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Los Angeles

The Influence of Billie Holiday and Black Vocal Music
on Selected Operatic Works by Anthony Davis, Terence Blanchard, and Marcus Norris

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Music

by

Marcus Norris

2022

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2022

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Influence of Billie Holiday and Black Vocal Music
on Selected Operatic Works by Anthony Davis, Terence Blanchard, and Marcus Norris

by

Marcus Norris

Doctor of Philosophy in Music

University of California, Los Angeles, 2022

Professor Richard Dane Danielpour, Chair

In my monograph I codify musical characteristics that have defined twentieth-century Black American popular vocal music to illustrate the cross-genre influence this music has on living American opera composers, including Anthony Davis, Terrance Blanchard, and myself. To define these musical characteristics, I analyze compositions and recordings from twentieth-century Black American singer Billie Holiday, who has shaped the genres she performs, with a focus on both songwriting and vocal performance.

My dissertation composition, a one-act opera titled *Ain't That About A-*, incorporates my findings and extends them in an innovative way: I musically represent “code-switching,” the practice of Black Americans to alternate between dialects in response to the demands of white culture. The story of the opera follows the locals of a Black neighborhood on the cusp of

gentrification. We look at what happens when well-intentioned young white people move into the neighborhood, looking to save a community of people who do not feel they need to be saved.

The dissertation of Marcus Norris is approved.

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University of California, Los Angeles

2022

I dedicate this monograph to my friend and mentor Richard Danielpour,
who gave me permission to be myself,

to my professor Ian Krouse, who has been an advocate for me since before he knew me,

to the memories of the late musicians who have helped me along my journey,
including Benny Poole, Mike Cunningham, and Morris “Butch” Stewart,

to my mother, to whom I owe this doctoral degree and my life,

and to my brilliant partner in opera, life, and love, Adamma Ebo.

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VITA

Marcus Norris's first foray into making music came in the form of producing rap beats on pirated software installed on a Windows 98 computer that he Macgyvered together from spare parts while lying on the floor of his childhood bedroom. Though he came to composing concert music later in life, he applied that same imagination and ingenuity to writing music of all kinds. Ms. Tina Knowles-Lawson chose Marcus as Music Director for the 2022 Wearable Art Gala, leading him to conduct South Side Symphony as the on-stage orchestra accompanying Chloe x Halle Bailey and Andra Day performing as "Lady Day" in a reprise of her Golden Globe Award-winning performance from the film *The United States vs. Billie Holiday*. Marcus founded South Side Symphony in 2020, which he describes as the only orchestra that would perform "Back That Thang Up" over Beethoven. Also a film composer, Marcus wrote what the Boston Herald called an "impressively orchestral score" for the 2022 NBC Universal feature film *Honk for Jesus. Save Your Soul*, starring Regina Hall and Sterling K. Brown and written and directed by Adamma Ebo.

Marcus's achievements in concert music include being selected as an inaugural Composer-in-Residence for the Chicago Philharmonic from 2021–24, earning a commission from the Atlanta Opera as a prize for winning their inaugural 96-hour Opera Project, making his Walt Disney Concert Hall debut in 2022 with his piece "MERCY" as part of the LA Phil's National Composers Intensive, and being awarded the prestigious Cota-Robles fellowship. His violin concerto "GLORY" opened to three sold-out performances when premiered by the Jackson Symphony Orchestra in 2019, and then was subsequently performed in Guangzhou, China later that year. His Dance Suite "I Tried So Hard for You" premiered in Havana in 2018, closely following the Russian String Orchestra premiere of "My Idols Are Dead" in Moscow.

Introduction

“I think that as a Black composer, I had a tremendous advantage, in that our tradition has never strayed far from the voice. When we write music, when I improvise, I can sing what I improvise... I was talking to one of my contemporaries, about the Black composers I know, and I said, ‘You know, it’s really open for us.’... And so, basically, there’s a real opportunity for the Afro-American tradition to become the dominant force in opera in America.” – Anthony Davis, 1986 (Delaney 1994)

Black artistry has defined American music. While research on Black Americans’ contributions to Jazz, Blues, R&B, Pop, Rock, and Country music is rich, this scholarship tends to overlook Opera. In my monograph, I analyze Black vocal music and several of its defining characteristics over time, extending current critical discourse to include the influence of Black American Music on twentieth-century American opera composers, including examples from Anthony Davis, Terrance Blanchard, and myself.

A comprehensive timeline of Black American music from the Atlantic Slave Trade to the present would necessitate a text many times the length of this one, and, even then, would almost certainly be incomplete. I make no attempt to offer one here. Instead, to support my claims, I consider popular recordings by iconic twentieth-century Black American singer Billie Holiday.

One could make no such selection without omissions that border on musical blasphemy. To narrow the scope of my research, I considered which artists’ recordings might offer the most illuminating insights through analysis, and which artists contemporary Black American opera composers publicly credit as their influences. Lastly, with the goal of informing my opera, written as a part of this dissertation, I considered which twentieth-century Black artists had the most powerful influence on my own musical decisions.

To define this influence, my methodological approach includes musical analysis of both songwriting—melodic structures and the relationship between melody and harmony—and vocal performance—range, timbral effects, and improvisational embellishments. Through a comparative analysis, I track the influence of Billie Holiday on the aforementioned American opera composers. My research offers insight into the significance of Holiday’s influence on their vocal writing, including performance practices and the relationships between harmony and melody. Ultimately, I explore the impact of Holiday on my own one-act opera, *Ain’t That About A-*, a component of this dissertation.

My decision to write about Billie Holiday should not imply that she invented the techniques discussed; rather, I use her work as a lens through which to view these techniques and a point of connection from which to trace the influence of Black American music to opera. Even though she is not the originator of the techniques outlined in this monograph, she did boldly embrace and popularize them in a way that makes her an excellent subject of study and a significant influence on all American music after her.

I. Billie Holiday and Her Music (1915–1959)

Background

Billie Holiday’s musical career started when she was a self-described poor and starving kid. As a child, she walked into the Log Cabin Club in Harlem, run by Jerry Preston, and ordered her first drink. She asked for a job dancing, but her dancing skills were immediately found lacking. Her break came when she mentioned she could sing and gave the manager a demonstration; her voice has demanded the attention of all those who have heard it since. Preston told her, “Kid, you win,” and from then on, she no longer had to starve (Shapiro and Hentoff 1966, 198).

Years later, in 1935, Holiday signed her first record contract, with Brunswick, at 20 years old. Although she lived to be only 44, due to a life of alcohol and substance abuse, which started with her music career at the Log Cabin Club that fateful day, she made a monumental impact on American music in her short time. In 1999 Time Magazine named “Strange Fruit” the song of the century (Sanburn 2011). Though Holiday did not write the song, it has become associated with her because she recorded, performed, and popularized it, despite pushback from the United States government.

Billie Holiday: The Performer

It is nearly impossible to overstate how tremendous a performer Billie Holiday was. She made numerous vocal performance innovations, all for the sake of heightening her range of expression. On her approach to singing, Holiday said, “I don’t think I’m singing. I feel like I’m playing horn. I try to improvise like Les Young, like Louis Armstrong, or someone else I admire. What comes out is what I feel. I hate straight singing. I have to change a tune to my own way of doing it. That’s all I know” (Shapiro and Hentoff 1966, 200).

Understatement

Holiday grew up listening to and idolizing blues pioneer Bessie Smith, who was a loud, emotionally intense singer. These characteristics were required in Smith’s line of work, as audiences expected her to shout-sing to entertain large crowds of people. Though she wished she could sing like Smith, Holiday did not have the same type of voice. Holiday lamented, “I wanted Louis Armstrong’s feeling, and I wanted the big volume that Bessie Smith got. But I found it

didn't work with me, because I didn't have a big voice... so anyway, between the two of them, I sort of got Billie Holiday" (Chilton 1989, 201-202).

In contrast to Smith, Holiday used a microphone when she sang. She often performed in intimate speakeasies, and so never really needed to yell. Emily J. Lordi theorizes in her book *Black Resonance* that the fact that Holiday was able to sing in a quieter tone benefitted the singer's career and artistry. Holiday sang in a nonthreatening, pleasing, and often sensual way. Appearing to be nonthreatening likely contributed to her ability to navigate through otherwise hostile male-dominated environments, all while clearly challenging the patriarchy through her performances (Lordi 2013, 117).

Holiday's subdued tone also contributed to one of the defining characteristics of her style, what James Baldwin calls "understatement." As Lordi puts it, when used in this context, understatement "describes a contrast between the tragic lyrics a vocalist sings and the resiliency her performance conveys" (2013, 100). Baldwin and Lordi both deem it heroic the way Holiday could sing about the devastating and traumatic experiences of her life with a quiet calmness and resolve. She could sing about her lover beating her or seeing men hanging from trees with their eyes bulging but still sang calmly and on an even keel. In this way, Holiday could comment on a situation from a simultaneously inside and outside perspective. Baldwin explains how if audiences did not know the context of the song, Holiday's performance could lead them to falsely assume her lyrics depicted happy and fictional tales. Since Black Americans would have been the only audience members with the complete context to understand Holiday's songs, Baldwin concludes that her understatement style is only useful to and fully understood by them.

An example of understatement can be heard in "Billie's Blues," written by the performer. In the song, Holiday laments being a "slave" for her man. She complains that he has yelled at

her, would not feed her, and even burned her clothes. Yet, she chooses to subvert possible audience expectations, and neither the performance nor compositional choices convey sadness. The song is in a bright D major key. She maintains a reserved performance, and never peaks in an emotional or dramatic breakthrough of any kind. Listening to the recording, it is easy to agree with Baldwin that if one lacks context, the performance could appear to be a happy song. In fact, Holiday even sings about being happy and speculates that her happiness is why some men want her. “Billie’s Blues” is a direct and overtly articulated example of the way that, as Baldwin theorizes, Holiday’s understatement signifies heroic confidence.

Range

Holiday was not known for an extended vocal range, which one could argue makes her legacy and influence as a vocalist even more impressive. She was able to make a significant impact without the big powerful high notes associated with many divas.

The following figure shows the highest and lowest notes for ten Billie Holiday recordings, based on John Nicholas’s transcriptions for Hal Leonard, as well as my original transcriptions for this manuscript. Apart from “God Bless the Child” spanning an 11th, the vocal range for these songs does not extend further than the enharmonic equivalent of a 10th. The lowest pitch in the range is F3 and the highest is C5.

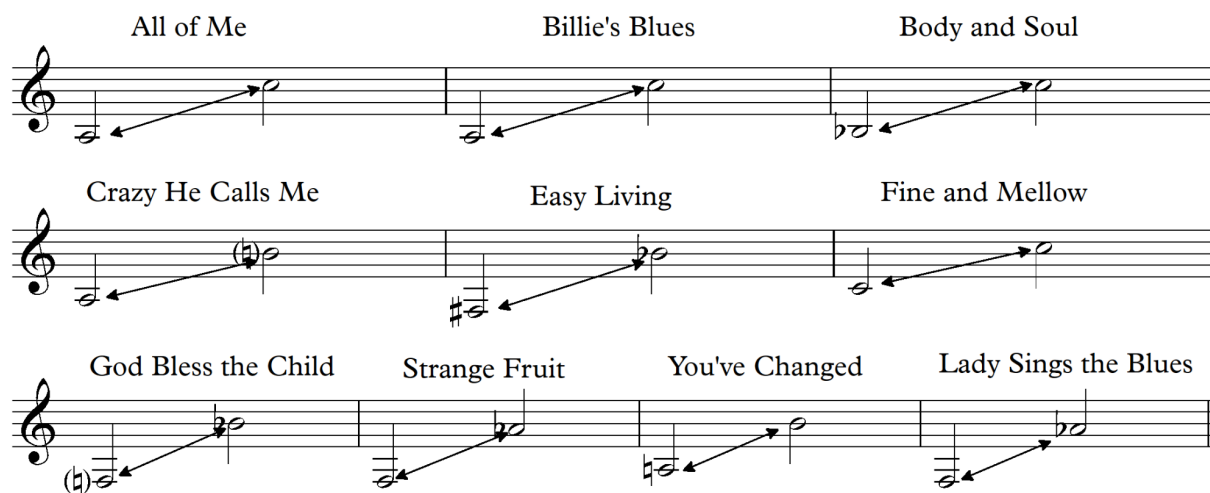


Figure 1

It is commonly assumed that Holiday had such a limited range due, in part, to her drug and alcohol use, and generally tough life. People speculate that as time went on, her voice grew lower and more limited. I found no evidence of this to be true. In her recording of “You’ve Changed” from 1958, the year before her death, her highest pitch is B4, just a half-step below her highest note in her recording of “Fine and Mellow” from 1935, the year of her first record deal.

Holiday’s strength in singing her notes suggests that physical ability was likely not the sole factor limiting her range and rather that it was an artistic choice. I speculate that she chose to limit her range to focus her audience on other aspects of her performance, such as rhythmic variation, pitch choices, *glissandi*, and timbral vocal effects that were integral to her musical expression. In large part, it is these timbral effects that Holiday is famous for, including changing the pronunciation of words and strategically leaning into a nasal tone of voice that most singers worked to avoid.

Timbral effects

Since Holiday sang with a microphone, she did not need to over project. The microphone gave the audience an intimate experience of the nuances in her performance, prominently featuring the

defining characteristics of her sound, the vocal timbral details that might have otherwise gone unheard. Specifically, taking full advantage of her microphone, Holiday made frequent use of unique pronunciations of vowels and nasal tones.

Pronunciation

To add artistic expression and detail to her performances, Holiday often modified her pronunciation of her vowels. This not only adds stylistic variation to her songs but also allows her to sing vowels with the warmer and more rounded vocal tone that came to define her style. An example of this can be heard in her 1938 recording of “When You're Smiling (The Whole World Smiles with You) (with Teddy & His Orchestra) - Take 3” at 0:45. During the chorus, Holiday sings the “i” in “smiling” as an “ah” sound (Bradford 2021).

Holiday also uses this pronunciation technique in her recording of “Gloomy Sunday (with Teddy & His Orchestra) - Take 1.” Around 0:28 in the recording, Holiday sings “little *white* flowers” as “little *wah-it* flowers.” Again, this change allows her to round her vocal tone, contributing to the style that audiences associate with her.

Nasal Tone

Her strategic use of a nasal tone also defined Holiday’s style. She would frequently sing with an almost pinched nasal tone of voice, which most other singers would have worked to avoid. This nasal aspect is especially prevalent in her upper range. We hear an example of this in the 1933 recording of a then 18-year-old Holiday singing “Riffin’ the Scotch,” with Benny Goodman and his orchestra. Notice the quality of her voice in the higher register when Holiday sings the words “breaking my heart” at 1:04 (Bradford 2021). This effect makes those contextually higher pitched notes more piercing and powerful.

Holiday also uses this nasal tone in the upper register at the end of “Tain’t Nobody’s Business If I Do.” Around 3:02, Holiday jumps up in register to sing the finale “Ain’t No-” and switches to a nasal tone, which, as previously stated, most singers would have avoided. Holiday embraces the timbre of the effect and uses it to heighten her expressivity.

Improvisational elements

Part of Billie Holiday’s genius is that no two of her recordings or performances are the same, each offering fresh ingenuity, cleverness, and musicality. I delineate improvisational elements from compositional elements in that the latter are those which the composer predetermined and are mostly consistent from performance to performance. In contrast, improvisational elements are performance-specific variations made by in-the-moment decisions. Of these improvisational adaptations, I examine Holiday’s variation of rhythm and her use of *glissandi*, as these aspects of her improvisation have had the most considerable influence on modern American opera.

Rhythm

Holiday’s approach to rhythm is by far one of the most known and distinct characteristics of her music. Although people agree that her approach is distinct, there are conflicting theories as to how she achieved her unique sound. Most audience members would say that she famously sang “behind the beat.” One might be surprised to learn, then, that when her colleagues described her timing, in contrast to popular perspective, they frequently spoke about her singing “in time.” Pianist Bobby Tucker is quoted as saying, “You know, with most singers you have to guide ‘em along — they’re either layin’ back or else runnin’ away from you. But not Billie Holiday... She had the greatest conception of a beat I ever heard. She could sing the fastest tune in the world or

something that was like a dirge, but you could take a metronome and she'd be right there” (Shapiro and Hentoff 1966, 199–200).

These accounts of Holiday are paradoxical, in that she is seemingly simultaneously both free from and completely locked into the beat. Hao and Rachel Huang propose another theory. They claim that Holiday constructs her vocal performances not in relation to the original beat and tempo, as played by the band, but instead in relation to her own tempo, what they call a “recitation beat” (Huang and Huang 1994/1995). The almost “timeless” quality of her singing comes from the way Holiday renders her listener unsure of the beat. The listener’s disorientation caused by the tension between the recitation beat and the band’s beat is part of the magic of Holiday’s performances.

In my aim to trace Holiday’s influence on opera, I explore her rhythmic variation through repetition. She puts this skill on display in her 1941 recording of “God Bless the Child.” Figure 2 is a rhythmic reduction of three refrains from this recording. Each time she performs the line, she sings it rhythmically differently. In the figure, I arrange these three instances vertically for ease of comparison.

ms. 9
Ma-ma may have, Pa-pa may have, but God bless' the child that's got his own.

ms. 18
Ma- ma may have, Pa-pa may have, but God bless' the child that's got his own.

ms. 37
Ma-ma may have, Pa-pa may have, but God bless' the child that's got his own.

Figure 2

Several characteristic Holiday rhythmic techniques can be seen here, even in such a brief example. Notice how in the second two transcriptions, even though the first two measures are different, she ends them the same way. This technique of varied entrances paired with consistent

endings is common in her style. Additionally, it is worth noting the way she frequently obscures beats using tied notes, as she does with beat one of measure 12 through tying over beat four of measure 11. She often ties subdivisions of triplets or changes the subdivision of a beat after a tied note, such as in measure 12, in which she ties two of the eighth-note triplets in beat two (notated here as a quarter note), or in measure 18, in which the quarter note in beat two is tied into beat three, obscuring the first new triplet subdivision of beat three.

As Miles Davis puts it, “a lot of singers try to sing like Billie, but just the act of playing behind the beat doesn’t make it sound soulful” (Chilton 1989, 229). With that being the case, let us examine other elements that contribute to Holiday’s soulful sound.

Glissandi

Holiday was an expert in vocal *glissandi*, effortlessly sliding between notes as a form of heightened expression. She used both short- and long-duration *glissandi*. She featured longer *glissandi* by holding a syllable and slowly bending between pitches in an expressive and transparent way. She used short *glissandi* by performing quick slides, often during the approach to or decay from a note.

An example of a longer, slower *glissandi* can be heard in her recording of “God Bless the Child” from 1941. The notated example in Figure 3 begins at 1:30 of that recording.

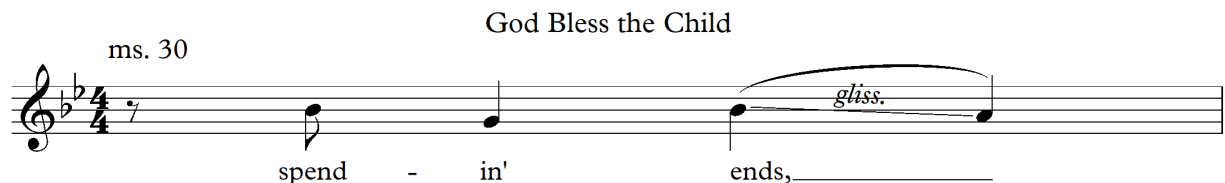


Figure 3

In this example, Holiday slides slowly from B \flat down to A over the approximate duration of a full beat. She emphasizes this technique by performing it with the last word of the phrase and giving the word a two-beat duration.

Holiday also frequently used shorter *glissandi*. These *glissandi* are so frequent that notating them all using standard notation would be immensely impractical. In their 2013 article “She Sang as She Spoke” in *Jazz Perspectives*, Hao and Rachel Huang develop an alternative transcription technique to notate this phenomenon, pictured in Figure 4 (Huang and Huang 2013).

The figure is Huang and Huang’s transcription of Holiday’s March 21, 1941 recording of “All of Me.” The rhythmic notation uses a spatial grid and seeks to be as accurate as possible, with the caveat that this notation would be completely impractical for a performance. The bar lines represent the band’s beat, at 108 beats per minute, making immediately visible how Holiday consistently deviates from this beat. The stemmed note values are the notes aligned with the authors’ assessment of the “recitation beat,” 160 beats per minute in this instance. Huang and Huang do not notate rests and specify that Holiday suspends the recitation beat during the rests; otherwise, she would grow increasingly off-beat from the band.

All - L of M - me why N - not T - take all - L of M - me ---
 can(t) chou S - see I'm no G - good with TH - out Y - you---
 Take my L - lips I want to L - lose them
 Take M - my - a - arms I'll N - ne - verY - use them
 Your G - good byes L - left me with eyes that CR - cry
 H - how can N I Go - o - on N De - ar with - ou - - - t Y - you
 Y - you took the part that once W - was - S - M my heart So - "W"
 why not take all - L - of M - me etc.

Figure 4

The painstakingly notated lines between notes indicate all of Holiday's slides, including those that occur into and out of phrases, which would be impractical to mark using standard notation.

This notation clearly displays and draws close attention to the sheer number of short *glissandi* Holiday uses in her performances. The music represented by the figure can be heard at 0:18 of the referenced recording.

Billie Holiday: The Songwriter

Most of the songs Holiday recorded were written by others, including some of her most famous such as “Strange Fruit.” Still, she was proud to be a composer, and she wrote or co-wrote many of her popular songs. One can gain insight into Holiday’s compositional approach through analyzing these original compositions. To spotlight her influence on opera, I describe the more characteristic aspects of her songwriting through examples from original songs “Billie’s Blues” and “Fine and Mellow.” These characteristic aspects include interesting relationships between melody and vocal harmony.

Billie’s Blues

One popular Holiday original was the aptly titled “Billie’s Blues.” I reference this song above to discuss Holiday’s use of understatement. As previously described, the song is in a D major blues tonality, the tragic and traumatic lyrics contrasting the uplifting music. The song has since become a jazz standard and recorded by many artists. For the purposes of this analysis, I reference Holiday’s “Billie’s Blues (Take 2)” recording for Columbia Records, recorded May 9, 1941. Measure numbers refer to the transcription by John Nicholas, published as part of the book *Billie Holiday - Original Keys for Singers: Transcribed from Historic Recordings*.

Relationships Between Harmony and Melody

One key aspect of Holiday's compositional approach, which foreshadows moments in modern opera, is the interesting relationship in her work between harmony and melody. Namely, in specific moments, the vocal melody highlights upper extensions, or altered upper extensions, of the harmony.

There are several of these moments in "Billie's Blues," and I notate three of them in Figure 5. The E natural in measure 9, which is repeated in measure 21, is especially striking, forming an interval of a 13th in the harmonic context over a G dominant 7th chord. The F natural preceding it is unexpected in a D Major tonality. In measure 17, also pictured in the figure, the F natural reappears, this time above a D dominant 13th chord. The F natural functions as an enharmonic equivalent of a $\sharp 9$ in this context. The note stands out as especially powerful over the top of the concurrent $F\sharp$ in the harmony. Less striking, but equally noteworthy, is the A natural over an E minor 9th chord in measure 26, forming the interval of an 11th.

ms. 9 ms. 17 ms. 26

G⁹ D¹³ Em⁹ A⁷

love my man; been your slave, ba - by I'd see you in you grave.

Figure 5

Holiday was an expert in chromaticism, effortlessly shifting in and out of key with complete control. The following figure shows two examples from "Billie's Blues" in which she uses chromaticism in a non-harmonic way. As she sings the "a" in measure 38, pictured below, Holiday uses a chromatic neighbor tone $G\sharp$ over an A dominant 7th chord. In measure 41 she uses an $A\flat$ for the syllable "to-," which happens to be enharmonic with the previous $G\sharp$, this time leading from an A natural down to a G natural instead of returning to A. The use of

chromatic non-harmonic tones is also part of the European concert music canon and is not unique to Black American vocal music. The technique predates Billie Holiday by several hundred years but is remarkable because of the frequency at which she uses it in her style.

ms. 38 ms. 41

but I had a long, long ways to put that all together makes me

Figure 6

Fine and Mellow

“Fine and Mellow” is another blues-influenced song in which Holiday laments her mistreatment by her man. Sadly, this is a recurring theme in her often-autobiographical musical output. The song is in F major, and again highlights Holiday’s nuanced and subdued understatement. The recording referenced in the following analysis is from *The Complete Commodore Recordings* album, and the figures and measure numbers again reference the Hal Leonard transcription by John Nicholas.

Relationships Between Harmony and Melody

From the very first note Holiday sings in “Fine and Mellow,” she makes bold and compelling choices. Although the harmony during her entrance is an F dominant 7th chord, Holiday starts the melody with a repeated Ab, as shown in the following figure. This pitch is an enharmonic spelling of a #9 interval and could be conceptualized as a minor third occurring over a major tonality. This choice of pitch is surprising and immediately creates a harmonic tension, drawing the listener’s ear to the melody. The effect is heightened by the note repeating before moving

down a half step to the natural 9th interval. In the following measure, the A \flat is repeated, this time harmonizing as the 7th of a B \flat dominant 13th chord.

ms. 5

F7 B \flat 13

My man don't love me, treats me aw - ful

Figure 7

Later, in measure 14, depicted in Figure 8, the A \flat is featured again with a prominent entrance, this time reharmonized as a \flat 13th interval over a C dominant 7th harmony.

ms. 14

C7 B \flat 13

that I've _____ ev - er

Figure 8

II. Influence of Billie Holiday on American Opera Composers

Anthony Davis (b. 1951) – *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*

As of 2022, Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer Anthony Davis has written eight operas, the first of which is *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* and premiered in 1986. Davis spent his early career as a jazz pianist but was interested in notated composition and the European avant-garde. The tension between these two worlds created an identity crisis for the composer: “I always tried so hard to fit in, and then I figured out I didn’t want to fit. I knew I could never be accepted as a straight-ahead jazz musician, nor would I accept myself as that. I would never be

accepted as a Minimalist. I wouldn't be a 'downtown' composer. Because I find all orthodoxies, all doctrines, to be ultimately banal" (Schwarz 1992).

Davis revealed in a 2022 interview with New Music USA that what first sparked his interest in opera was reading Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* as a student. Davis explains, "I thought that what Nietzsche was writing about in terms of the Apollonian and Dionysian, and the kind of binary that he created, was more applicable to American music than it was to German. Because we're African and we're European. The combination of the musical foundation in these two great cultures, I thought opera could have that. An American opera ideally would be that kind of expression" (Oteri 2022).

Davis has been vocal about the value he places on Holiday's music and the considerable influence she has had on his own writing. In 1992 Davis told the *New York Times* that "when I write for the voice, a lot of my rhythmic setting comes out of Billie Holiday—how she phrases over the bar, how she bends the rhythms. I write that in" (Schwarz 1992).

Thirty years later, in an interview with NewMusicUSA, Davis doubled down to describe how "you can find the hybrid musician. I think that's merged over time. It was rarer in 1986, when I did it, than it is now. They're exposed to many things. I think an opera program, my wife might disagree 'cause she's an opera singer, but I think they have to learn Billie Holiday. They have to understand Billie Holiday to understand how you use words, and how you phrase, and how you find rubato within time, how you find freedom within the time, rather than having to stop the time" (Oteri 2022).

Rhythmic variation through repetition

Varied repetition is the foundation of Black Music. In the spirit of Davis evangelizing about Holiday's importance, I searched for her influence in his music with an ear for rhythmic

variation through repetition. I found numerous examples throughout *X*. A simple, clear example illustrates the point at Act I, scene 2, measures 511 and 514. The character Street sings the lyrics “Let them come to you” in two rhythmically contrasting ways. The following figure shows rhythmic reductions of these two instances, aligned vertically to highlight the differences between the two. In the first instance, Davis gives each of the first four words an eighth note duration. In the second, the duration allotted to the third word, “come,” is tripled, pushing back “to you.” The figure can be heard on disc 1, track 9, around 1:54 of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project recording.

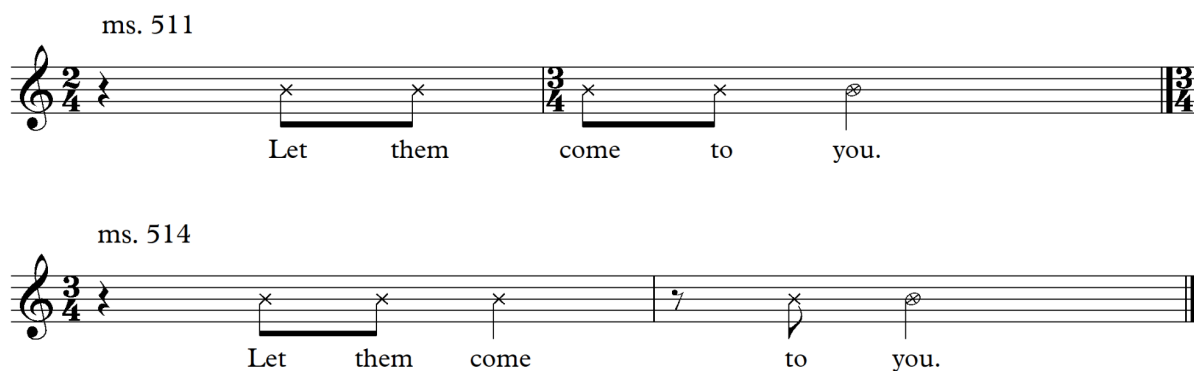


Figure 9

While that variation is subtle, the example in Figure 10 is even more varied. The composer changes and mixes subdivisions of beats, just as Holiday might have. The following figure is a rhythmic reduction beginning at Act II, scene 4, measure 34. The text states, “We are a nation, trapped inside a nation. We are a nation dying to be born,” and can be heard on disc 2, track 6, around 2:02 of the same Boston Modern Orchestra Project recording.

ms. 34

We are a na - tion trapped in-side a na - tion.

We are a na - tion dy-ing to be born.

Figure 10

The way Davis alters the entrances of “we are a nation,” but then keeps “nation” the same is remarkably like the rhythmic variation Holiday uses in “God Bless the Child,” transcribed in Figure 2 of this monograph. Also like Holiday is the way Davis obscures beat one of measure 37 using tied notes between triplet subdivisions and duple subdivisions.

Relationships between harmony and melody

In Davis’s *X*, we find numerous instances of interesting relationships between harmony and melody. The example in Figure 11 occurs in Act I, scene 2. The figure begins at measure 39 and can be heard on disc 1, track 7, at 2:02 of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project recording. The A# on the word “child” over a C# minor 7th chord is especially striking and forms the interval of a 13th in relationship to the harmony.

ms. 39

Come with me, child.

C#m7

Figure 11

The next example occurs during an overtly jazz-influenced passage, and Davis undoubtedly created extended tertian harmonic relationships between harmony and melody to harken back to the jazz idiom. The composer includes chord symbols in the piano-vocal score,

relationship. The example can be heard on disc 2, track 10, around 1:24 of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project recording.

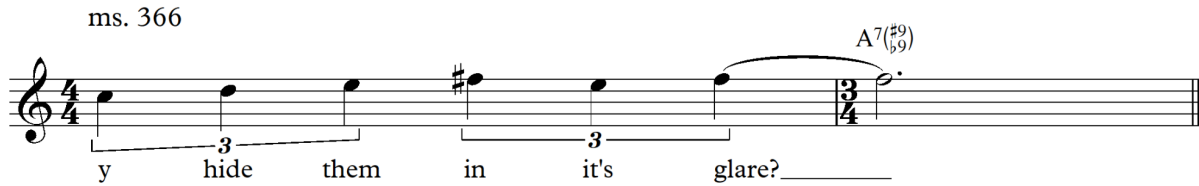


Figure 13

Understatement

Davis uses understatement in an effective way to end Act I, scene 1 of the opera. The passage occurs starting at measure 735. At this point in the story, Young Malcolm’s father has been murdered and his mother has “gone mad.” The Social Worker wants to take the children and make them wards of the state. This “Momma, Help Me” passage is Young Malcolm’s response. It is easy to imagine a scenario, especially in opera, in which this moment would feature a dramatic and wailing singer, as many tragic operas have done in moments of despair. Instead, Davis writes a subdued and intimate song for a boy soprano, and the result is haunting. There are no high powerful notes, and the range spans only an octave and a half step, as pictured in the following figure.

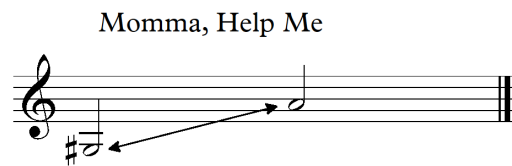


Figure 14

It adds to the effectiveness of this moment that after this song, the Malcolm character is silent for over 20 minutes, not singing a note. The next time the audience hears him sing, it is as a grown man in a fit of anger over everything that has occurred in his life up to that point.

Timbral effects

There are two instances of notable vocal timbral effects in this recording of *X*. They both could be described as growls and are both performed by the character Street in Act I, scene 1. This scene stylistically harkens back to the blues-influenced jazz styles of Holiday's time.

The first growl occurs in measure 298 on the word "job," and the second during the same scene in measure 315 on the word "Don't." The first growl can be heard around 4:51 of track 8, disc 1, and the second around 5:22 of the same track. These growls are characteristic of the blues era Holiday came from.

Glissandi

Though there are not many *glissandi* in *X*, the few instances are effective and notable. One instance occurs in measure 240 of Act I, scene 1. In this scene, Malcolm's mother, Louise, waits for the return of Malcolm's father, who has been gone longer than he should have been. At this point Louise is unaware that racists have murdered Malcolm's father, but she is beginning to suspect something is wrong.

Contextually, it makes sense in this moment to draw musical influence from blues tropes such as *glissandi*, as a Black woman laments her man. This moment speaks to performance practice, as the composer did not write the *glissando* in the score. The following two figures show the passage as written alongside a transcription of the singer's performance as recorded in the Boston Modern Orchestra Project's 2022 album. The figures correspond with approximately 1:50 of track 3, disc 1 of the recording.



Figure 15



Figure 16

The composer includes an even more prominently featured *glissando* in measure 420, Act I, scene 2. In this instance the composer notates the *glissando* into the score, although marks it as optional. The effect happens at the end of the “Shoot your shot” passage, and the singer goes up an entire octave to their higher register, to dramatic effect. This use of *glissando* is much louder and more intense and dramatic than Holiday’s more understated style, but the point of connection is still notable.

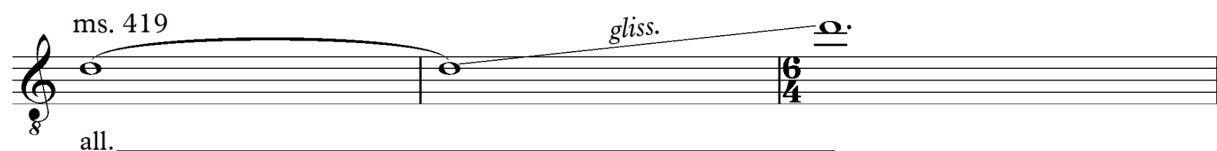


Figure 17

Terence Blanchard (b. 1962) – *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*

Terence Blanchard is a Louisiana-born American composer whose musical roots are based in jazz and film music. He is most widely known for scoring many of Spike Lee’s films, including *Malcolm X* (1992), *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), and *Da 5 Bloods* (2020). The Metropolitan Opera 2021–2022 season production of Blanchard’s *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* was the first opera by a Black American composer the organization had ever produced.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Blanchard responds to this description, saying, “I understand it, but I don’t want to be a Black composer; I want to be a composer. I understand why there’s a need to say that because of the historic nature of it and the significance of it. I get it. But there’s some inherent things in that statement that I don’t think people realize” (Smith 2021). I examine this Met Opera production and the Met Opera on Demand 2021 recording in this monograph.

Holiday’s influence on Blanchard is neither secret nor subtle. In 1994 Blanchard released a collection of Billie Holiday cover songs as an album he titled *The Billie Holiday Songbook*. Among the songs Blanchard recorded are several that I have referenced above, including “Fine and Mellow” and “Strange Fruit.”

Understatement

One of the most direct points of connection linking Billie Holiday to *Fire* is the use of understatement. The technique stands out because Blanchard uses it during the most dramatically climactic moments in the work. There are two main examples I highlight here, and both are from painful, emotionally heightened points in the story. My theory—that Holiday influenced Blanchard’s portrayal of these painful moments—is supported by the fact that in a promotional interview for his Billie Holiday cover album, 25 years before *Fire*’s premiere, Blanchard said, “the first time I heard Billie sing, it haunted me... When I listen to Billie Holiday... I feel the pain, and I’ve never met the woman... And that’s what I want to do with my music someday” (Reelblack 2018).

The first use of understatement I highlight as an example occurs at Number 43 in the piano-vocal score (Met Opera on Demand, track 51). At this point in the story, the lead character,

Charles, is on his way to murder the man who harmed him. This is the climax of the main drama of the opera. The moment is also a return to the unresolved dramatic tension of the opening teaser scene. The audience has seen Charles as a boy and has grown to love him, and they saw that the man Chester hurt Charles when Charles was just an innocent child. In the midst of Charles's emotional and murderous rage, a gun in his hand, suddenly Charles as a child, called Char'es Baby, begins pleading to his older self by singing in a soft, calm voice. This singing calms Charles and signifies his decision not to choose revenge.

Char'es Baby's range for the entire passage spans only that of a minor 6th, pictured in the following figure, and is marked with a *mezzo piano* dynamic. The initial phrase, "Sometimes you gotta just leave it in the road," spans only a perfect 4th. It is not an obvious compositional choice to score such a dramatic and emotionally charged moment with a quiet and understated song, which contrasts the innumerable louder moments in belting range throughout the opera. I interpret this decision as Blanchard's attempt to replicate the "haunting" feeling he experienced when he first heard Holiday's music.

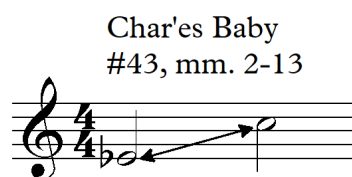


Figure 18

Another expertly understated moment is when Charles and his mother finally say "I love you" to each other, after failing to do so for their entire lives until that moment. While not the main drama of the opera, this is a significant secondary theme and the climax of the family's arc. The moment is set up earlier in the opera by each of the two characters separately begging to hear "I love you" from the other, yet not getting the affirmation they desperately need. This

denial of support contributes significantly to the underlying tensions of the opera, which resolves in this final moment. When the characters finally profess their familial love, they do so calmly, softly, and comfortably in the middle of their vocal ranges. These are the last sung notes of the opera. The following figure shows the passage, starting at Number 43, measure 55.

ms. 55

Billie *mp*
I love you too

Charles *mp*
I love you___

Figure 19

Rhythmic variation through repetition

Terence Blanchard takes a different approach to rhythm and rhythmic variation through repetition than either Davis or Holiday. In *Fire*, one of Blanchard's main compositional techniques is to use rhythmic themes that repeat in similar ways throughout the work.

Rhythmic Motifs

One of the most identifiable themes in the piece is the "Char'es Baby, Youngest of Five" motif. The rhythmic pattern first appears at measure 15 of Number 6. The following figure features a rhythmic reduction of this pattern.

ms 15

Char'es ba - by youn-gest of five the neigh-bor-hood ba - by
 sweet as pe - can___ pie not just your ba - by our ba - by___ too

Figure 20

The motif's distinct rhythms of contrasting subdivisions make the theme easily identifiable as the audience hears it throughout the opera. The "Char'es Baby" motif returns in Number 7, measure 84; Number 12, measures 13 and 37; Number 24, measure 22; Number 29, measure 5; Number 34, measure 38; and Number 36A, measure 45.

Another prominent repeating rhythmic motif is the "See How da Ground" theme, notated as a rhythmic reduction in the following two figures. Figure 21 depicts the first appearance of the motif, in Number 7, measure 23.

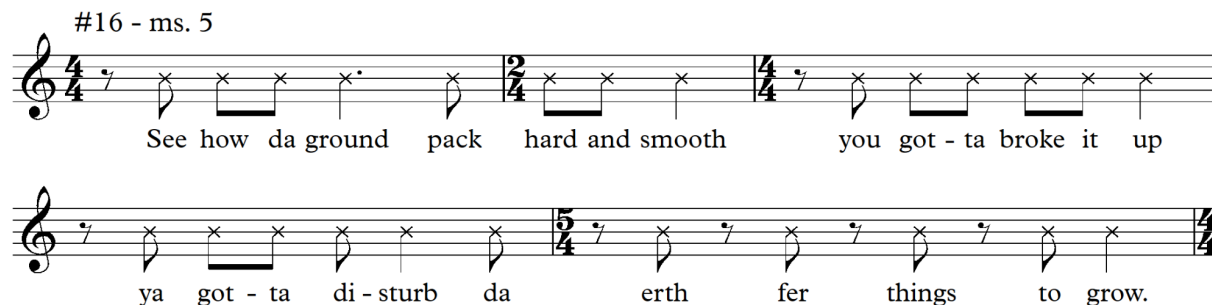
#7 - ms. 23

See how da ground pack hard and smooth you got - ta broke it up
 ya got - ta di-sturb da erth fer thing ta grow._____

Figure 21

The motif returns in Number 16, measure 5, with the exact same rhythms, except in the last measure. These figures exemplify Blanchard's use of rhythmic motifs throughout the piece.

#16 - ms. 5



See how da ground pack hard and smooth you got - ta broke it up
ya got - ta di - sturb da erth fer things to grow.

Figure 22

Rhythmic Variation

As these rhythmic motifs act as identifiable motivic signposts in the piece, they are not varied in significant ways, so as not to obfuscate the themes. Instead, Blanchard makes room for rhythmic variance in other moments through improvisation, in a method not unlike the jazz idiom that both Blanchard and Holiday share. Whereas Davis notates vocal rhythmic variations in specific, detailed, and predetermined ways, Blanchard decidedly leaves that variation up to the interpretation of the performer, as in the jazz tradition.

Blanchard features an example of this improvisation during the “Boy with Peculiar Grace” theme that first appears in Number 22, starting at measure 4 (Met Opera on Demand, track 25, 0:18). The rhythmic motif returns in Number 35 (Met Opera on Demand, track 40, 0:07), and again in Number 40A (Met Opera on Demand, track 48, 0:01). Although the composer notates the rhythm the same way each time, he gives the singers freedom to improvise, vary, and embellish through performance. At 40A, he gives the entire number the character marking “A capella,(sic) freely - quasi improvised,” even though he notates the rhythm precisely. From the perspective of an audience member, who cannot see the notation, both Davis’s and Blanchard’s pieces achieve rhythmic variation through repetition, even though the composers use contrasting methods to achieve it.

Relationships between harmony and melody

Given Blanchard's background in jazz music, it will come as no surprise that in *Fire* the composer frequently uses chords with altered upper extensions. Many times, these altered upper extensions occur in the vocal melody, in ways that echo Billie Holiday's work.

One such moment occurs in Number 10, measures 16 and 17. In measure 16, the composer writes an F# happening over a dominant F7, being sustained over an Eb 13th chord. The F# stands out, as it is an enharmonic b9 over an F, and a #9 over the Eb chord. In the following measure the melody is almost entirely upper extensions, the D# is a #9 over the C7 chord, which leaps up to an F#, the 13th on top of the dominant A harmony.

ms. 16



give it back, and much more, when I get paid to-night.

Figure 23

When compared to the rest of the opera, this passage is especially dense with altered upper extension notes in the vocal melody. It is interesting to note that the character Spinner, who sings the passage, is a blues musician. This leads me to believe that Blanchard's references to the traditions of singers past, including Billie Holiday, is certainly intentional.

Glissandi

There are several interesting uses of *glissandi* in *Fire* that harken back to Holiday's music. The character Billie—serendipitously named—performs a *glissando* in Number 18, measure 15, page

110 of the piano-vocal score. I have included a notated diagram below, although Blanchard does not notate the *glissando* in his original score. The example corresponds with 0:33 of track 21 of the Metropolitan Opera October 23, 2021, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* Met Opera on Demand recording.

Billie, the character, performs a *glissando* from Bb down to G over the duration of a beat. The effect is to connote a blues influence that is certainly reminiscent of Holiday’s performances. The context makes the blues influence even more prominent because the character sings about the hardships facing people in the community, often a topic of the blues.



Figure 24

Another notable example occurs around 0:48 in the same piece and recording. Transcribed below, the *glissando* appears on the word “tired”; tiredness, again, being a quintessential blues topic. Blanchard does not notate this *glissando* in his piano-vocal score.



Figure 25

Blanchard returns again to the “tired” blues trope in Number 20, this time through the Spinner character. The following example corresponds with 5:32 in track 21. In this scene, Spinner tries to convince the Billie character to take him back after his countless acts of infidelity

and abandonment. His aim is to be charming and persuasive. Notably, Blanchard gives Spinner the opportunity to mimic Billie’s bluesy *glissando* on the word “tired,” showing his attempt to feign empathy. Again, the figure below is a transcription and not the way Blanchard notated the score, suggesting that he gave the performers improvisational instructions during rehearsals.



Figure 26

III. Conclusions and Effects on the Author

An element of my dissertation work has been to compose the piano-vocal score of a one-act opera, titled *Ain’t That About A-*. I structured the opera in four scenes connected by short instrumental interludes, totaling approximately 45 minutes. I composed the music and wrote the lyrics, and screenwriter Adamma Ebo authored the story and book. With its authentic focus on the Black American experience, in both its narrative and musical language, I believe this piece will impact the genre of opera by sharing stories and giving voice to ideas that have not been heard in an operatic setting to date.

Additionally, the work is unique in that I artistically explore the idea of “code-switching” in Black communities, through both the libretto and the music. The Oxford Dictionary defines code-switching as “the practice of alternating between two or more languages or varieties of language in conversation.” For many Black Americans, code-switching manifests in the way we talk with one another, as opposed to how we talk to people of other races, often in attempts to

make people in professional spaces feel more comfortable around us. Throughout *Ain't That About A-*, I explore musical representations of code-switching.

In the story, our main character Raenia—a young Black woman—arrives home to her neighborhood to discover that Barney Lowe—a young white professional—has moved in next door. In a common story of gentrification, Barney has relocated to a Black neighborhood, intending to “save” a community that does not feel it needs saving. When Barney enters for the first time, I underscore his introduction with a repeated Eb pitch that remains constant throughout the entire section, a subtle musical reminder of the slow incessantness of gentrification. This Eb reharmonizes in contrasting ways in the accompaniment, always with consonant, pleasing-sounding harmonies, but the section is in an odd 7/4 rhythmic meter. The harmony moves smoothly; however, coupled with the irregular meter, the harmony evokes a feeling of being off-balance. The translation of this musical feeling is that when someone encroaches into your safe space, even if that person is kind and well-intentioned, the intrusion can feel uncomfortable.

When Raenia sings to her friends, she sings in R&B, Jazz, Blues, and Gospel-influenced styles. When she, in turn, speaks with people from outside of her neighborhood, such as Barney, she mimics their style of singing. This change influences Raenia’s melodic contour, register, and style. In the second scene of four, in which she snaps out of her introspective solo aria to respond to Barney, Raenia code-switches, singing her reluctant agreement with the words “uh-huh,” in the same Eb pitch Barney sings so often.

Billie Holiday's Influence

Although studying Billie Holiday's music led to multiple points of connection in my work, the two most prominent influences on display in *Ain't That About A-* are my use of understatement and how I leave room for vocal varied repetition.

Understatement in the service of realism

In the final climactic scene of the opera, our main character Raenia returns to her neighborhood after work to discover that her favorite community hub restaurant has closed and been sold. In the world of our opera, this is akin to a death. Raenia laments the loss with the aria "Who Cries for Babylon?" and understands that the relentless march of gentrification has come for her beloved neighborhood; this song serves as a requiem.

The singing for the verses in "Who Cries for Babylon?" is very understated. Though the aria is the emotional peak of our opera, Raenia sings the verses softly and in her lower register. To my sensibilities, this understatement is a more modern expression of feeling than the grand, sweeping, dramatic, and romantic gestures that opera is known for. I made this decision, in part, mindful of the modern diverse audiences I hope to reach, who are often unaccustomed to traditional opera. I believe understating the climax creates a satisfying dramatic arc, while the story remains realistic and grounded. As described above, this understatement also gives Raenia the ability to comment on her situation both from within it and from "a little bit outside of it."

Anthony Davis spoke against this type of realism in a 1986 interview, saying, "You have to use images and metaphors. Just the conceit of having the characters sing, rather than speak, takes it out of the realistic mode. If you plunge back into realism, either in language or in action, it can compromise abstraction implicit in the music" (Delaney 1994). He goes on to insist that

the one thing an opera composer must not do is write a play, because “you can’t sing a play.” It is my position that the developments of the last 30 years of Black music have given us the tools to embrace realism effectively and creatively in opera. As a composer raised in genres such as Rap and contemporary R&B, I have musical tools and sensibilities that are not part of Davis’s compositional language and which may not come naturally to him, being 40 years my senior.

Variation through repetition

Billie Holiday’s vocal style also inspired me to leave the singers of *Ain’t That About A-* a significant amount of space for varied repetition. All the major arias— “Home,” “Forever,” “Dyin,” “Who All Over There,” and “Who Cries for Babylon?”—feature repetition intended to be conducive for vocal improvisation, à la Billie Holiday. Previously in this monograph, I presented two different approaches to vocal variation. Anthony Davis meticulously notates the rhythmic variation as part of his compositional process, while Terence Blanchard notates identical rhythms but gives performers freedom to make their own choices. My position aligns with Blanchard’s in that I prefer to empower performers with those decisions. I find that when I write extremely specific notation, the singers may perform the notes accurately, but often in ways that seem more premeditated than the natural flow that a conversational tone has. In my aim to create a modern opera steeped in realism, it is essential that the singing feel as natural as possible to both the performers and the audience. When singers are given space to sing and improvise on their own, they are often more comfortable, inspiring a confidence that can strengthen and deepen the performance.

Conclusions

Although I have adopted Blanchard's approach to variation through performer improvisation, I disagree with his resistance to audiences labeling him a Black composer. I draw inspiration from the way Stravinsky embraced his Russian heritage by using folk tunes in his music, and how the European master composers unapologetically draw influence from and celebrate their cultural predecessors. I do not wish to conflate nationality with race, but rather to declare that cultures are distinct and unique, and that this variation is beautiful. In *Ain't That About A-*, Adamma and I strategically highlight differences between people, through a juxtaposition that is uniquely American, and through a lens that is uniquely Black American. We strove to do this in a humorous way that made each character and musical style sound good. Although the opera features racial tensions, we set out to tell a story that contains no villains. We celebrate the differences between people, rather than act as if they do not exist. An underlying theme of *Ain't That About A-* is that while God may have created us all equal, we are not the same. It is my hope that the conversations this opera inspires and provokes will build bridges rather than walls, and, in doing so, help to bring people together.

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