The fifth movement of the suite, “Dance Juba,” is arguably one of Dett’s most memorable compositions. The piece makes characteristic use of syncopation, which Dett believed was a unifying element of African American folk music. There is also a prominent use of free dissonance which alludes to contemporary classical and popular styles. A link with European music is maintained through the way in which the main theme is developed in the manner of a symphonic or sonata development. The practice of “pattin’ juba,” from which the movement derives its name, references African customs and was observed, recorded, and parodied on the American minstrel stage during the nineteenth century. The most famous practitioner of “pattin’ juba” was also the only African American to attain international fame as a minstrel performer

³⁷ Simpson, 365.

³⁸ “Music Department at Hampton Institute Gains Zealous Young Songster,” *Cleveland Gazette*, November 1, 1913.

³⁹ Dett, “The Authenticity of the Spiritual.”

with a white company before the Civil War, William Henry Lane. Eileen Southern pointed out that Lane's involvement with mainstream white minstrelsy ensured that the shows maintained a semblance of authenticity that they otherwise would have lacked.⁴⁰ As performed on the stage by artists such as Lane, "pattin' juba" became a precursor to modern tap dancing.⁴¹ This involved a make-shift rhythmic accompaniment of hand clapping and foot patting and it is reflected in Dett's composition in the left hand of the piano part, comprised of a rhythmically- broken pattern that suggests such an accompaniment. Simpson noted that the specific rhythms utilized in Dett's composition derived from the New Orleans version of the dance.⁴²

⁴⁰ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 95.

⁴¹ Burton Peretti, *Lift Every Voice: The History of African American Music* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 22-23.

⁴² Simpson, 368-369.

Chapter 4: Robert Nathaniel Dett and the Harlem Renaissance: His Critics and Detractors

One style of secular music which Dett did not make use of in his compositions was the blues. In his few writings on this form, he displayed an attitude of ambivalence that contrasted with his determined promotion of the spirituals. Dett gave his clearest assessment of the form in his review of the academic folklore study *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926) by Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson. As a musician, Dett wanted to see more specific examples of notated music in the collection, but nonetheless recognized sociological value in the fact that this type of study was attempted at all. Odum and Johnson were both white sociologists who focused on the rural culture of African Americans in the South. Dett believed that African American scholars would have been reluctant to undertake such a study, preferring instead to pursue topics with clearer potential for racial uplift. This was particularly the case with the efforts of black Americans to distance themselves psychologically from rural culture through the construction of the emblematic figure of the Harlem Renaissance, the “New Negro,” and physically through the Great Migration to Northern cities. Despite his praise for Odum and Johnson’s goals, Dett’s benchmark for any musical expression of African American culture remained the spiritual. There is a pronounced cultural contrast and a certain condescension when he writes that, “The volume is for the most part a collection of secular songs and their source has been the more or less itinerant Negro of the class forced to labor at menial tasks—those whose lives have been governed by circumstance and whose ambition has been the temporary gratification of very natural but very earthly desires.” Dett added that, while “fascinating enough,” the themes of the blues in no way applied to the race as a whole and “could hardly be expected to furnish topics for very lengthy conversations in cultivated society.” The spirituals, on the other hand, presented a

feeling that was universal to the race.¹ For Dett the blues additionally lacked the urgency that was strongly characteristic of the spirituals. Blues lyrics documented the problems of everyday existence as the spirituals had once done, but without the same intensity of circumstances and emotion. Other writers commented extensively on the blues, but primarily in a manner that reinforced Dett's opinions and highlighted the contrasts between the blues and the spirituals: the blues uniquely reflected post-Civil War society in a manner that was secular and driven by individual expression; the spirituals had their genesis prior to the Civil War and were more centered on religious and group expression. Musicologists including Richard Crawford, however, have observed similarities between the two forms, particularly between the "sorrow" spirituals and the blues; both "convey the same feeling of rootlessness and misery..."² Additionally, blues form is almost always based on a twelve-measure AAB musical framework and rhyme scheme which frequently lends itself to performance practices resembling call-and-response. This feature can be discerned in the improvised instrumental answers to each vocal phrase.³ The similarity is also present in the inherent repetition found in the second "A" statement.

Largely through the work of one author, however, the form and emotional content of the blues did find its way into the mainstream of the Harlem Renaissance by the second half of the 1920s. Although he rarely, if ever, mentioned him by name, Langston Hughes was one of the most vocal critics of Dett's style of merging European and African traditions into a hybridized result. In his best-known statement on the topic, "The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain," Hughes

¹ Dett, Review of *Negro Workaday Songs* by Howard W. Odum and Guy B. Johnson, *The Southern Workman* 56 (1927).

² Crawford, *America's Musical Life*, 333.

³ *Ibid.*, 336.

conveyed his belief that the largely upper- and middle-class initiative to merge the materials of black folk music with long-established European forms could more accurately be described as a form of misguided emulation and destructive assimilation. He believed that the current practices of composers such as Dett were holding back the progression of music as authentic cultural representation, writing that this practice presented a considerable obstacle to younger artists because “no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself.”⁴ Vivian McBrier, Dett’s first biographer, opened her work with the observation that Dett was unoriginal in style, in the sense that he worked in forms already developed.⁵ This reflects Hughes’s criticism of the era as a whole: American musical development overall was being stifled by composers who insisted on looking backward. Hughes believed that the music of the future was to be found in the popular styles of the day, not in styles whose popularity had already peaked. In his impassioned defense of unarranged presentations of folk music styles such as the blues, Langston Hughes functions as a counterweight to Robert Nathaniel Dett. Whereas Dett was primarily a composer who also wrote a great deal of prose on the music of his era, Hughes was primarily a writer who sought to incorporate what he deemed to be the true heritage of African American folk music styles into his poetry. However much they reflected each other in their pursuits to keep alive these folk styles, though, their methodologies differed greatly.

Drawn to Harlem in 1921 by the premier of the stage musical *Shuffle Along*, Hughes (who would become an acquaintance Carl Van Vechten) was inspired by the vitality of the neighborhood’s cultural scene as displayed through live presentations of jazz. Hughes viewed

⁴ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, ed. David Levering Lewis (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 91.

⁵ Vivian McBrier, “The Life and Works of Robert Nathaniel Dett,” (PhD diss., Catholic University of America, 1967), 1.

this music, along with both the rural and urban varieties of blues, as truly representative of the place and time. He did not distinguish critically between the rural folk forms and the more modern and popular vaudeville style characterized by the recordings of “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith. In what can be seen as a precursor to Nathan Huggins’s comment that most of the popular musicians were too busy creating their art to be much concerned with writing about it or analyzing it, Hughes was more impressed by the musicians, poets, and painters themselves than with those whose primary purpose was cultural criticism. In an analysis of Hughes’s place in the Harlem Renaissance, Anderson wrote that “As an unapologetic defender of the blues and jazz, he wanted ‘Negro folk-songs’ to evolve at the pace set by their actual practitioners and consumers, not simply at the pace demanded by bourgeois cosmopolitans eager to speed up development.”⁶ Although the point has been confused by the image of Harlem as a center of the 1920s explosion of jazz, musical theater, and popular dance, Alain Locke sharply distinguished between the 1920s “Jazz Age” and the concurrent, but vastly different in goals and musical preferences, Harlem Renaissance.⁷ A convergence of the two movements can be seen in the viewpoints and work of Hughes, known as one of the most famous writers of the Harlem Renaissance, but who clearly favored the popular manifestations of Harlem culture and distanced himself from Locke’s characterization of what was authentic during the Harlem Renaissance.

As a poet and writer of short stories, Hughes himself was an artist who did much more than write about or analyze the work of others. His style was marked by a pronounced presence of the content and verbal inflections of blues styles. His early work, most notably in his poetry

⁶ Anderson, *Deep River*, 193.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

collection *The Weary Blues* from 1926, utilized the blues as a theme in many of the poems. By the later 1920s, he was engaging more directly with the form through poems that feature words resembling direct transcriptions of blues lyrics and typographical cues that are meant to indicate verbal inflections.⁸ The presence of the blues in Hughes's work was most obvious in formal schemes that used an AAB structure. As mentioned, Robert Nathaniel Dett's ambivalence to the blues can best be seen in his very cursory discussions of the genre. Locke and DuBois, on the other hand, were more outspoken in their concern over the music's potential to impede their goals for black folk music. Anderson wrote that for many Renaissance thinkers (Locke's positive review notwithstanding), *The Weary Blues* was just as culpable in generating a false view of the Harlem Renaissance as an artistic movement and Harlem as a neighborhood inclined to spontaneous primitivism as was Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*. Apart from the concern that it would give credibility to Van Vechten's take on Harlem culture, the overall style of Hughes's poetry may also have been viewed as potentially substantiating Natalie Curtis Burlin's opinion that black artists were naturally inclined to produce works of art spontaneously without the formal preparation necessary for most art. This appearance of informality was consciously adopted by Hughes as a way to infuse his work with what he viewed as the true spirit of the black lower classes. He wrote in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain": "In many [of my poems] I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz. I am as sincere as I know how to be in these poems..."⁹ From *The Weary Blues* on, Hughes's writing became

⁸ David Chinitz, "Literacy and Authenticity: The Blues Poems of Langston Hughes," *Callaloo* 19, no.1 (Winter 1996): 185 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3299349> (Accessed September, 3 2010).

⁹ Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 94.

increasingly more modernistic and less traditional, generating a split in Harlem Renaissance thought between older and younger generations of writers and artists.

Hughes was not alone in criticizing the mainstream of the Harlem Renaissance. Sterling Brown, Wallace Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston were representative of younger writers who reflect the trends of the final years of the 1920s. Hurston, a Columbia-trained anthropologist, was even more outspoken than Langston Hughes in denouncing the writings of Alain Locke and the musical style of Dett as elitist. Hurston based her point of view on first-person observations of Southern folk culture conducted during fieldwork for her anthropology training. Hurston did not merely disapprove of Dett's European-influenced arrangements of spirituals; she flatly disagreed with his premise for doing so. Hurston viewed one of the problems with Dett's preservation initiative as presuming that the rural Southern culture of the spirituals' origin was dead or dying. In her fieldwork, Hurston saw evidence of its everyday existence. Ironically, according to Hurston, the very work Dett was doing in the name of preserving the spirituals, might in fact be doing more to kill their authentic performance traditions through the introduction of European forms completely alien to their traits. Hurston also downplayed the religious significance that affected Dett so strongly. She emphasized that, after witnessing their performance first-hand, religion did not in fact play a large role in their significance to the average performer. They were meant as primarily artistic in purpose. Furthermore, they were already formal in their presentation, and were not in need of further formalization.¹⁰ Dett's clearest response to the criticism directed at him was found in his prize-winning essay *Negro Music*. Citing supporting quotes by Robert Moton and Will Marion Cook, he argued strongly in favor of retaining both the

¹⁰ Anderson, *Deep River*, 200-205.

purist and the more formal approaches. While there was nothing wrong with folk music in its primitive state, the preservation of the music required it to be fixed in notation. The work of Dett and others was meant to: (1) preserve the characteristics of the music which he believed to be in danger of being forgotten; (2) demonstrate the potential of the music to combine with larger established forms to create something entirely new and contribute to the progress of American classical music.¹¹ Dett's work was not always confined to the completely cut-off environment of academia that Hurston's argument implied. On at least one occasion, he personally witnessed a "backwoods" gathering similar to those that Hurston observed regularly. However, he came to the opposite conclusion regarding the relationship between the performances and genuine religious belief. Commenting that there were superficial aspects present that reminded him of minstrelsy, Dett believed the differences lie in the "spiritual elevation" absent from most minstrel performances.¹²

Dett's response to the criticism from the folk-purist point of view put forth by Hurston and Hughes culminated in his work at Hampton Institute as Director of Music, and specifically as its principal choral conductor. In his editorial, "As the Negro School Sings," Dett outlined his hopes for what might be accomplished through formal education in the service of musical development. His ideas here represent one of the clearest examples of the attitude Hurston opposed. Dett placed nearly all of his goals for the "intelligent" development of African American music within the framework of formal education. Dett wrote that the school presented an opportunity to provide a balance against the trend towards the appropriation of characteristics of the spiritual in

¹¹ Dett, "The Development of Negro Religious Music."

¹² Dett, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute*.

popular styles, as well as by the church; “It is in the Negro school for the most part that the songs of the race have been most carefully preserved. It is in the Negro school that these folk songs, especially the ‘spirituals’ have been used to create and intensify the atmosphere of religion, which is, as their name implies, their best and most natural office. It is in the Negro school that music directors have led Negro songs with no idea other than to produce the effect of beauty and naturalness; so it is that now only in the Negro school is the ideal presentation of Negro music to be found; more ideal one may unblushingly say that in the Negro church; for the reason that the present stage of development of the race often finds a more intelligent direction of affairs in the Negro school than in the Negro church.”¹³

Making his argument primarily in the name of preserving the spirituals, Dett contended that it was within higher education that the talent and historical knowledge of the music’s characteristics were found. In addition to how his teaching responsibilities would assist this goal, Dett also saw it as his responsibility as a composer to contribute to his preservation initiative. It can be argued that Dett saw it as the trained composer’s job to write in an authentic style that would act as a catalyst for bringing out religious feelings in a younger generation of performers, which he believed to be waning. In the foreword to his collection of arrangements, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute*, Dett wrote that those who would likely be singing the material, characterized by him as youth with an “adventurous spirit,” did not possess the same religious feelings as the originators of the music. Therefore, he believed that it would be inappropriate to let them harmonize the melodies, or create arrangements by instinct.¹⁴

¹³ Dett, “As the Negro School Sings,” *Southern Workman* 56 (July 1927).

¹⁴ Dett, *Religious Folk-Songs of the Negro as Sung at Hampton Institute*.

Perhaps Dett's critics were viewing his work as part of a lineage extending back to the 1860s that attempted to translate orally-transmitted music to the written page. This endeavor often produced mixed results that challenged many notions of authenticity. Regarding the earliest attempts, Erskine Peters noted that, due to the difficulties of transcribing some of the unique performance practices of the spirituals, often only a "general outline" could be obtained.¹⁵ The remarks of ragtime songwriter Ernest Hogan convey that Dett's notion of alteration in the name of preservation could carry over into popular music as well: "The ragtime players were the boys who played just by ear their own creations of music which would have been lost to the world if I had not put it on paper."¹⁶ This association could also not have done any favors for Dett however; Hogan was a practitioner of the brand of ragtime song labeled the "coon song." An outgrowth of the minstrel era that peaked in popularity around the turn of the century, this trend took the most superficial aspects of instrumental ragtime and added demeaning, stereotype-laden lyrics. Needless to say, it was one of the more blatant manifestations of racism in popular culture, and one which provided many in the Harlem Renaissance movement continuing motivation to change the terms of what would be accepted depictions of African American life.

The choral music historians Carl Gordon Harris Jr. and Arthur Lee Evans were two figures who defended Dett's works, often invoking the specific traits that his critics did, but presenting them in a positive light. Evans focused on Dett's ability to incorporate chromaticism and a more modern harmonic style, but without losing reference to a tonal idiom. In contrast to Dett's critics, his supporters, including Evans and Harris, tended to emphasize the purely technical aspects of

¹⁵ Erskine Peters, *Lyrics of the Afro-American Spiritual: A Documentary Collection* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1993), xvii..

¹⁶ Quoted in Huggins, 277.

Dett's craft in the wider context of American musical development—in other words, their critical priorities were much the same as Dett's. While noting that Dett's style owed a debt to Burleigh's breakthroughs, Evans believed that he advanced on these breakthroughs through “melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic effects [achieved] by the judicious use of dynamic and tempo indications.”¹⁷

Jon Michael Spencer, whose *The New Negroes and Their Music* highlighted the music of Dett as a clear example of the success of the Harlem Renaissance, believed that, ultimately, Hurston and Hughes's argument could not be sustained: “Presenting to posterity an old picture in a new frame was exactly what Dett and [Roland] Hayes did in selecting the spirituals as ‘serious material’ for performance—because the spirituals were deserving of being placed on a ‘higher plane’ than the mimic phonograph records, the vaudeville stage, and the after-dinner joke. In fact, no reliance on the contesting positions of such artists as Hughes or Hurston can shore up an opposing argument, for these artists were themselves placing black folk materials on a ‘higher plane’”¹⁸ Spencer based his argument for the success of the Harlem Renaissance on two foundational principles: The artists, most prominently Dett, William Grant Still, Roland Hayes, and Harry Burleigh, should be seen as fulfilling the ambition of James Weldon Johnson's unnamed protagonist in his novel *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published in 1912. Johnson's protagonist has dreams of becoming a professional musician, and in the process, developing African American folk music into high art. By the end of the story, however, racial strictures have forced him to abandon this goal, and he chooses to pass for white and work in real

¹⁷ Arthur Lee Evans, “The Development of the Negro Spiritual as Choral Art Music by Afro-American Composers with an Annotated Guide to the Performance of Selected Spirituals,” PhD diss., University of Miami School of Music, 1972, 60, quoted in Simpson, 447.

¹⁸ Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*, 24.

estate. In Spencer's construction, the career of Dett represented a successful outcome of this story. Spencer's second principle advocated the concept of "mastery of form," discussed in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, to Harlem Renaissance music. In this context, the mastery of form was the only viable artistic strategy for achieving Dett's goals. It necessitated appearing to appease the desires of the critics and consumers of art—which in this case often involved the perpetuation of stereotypes—while also subverting the stereotypes through utilizing forms associated with European high art. Spencer cited Dett's piano piece "Mammy" from his *Magnolia* suite as an example of this practice. Dett appeared to be doing his part to maintain the romanticized popular image of the old South, but through encasing his notes in formal European structure, he was actually doing more to repel this image, and in Spencer's terminology "vindicate" the race.¹⁹

¹⁹ Ibid., 109-110.

Chapter 5: Dett at Hampton Institute

During the height of the Harlem Renaissance, when *Shuffle Along* was helping to inaugurate the Jazz Age at Daly's 63rd Street Theater on Broadway, and further uptown James Weldon Johnson was observing the boundless optimism to be immortalized in *Black Manhattan*, Robert Nathaniel Dett was working among “the shaded walks” and “satiny sheen of magnolia trees” at Hampton Institute in Virginia, doing his part to contribute to the goal of imparting an appreciation of nineteenth-century folk culture to a generation of students who might help in preserving that culture through formal musical arrangements. The observations of Hampton's environment were recorded by May Stanley, who visited and interviewed Dett there in 1918. Stanley believed that Dett's physical immersion in the South helped him to better interpret the musical customs of that region, particularly as displayed through his piano suites, written roughly at the time of his appointment in 1913.¹ Dett's initial responsibilities were primarily centered on choral instruction, and included such activities as teaching the day and night choruses, and leading the choral union, glee clubs, and orchestra.² Dett was likely drawn to the school because of its rich choral history—which dated from the mid-nineteenth century—of presenting the spirituals in a concertized setting, recalling the Fisk University choirs. However, by the time of his arrival, Dett found that much work was needed in order to strengthen the school's musical presence. No formal music or music education programs were available at this point, which Dett believed crucial to implementing his goals. Upon his arrival, he wrote to the

¹ Stanley, “R.N. Dett, of Hampton Institute: Helping to Lay Foundation for Negro Music of Future,” 64.

² Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 125-126.

administration, citing deficiencies in the campus's attitudes and provisions towards its music students; these included a lack of serviceable instruments, no course credit offered for music classes, and a general lack of priority given to musical endeavors.³

These issues were reflective of the historical mission of Hampton Institute, which was founded in order to emphasize manual labor training rather than a liberal arts education. Music at Hampton would only fit into the administration's goals for the school as a sociological curiosity centered on an interest in authentic folklore, which contrasted sharply with the value Dett placed on formal instruction. The school was founded in 1868 by Samuel Chapman Armstrong, a veteran of the Civil War, who was placed in charge of providing education for freed African Americans in the Hampton area. Armstrong's original mission for the school was to provide an educational opportunity that balanced manual labor training with a traditional curriculum, in the process attempting to reverse the belief that manual labor lacked dignity. Lawrence Schenbeck wrote that Armstrong believed "vocational training combined with academic studies would produce intelligent workers and capable teachers and community leaders."⁴ Following Armstrong's death in 1893, there was a shift in Hampton's priority on educational balance which mirrored the loss of the more altruistic traditions that informed Oberlin's goals during the early twentieth century. Like the situation at Oberlin, this shift also corresponded to the years that Dett began working at Hampton. The funding that was crucial to African American education in the South was increasingly handled by Northern philanthropic and business interests, who sought a greater emphasis on manual training. This view was held by those such as George Foster

³ Ibid., 126.

⁴ Ibid., 123.

Peabody, who would be strongly connected to Dett's later years at Hampton. Peabody served on the board of trustees of the General Education Board, the largest clearinghouse for Northern philanthropic funds directed towards black industrial education.⁵ James D. Anderson wrote that by funding and promoting black industrial education in the South, Northern business interests intended to benefit themselves, particularly in the cotton trade. These parties believed that "private philanthropy was the best vehicle to spread industrial education throughout the Afro-American South. Southern states were either too resistant or too poor to appropriate additional funds to expand black education. Black schools controlled by missionary societies and black religious organizations placed top priority on traditional academic education and were generally indifferent or opposed to the Hampton-Tuskegee model of industrial training."⁶

Encompassing positive and negative consequences, 1926 was an eventful year for both Dett and Hampton Institute. After thirteen years as instructor of the school's music classes and director of its choirs, Dett was promoted to Director of the Music Program at Hampton. Through his efforts, by 1923 Hampton students had been able to major in music education, and by 1927, the institute had a functioning School of Music. During this year, Dett also received an honorary doctorate from Oberlin College.⁷ These social and professional advancements were, however, accompanied by a dramatic setback in race relations at Hampton that extended to the entire state of Virginia. On March 9, 1926, the Virginia Public Assemblage Act was passed, "requir(ing)

⁵ James D. Anderson, "Northern Foundations and the Shaping of Southern Black Rural Education," *History of Education Quarterly* 18, No.4 (Winter 1978): 375-377 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/367710> (Accessed August 14, 2012).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 378.

⁷ Regennia N. Williams, "Robert Nathaniel Dett and African America's Christian Kingdom of Culture, 1926-1932," in *The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion*, ed. Theodore Louis Trost (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 75.

racial segregation in all places of public entertainment or public assemblage.”⁸ The incentive for this act had arisen directly out of the fact that Ogden Hall, the public performance venue at Hampton Institute, was not traditionally segregated for public events. Ogden Hall was the site of many events given by the school’s performance ensembles and soloists, including many of those led by Robert Nathaniel Dett. The passage of the act affected the entire state, and came amidst the passage of several other laws which sought to crack down on institutions such as Hampton, “which in the eyes of its critics was guilty of teaching and practicing the dangerous doctrine of social equality.”⁹ Hampton’s response to the act, which came at a time when the school was conducting a campaign to raise funds and did not want to antagonize those who might help, was to close performances at Ogden Hall to the public. Performances would only be open to those associated with the school, and consequently not a public assembly subject to the new law. The Hampton administration took this action rather than segregate audiences or defy the law in order to produce a test case, a possibility suggested by Robert R. Moton, Hampton board member and Tuskegee Institute principal. Anderson noted that members of the Hampton staff were consulted on how best to proceed, although it is not known if Dett was among them. The Virginia Public Assemblage Act stood for nearly forty years, until it was declared unconstitutional in 1963.¹⁰

By 1930, Dett had been at Hampton modernizing and formalizing the school’s music program for seventeen years when a world tour was organized by the board of directors. The tour would recall the 1870s Fisk University tours in the type of material performed; spirituals, many

⁸ Richard B. Sherman, “The ‘Teachings at Hampton Institute’: Social Equality, Racial Integrity, and the Virginia Public Assemblage Act of 1926,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 95, No. 3 (July 1987): 275 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4248953> (Accessed August 14, 2012).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 300.

arranged by Dett, were to be programmed alongside traditional European repertoire, including the Russian choral works that Dett felt represented the strongest parallel to his own cultural mission.¹¹ This strategy was central to Dett's plan for the tour. The spirituals' intrinsic value would be best demonstrated to the world when heard side by side with material already accepted by the audience. The composer's program notes for the May 3 concert at Queen's Hall in London offer a great deal of explanatory detail on the history of the spiritual and how they "form a group unusually expressive of the slave's attitude toward his condition."¹² Additional program notes from concerts on the tour, as well as from the preceding two years, demonstrate how Dett's carefully chosen performance repertoire would aid his goal of promoting the value of the spirituals. The many categories and genres described by Dett included "Negro Melody as Cantus and Chorale," "Sacred Songs of the Early Church," "Folk Songs," "Russian Liturgical Anthems," "Religious Compositions by American Composers," and "Negro Idioms in Motets and Anthems." Dett included his popular choral work "Listen to the Lambs" in this final category. These works differed from traditional arrangements of spirituals in that the motives are subjected to numerous developments and alterations including "absolute or relative repetition of the theme, expansion, contraction, variation, or inversion, of the melodic ideas; rhythmic diminution or augmentation, dismemberment or enlargement."¹³ In nearly all of the categories described, Dett employed a strategy beyond simply programming music that he believed Hampton administrators, his choir, or the audience might enjoy. Genres such as "Sacred Songs

¹¹ Spencer wrote that Dett's 1930 tour was, in fact, more important in its own time than was the earlier Fisk tour, because the choir would now be representing an internationally-recognized artistic movement, the historical importance of which was already acknowledged. Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*, 46.

¹² Dett, Program Notes for "Hampton Choir Concert at Queen's Hall, London, Saturday Afternoon, May 3, 1930 at 3:00."

¹³ Ibid.

of the Early Church,” “Russian Liturgical Anthems,” and “Negro Melody as Cantus and Chorale” demonstrated historical parallels with Dett’s own music. In the first category, Dett describes these pieces as looking both backward and forward: “In spite of the fact that all these choruses have been subjected to touches from practiced hands of later artisans, it is interesting to note that the melodies themselves exhibit that tendency for gravitation to a key-center which later was to become one of the most dominant and revolutionary factors in the art of music.”¹⁴ It is likely that, by programming these pieces, which had undergone formal development and still remained faithful to their original materials, Dett was attempting to justify his own development of past African American musical materials into current genres. In another instance of parallel goals, the use of cantus and embellishment in “Negro Melody as Cantus and Chorale” illustrated parallels between the common European use of cantus and embellishment and the improvisations found in nineteenth-century African American folksong. Dett’s specific use of these materials in his own compositions adhered strongly to Alain Locke’s idea that the use of basic folk material should inform new arrangements, but be discernible only through technical analysis. In his program notes, Dett commented that, “the Negro folk song is rich in elements which may be the inspiration of new creations, more or less invisibly related to their source, even as before the song there was the wild cry and before the symphony the choral ring.”¹⁵

Two days prior to the Queen’s Hall concert during the 1930 tour, the *Musical Times* of England foreshadowed the difficulty Dett would be facing from both his audience and the

¹⁴ Dett, Program Notes for “Concert By the Hampton Institute Choir A Cappella, Directed by Dr. Robert Nathaniel Dett, Presented Under the Auspices of the Hampton Committee of Boston, Symphony Hall, Boston, Sunday Afternoon March 10th, 1929 at 3:30 o’clock.

¹⁵ Ibid. The idea that a connection with the folk material used as inspiration should only be detectable through close analysis, and presumably only available to those with formal training, was another explicit example of where Dett clashed with the populist goals of Hughes and Hurston.

administration at Hampton; “Dett, a Canadian-born negro, has all the joyous spirit of the members of his race born further south.”¹⁶ This statement corresponded to the “cult of authenticity” that had shaped white interest in the spiritual going back to the first mid-nineteenth century anthologies. The cult of authenticity was firmly embedded in the sociology and music curriculum of the Southern black colleges that had been established following the Civil War; and, at schools such as Hampton, it went hand-in-hand with the school’s lack of enthusiasm for formal music education. Its basic tenet was that black folk music, such as the spiritual, was to be performed in a manner that de-emphasized the academic learning and polish which were the foundations of Dett’s approach.¹⁷ Dett had spent his time at Hampton throughout the 1920s trying to bring the music curriculum up to date in order that the school might progress beyond the romanticized cult of authenticity.

As was shown, he had met much success in this pursuit by the 1920s with the formal establishment of a school of music. Additionally, by the start of the 1930 tour, Hampton’s administrators had relented somewhat, accepting formal music education for its students beyond the collection of folklore and an emphasis on an unrefined and spontaneous performance ideal. Schenbeck wrote, “A decade of visibility for the New Negro had caused some white opinion makers to revise their assessment of black capabilities upward.”¹⁸ The tour was largely motivated though by the goals of George Foster Peabody and the administrators at Hampton, and was initially meant as much a diplomatic tour as a musical one to promote the model of Southern black education in the United States as appropriate for overseas adoption. It was believed that the

¹⁶ H.W.P., “Leading Negro Choir’s European Visit,” *The Musical Times* 71, no.1047 (May 1, 1930): 416-417.

¹⁷ Schenbeck, “Representing America, Instructing Europe: The Hampton Choir Tours Europe,” *Black Music Research Journal* 25, no. 1/2 (Spring-Fall 2005): 18-20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

success of the Hampton choir would validate the success of this educational system.

Additionally, the tour's promoters sought to use this opportunity to attempt to improve the treatment by British colonialists towards its overseas black laborers.¹⁹ Dett's goals for the tour were located elsewhere, as he was concerned with educating the international music public on the intrinsic value of the material his ensemble performed as well as ridding it of the overly-romanticized viewpoints that much of the audience held in common with writers such as Natalie Curtis Burlin. In his recollection of the tour, Dett placed particular emphasis on describing the work and preparation that went into the choir's performances, as well as the diverse background and training of its members, noting how "the choir's success was the result of frequent and diligent practice on the parts of the students not in the school of music – five o'clock in the morning rehearsals not being uncommon especially in the men's section; only thirteen were regularly enrolled in the School of Music; five were from the School of Business; ten from the School of Education; three from the School of Home Economics, and one was an agriculturist..."²⁰ As part of his goal to diminish stereotypes potentially held by those whom the choir might encounter on the tour, Dett also maintained tight control over the behavior and appearance of his students while on board their ship, the *De Grasse*, an approach that Dett would face more criticism for upon his return to the United States.²¹

In spite of the fact that Hampton's administrators had been increasingly supportive of his on-campus goals for formal music education, Dett clashed continuously with Hampton board

¹⁹ Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943*, 153-154.

²⁰ Dett, "A Musical Invasion of Europe: The Hampton Choir Abroad," *Crisis* 37 (December 1930).

²¹ Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943*, 167-169. Benjamin Stolberg criticized Dett in the January 1931 *Crisis* (NAACP publication), commenting that Dett's strict discipline over his students, practiced in the name of refuting stereotypes, could just as easily be seen as validating those same stereotypes.

members and tour managers during the tour over the manner of the choir's performance, specific repertoire, and the programming of the concerts. Schenbeck noted that, "Arguments continued to flare up over programming. Dett objected not only to the mixing of sacred and secular numbers but also to management's persistent attempts to have the choir perform more spirituals and lively folk arrangements. Correspondence and surviving papers indicate that, as the tour progressed, management prevailed."²² There were also arguments over the order of programming; management desired that the classically-oriented pieces be done and over quickly in order to build to a climax with what they viewed as the more "primitive" songs; Dett wished to begin with these and progress towards more complicated arrangements, an approach management felt deprived the concert of an effective climax. Even though the final decision in such matters was not his, Dett refused to compromise when it came to his larger vision for the tour, exacerbating tensions that resulted in the termination of his relationship with Hampton following the choir's return. In July 1931, he was asked to step down by Hampton President Arthur Howe. Dett's forced resignation occurred only one year before he could have retired with benefits. Shortly after, in 1935, the School of Music and the music major itself were eliminated.²³

The Hampton Choir's 1930 tour highlighted several larger issues at the time. The competing views of Dett and Hampton's governing body represented two of the viewpoints of the Harlem Renaissance as a whole. While Dett's principles were in line with the goals of Alain Locke, he faced criticism from the Hampton Board, the European audiences, and Zora Neale Hurston over his choir's interpretation of folk music. Although Hurston arrived at her conclusions based on a

²² Ibid., 162.

²³ Ibid., 169.

different set of experiences, they often matched those of Hampton and the European concert audiences when she criticized Dett's approach as elitist and inauthentic. The Hampton Choir's efforts in Europe were not, however, entirely in vain. Contrary to much of the reception in the United States, European press reviews often revealed that they understood Dett's goals, and appreciated the results of the choir's hard work. Brussels' *La meuse*: "From the standpoint of vocal technic the choir is perfect. It could easily teach many things to our own choruses." From Berlin's *Tageblatt*: "The program was a great success; after the first number idle curiosity was turned into genuine enthusiasm and appreciation. The artistic training of these singers is outstandingly remarkable. There is perfect tone balance."²⁴

²⁴ Quoted in Spencer, 58.

Conclusion

The specific reasons for the split between Dett and Hampton were not publicly revealed. In his subsequent letters to Howe, Dett repeated that he had been asked to take on too many responsibilities while at Hampton, and was left with no time for creative endeavors. His first activity following the break with Hampton was to complete a master's degree at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York. His thesis was the oratorio *The Ordering of Moses*, premiered five years later to tremendous success in Cincinnati.¹ After stints as NAACP Rochester branch president from 1934-1935, and teaching in Austin, Texas from 1935-1936, Dett took a position as the head of music at Bennett College in North Carolina in 1937. While at Bennett, he pursued the same types of activities and goals as at Hampton, touring with the college's all-female choir.² Again finding a lack of free time to compose, and according to Simpson, not comfortable at a college as small as Bennett, Dett resigned in September, 1942. Rarely mentioned in accounts of his forced resignation from Hampton is that in 1941, he was offered a job there by new president Malcom S. McClean. He declined, evidently worried that his acceptance would cost the then-organist his position.³

Dett suffered two consecutive heart attacks and died on October 2, 1943, nine days shy of his sixty-first birthday. At the time, he was composing for a USO show. His obituary remarked that he was “unfortunate in having had to earn his living by working under those who did not

¹ Simpson, 210-233.

² Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*, 64.

³ Simpson, 252.

appreciate his genius, and ignorantly tried to force him into their own mold.”⁴ Even though he composed works as early as the beginning of the twentieth century and was still active when he died in 1943, Robert Nathaniel Dett’s work fulfilled the goals of the Harlem Renaissance and corresponded chronologically with the height of the movement more so than most composers. Although they made significant initial contributions to American music, the generation that included Will Marion Cook could not participate as fully in the classical realm due to the discrimination that was prevalent at the time. Furthermore, Dett’s awards and achievements such as the 1927 Harmon Award in music were emblematic of Lewis’s second stage of the Harlem Renaissance, when establishment patronage and philanthropy were a primary source of arts funding and encouragement.

Soon after the Great Depression set in, the existing patronage system began to be replaced by government-sponsored programs designed to encourage artistic production. These programs ranged from New Deal creations to Communist-sponsored alternatives. The latter option was seriously explored for a period of time by major artists including Langston Hughes. The composers who thrived in this new era were influenced by Dett, and formed what could for the first time be called a genuine school of American music informed by African American technique. David Levering Lewis wrote that the Great Depression only accelerated the collapse of the Harlem Renaissance and that it was destined to be short-lived in any event. Lewis echoed

⁴ “Robert Nathaniel Dett Obituary,” *The Journal of Negro History* 28, no.4 (October 1943). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2714960> (accessed July 10, 2010).

a view that it was unrealistic to believe that artistic achievements by a talented few would advance civil rights as a whole in any way.⁵

Despite the validity of that point, the success of William Grant Still and William Dawson, to name two musicians, supports a notion put forth by others of ongoing development in African American classical music lasting well beyond the period in question. Still attempted to develop blues in the same way that Robert Nathaniel Dett developed spirituals.⁶ His *Symphony no.1*, the *Afro-American Symphony*, begins with a blues theme making prominent use of flatted sevenths. According to the composer, the goal was to “demonstrate how the blues, so often considered a lowly expression, could be elevated to the highest musical level.”⁷ Eileen Southern wrote that Still “was the first African American to employ the blues and jazz in a symphonic work; previously, black composers had confined their use of Negro folk idioms in concert works to spirituals, worksongs, and dance songs.” Among the most notable of Still’s accomplishments was the premier of his opera *Troubled Island* (to a libretto by Langston Hughes) by the New York City Opera in 1949. The premier, which took place eight years after its completion, was the first time an opera by an African American composer was produced by a major American opera company.⁸

On June 15, 1933, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra gave a landmark concert of works by African American composers. The most important was the premier of Florence Price’s

⁵ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 305-307. Those who were watching matters of artistic production most closely, such as Alain Locke and Carl Van Vechten, pointed to the noticeably elevated quality of African American works in the early years of the Great Depression. Jon Michael Spencer wrote on this point: “The decreasing quantity of published output caused by the Depression was compensated for by a rise in the quality of the art.” Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*, 134.

⁶ Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music*, 72.

⁷ William Grant Still, Program Notes for *Afro-American Symphony* score, qtd. in Southern, 433.

⁸ Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 433.

Symphony in E Minor. Price's work did come under criticism from Alain Locke, who used a quantitative approach to measuring the standard of African American composition in which the occurrences of specific devices deemed racial in character were counted. Locke found Price's work lacking in this respect; nonetheless, this should not obscure Price's achievement in carrying on the tradition set by Dett in effectively employing folk idioms in serious composition. As Rae Linda Brown pointed out, this can be seen in a movement in the *Symphony in E Minor* which is based on juba rhythms – the first instance of this in a symphonic work.⁹

Along with William Dawson, Price was the composer who best represented what Samuel Floyd called the Chicago Renaissance, lasting from 1935 to 1950. These composers are the “Echoes of the Harlem Renaissance” according to Rae Linda Brown. One more inclined to Jon Michael Spencer's view would classify this later era as simply another manifestation of the earlier epoch. The Chicago movement, while it produced equally significant artistic developments, was less of a coherent or self-conscious movement than Harlem. In an historical parallel to Harlem, however, the music that has come to be best remembered is mainly the popular music, most prominently the “hot” jazz of Louis Armstrong and King Oliver.¹⁰ The popularity of music that was in many ways competing with the work of composers such as Dett, Still, and Price has served to obscure the impact of their accomplishments. Nonetheless, as the work of an increasing number of scholars has shown, and its further proliferation promises, it can be expected that Robert Nathaniel Dett's compositional and educational contributions will receive their appropriate historical credit.

⁹ Rae Linda Brown, “William Grant Still, Florence Price, and William Dawson: Echoes of the Harlem Renaissance,” in *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 82.

¹⁰ Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 118-131.

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