

Sound Expertise Season 3, Episode 2

The Paradoxes of Black Classical Music with Kira Thurman

Transcription by Andrew Dell'Antonio

Kira Thurman 00:00

I was also interested in trying to show what it means ... how the politics of race and blackness have functioned in the world of classical music, which has deliberately obfuscated these politics at work because of its myth of colorblindness and universality.

00:19

[Music]

Will Robin 00:38

One of the reasons I started this podcast a few years back was, I needed a specific reason to catch up on music scholarship, articles and books that I've been meaning to read for sometimes months, and often years. And I knew that if I interviewed the people who wrote them, I would definitely have to read them in advance. At the same time, this is a pandemic podcast, and I don't think I'm alone in that I found it very, very difficult to read anything from about March 2020 until... well, today, beyond what thankfully the podcast got me to read. But there was one academic book that I ended up reading totally for pleasure when it came out back in 2021, Kira Thurman's *Singing Like Germans, Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven and Brahms*. Reading and then rereading *Singing like Germans*, I found the book totally engrossing and insightful, providing the kind of rich textured historical detail that I love, and don't often find enough of in musicology. And though Dr. Thurman, who is an associate professor at the University of Michigan, is technically a historian and in German Studies, she's also definitely a musicologist. Her appointment at Michigan is actually in all three fields. The book looks at the large number of African American classical musicians in the 19th and 20th centuries who traveled to Germany to perform and to have profound experiences abroad that provided an alternative to the segregation they faced at home, but not necessarily an escape from the intense and violent racial politics of Germany itself. This is Sound expertise. And I'm your host, Will Robin. I'm a musicologist. And this is a podcast where I speak with my fellow music scholars about their research, and why it matters. I've been wanting to have Dr. Thurman on the show for a while now. And I think you'll really learn a lot from this conversation. And I hope that you pick up the book and enjoy it as much as I have.

02:44

[Music]

Will Robin 02:53

So you are a historian and your book is a history, it's this very sweeping and engaging history that moves from the late 19th century to the present day. And I was hoping our conversation could move historically, as well jumping a bit chronologically to cover some of the moments I found most interesting in your study. But I'd love to start at the beginning. In this moment, in the late 19th century post slavery

period in the US, in which you document African American musicians and intellectuals who are gravitating strongly towards classical music, and specifically Austro German classical music. Can you talk a little bit about how that came to be? And why German music in particular had such a powerful grip in this period?

Kira Thurman 03:38

Sure. I think I would say a couple of different things. Actually, the first chapter of my book, in a lot of ways was the last one that I ever wrote, which is really interesting. Because when I started off with this project, I was really interested in German reception of Black classical musicians, primarily African Americans, I came to discover later on. And so that really had been the main focus and thrust of my dissertation as I was writing it. And then over time, it became more and more important for me to try to answer the question that people kept asking me, of -- how did these musicians get into this music in the first place? How did African Americans encounter classical music -- the Austro-German canon so to speak -- which is what led me to then spend the summer of 2015 actually in my parents' basement in Atlanta, which they were thrilled about, and our family dog was thrilled... oh, our dog loved it, and going to different archives at different historically Black colleges and universities to think about how they had set up their music programs. So I went to Spelman College, I went to Morehouse, I went to Fisk university was a really important site for me, Howard, Tuskegee, you know, just going to different historically Black colleges' archives to think of about how they set up their music departments, and to look for what I assumed were going to be traces of an Austro-German canon there. And my hunch was confirmed, basically. So in other words, yes. So my book, the way it starts is by examining this moment after the Civil War, when African Americans are able to pursue higher education in greater numbers than ever before. And that it was important for me to understand how music fit into their visions of education, of racial uplift, of advancing their causes in American society, but also how -- what I found so fascinating was that different, particularly international musicians, were also equally as important in encouraging African Americans to consider leaving the United States altogether and finding musical careers for themselves abroad.

Will Robin 06:00

Yeah, can you talk more about -- how is it that this path towards higher education also intersected with this particular kind of music? What is it about Austro-German music that was the exemplar of this dynamic of racial uplift that was kind of playing out in this period?

Kira Thurman 06:21

Right. What helps to think about and what helped me to think about it was realizing how much the Austro-German canon, so to speak, dominated American music in the 19th century, broadly, that by the late 19th century, you get that joke that there are two types of music, German music and bad music. And that's a joke made by an American journalist. So for the United States, anyway, the epitome of excellent taste, the epitome of good cultured breeding, so to speak, was German music in particular, more so than perhaps Italian opera or something French, it was considered, "the most universal", the best music, so in some ways, in terms of in broad strokes, we see African Americans also in the 19th century, eager to take on this music that's considered the most universal, that's considered somehow the best music. And so we see them taking it on in both regards, because it was just simply understood that way, but then also, we see it getting tied to the cause of, again, racial uplift, and the idea that this is

how they could advance themselves in society. Nowadays, we think of it as a certain kind of respectability politics. And that has in a lot of ways been, I don't want to say entirely dismissed, but there was, understandably, I think, some criticisms of respectability politics, and how it was class based -- how it's geared towards a sort of middle-class, upper-class bourgeois line of thinking. But at the same time, I would also say that, it's still important to remember that African Americans are trying to find any kind of solution really to illustrate and try to demonstrate their humanity. And so if classical music was a vehicle for doing that, then so be it, at the time. I would also say, though, that I want to also leave space for aesthetic pleasure, that African Americans encountered this music in variety of guises, as did everybody, and fell in love with it, and learning how to perform it, learning how to play it, was also a way of insisting on their right to aesthetic pleasure.

Will Robin 08:40

Right. So you mentioned the archives you visited of the HBCUs. What were the kinds of things you saw that showed that connection between how these music programs were being set up and how this music was being valued and taught, that leads to this flourishing, and this desire of these musicians to then go to Germany as well?

Kira Thurman 09:01

Yeah, that's a great question. So in the archive I encountered a couple of things that help us think about what musicologists would denounce as the Austro-German musical tradition or something like that. So firstly, in their course catalogs, at different institutions, it was overwhelmingly German, the music that they were encouraging, if not demanding students to learn. And that could take the form of everything from certainly piano musical instruction, which says you have to learn a Beethoven sonata, to also your music theory textbooks that were assigned and what kinds of homework assignments you had to do, which was to learn part writing -- you have to part-write a Bach Chorale. So it really manifested in daily instruction in that way. But then the other way that it manifested, I think that you are alluding to which is also helpful, is it manifested discursively -- meaning that in student newspapers, I found columns and writings from music students, encouraging people to listen to classical music, encouraging them to play it and saying that this is what can make you, especially in the 19th century, a sort of morally upstanding human being.

Will Robin 10:22

Who were some of the most important figures for you to discuss, or a couple of representative examples who were doing this in this period.

Kira Thurman 10:31

So in terms of student newspapers and writings, Raymond Augustus Lawson was a pianist who eventually studied a lot in Europe, in Germany, and in Vienna as well. So I found lots of his writings at Fisk university about the values of classical music and the values of a classical music education. And then, but there are also figures like W. E. B. DuBois, a legendary African American intellectual and historian, and sociologist, I should say, founder of the NAACP, who writes about really just being overcome by the Fisk Mozart society, it was called, and, you know, one of their performances, and it just was so moving to him, and it made him realize there's a certain kind of shared humanity, I think, is how he saw it, across musical lines, so to speak.

Will Robin 11:24

Fisk is obviously the most prominent example, or the one that is most known musically, because of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. And the fact that your book is talking about the Mozart society points towards this crucial through line, that's this counterintuitive idea that classical music rather than popular music is important for understanding African American life in this period. Can you talk about how you came to that conclusion or that that argument more broadly?

Kira Thurman 11:59

Sure. I mean, maybe I would scale it back to say, I don't want to say that classical music is more important,

Will Robin 12:06

not more important, says something different, perhaps. I'll let you...

Kira Thurman 12:11

Right. I think, at least for me, as a Black classical musician, and pianist, I always found it really interesting, and sometimes, I should also say, frustrating that our conversations on Black people in classical music were so narrow, that it felt like the only way we could talk about Black contributions to music was through popular music. And that there was no way to talk about a history of Black people in classical music that was recognizing their own agency and recognizing what it meant for them, and why they might be pursuing it. So that's in some ways the impetus, I guess, I would say behind how I was thinking about... or why I wanted to look at African Americans and classical music in the 19th century.

Will Robin 13:07

Maybe it would be also helpful if we back up a little bit and talk about your trajectory as a scholar and musician that led you to a project like this. Can you talk a little bit about how you came to write a book like this?

Kira Thurman 13:17

Sure, yes. So I am, funnily enough, I am a German historian by training. And my friends jokingly call me an honorary musicologist. I think, like the label that I get,

Will Robin 13:32

I would just call you a musicologist, as well, but...

Kira Thurman 13:36

Right. Well, thank you for that. And I think, yes, I can... I've started calling myself an actual musicologist lately, not just an honorary one. And so my background is in piano performance and in music history. That's what my undergraduate degree is in. And then I switched to history for my PhD, but I always knew that I wanted to keep a foot in the music world. So I found I mean, really the most amazing, wonderful advisor, I won the jackpot, I won the lottery so many times over, I didn't even realize that, in Celia Applegate, is her name, who is a German historian, but she's written a lot on music. And so that really allowed me to have a model for somebody who was recognized as a historian,

but was also recognized by musicologists for doing important work. So I got really lucky, she wanted to have me study with her. So I did at the University of Rochester, and I got my PhD in history there with her while also taking classes at the Eastman School of Music, which was also really nice that that was allowed, I guess, I should say. And so at some point in my graduate career, I had wanted to bring together music and German national identity in the way that my advisor had done. But I also became really invested in thinking about the history of ... I think, over time, I became invested in uncovering or dismantling two different mythologies at work. And both of them, interestingly enough, are mythologies of whiteness and colorblindness. So one of them was a mythology that there were no Black people in classical music. And also the problem of classical music is meritocratic, it is colorblind, all of that language. So I realized I was really interested in dismantling that. But then I also realized I was really committed to uncovering a long history of Black people in German history. So the way that I put it is I wear two different hats, one of them is thinking about race and classical music, and what that relationship has looked like over time, but then I'm also wearing this other hat as a historian where I'm thinking a lot about Germany's historical relationship to the Black diaspora, in part because I grew up overseas in German speaking Europe. And I also wanted to dismantle this mythology that it's impossible to be Black and German. And so just trying to do more work recognizing a history of Blackness in German speaking Europe became really important to me,

Will Robin 16:21

I actually don't quite -- I know you are from Europe vaguely speaking -- so what is your biographical relationship to German speaking places?

Kira Thurman 16:32

Sure! So I grew up in Vienna, Austria, I lived there till I was 15. And then my parents moved to the States. But it's complicated. I still have family there. I have nieces and little tiny children running around, who are Afro-German, who speak German as their first language and kind of broken English, although their English at this point is certainly better than most eight year olds or seven year olds out there. So yeah, I have family on both continents, and I've always to a certain extent have had family on both continents. I have a British passport for my mother. It's just really complicated. A multitude of nationalities and diasporic experiences that comprise my entire family, I guess I would say.

Will Robin 17:16

So it sounds like these two kind of main myths that you want to bust are personal as well as scholarly.

Kira Thurman 17:27

Oh, yeah. I used to think ... I used to feel really insecure to a certain extent, in grad school. The problem, or the label that a lot of people of color get in academia is, it's either two different things that either (1) you're doing me-search, it's called, you're just researching things that are related to you or something. And I felt that insecurity -- or, if you're doing something that's not related to you, then -- What on earth are you doing there? So either way, these ways of thinking are kind of weaponized against people of color in particular in academia and Black people specifically. And so I had this insecurity for a long time that I was just doing me-search and that it wasn't considered somehow legitimate to study. But then at some point, I realized, well, wait a minute, I'm one of the only people who can see these things. I'm one of the only people who was able to recognize these two dynamics at

work, which I think has surprised a lot of people, the dynamics at work, I should say, have surprised a lot of people but it was never surprising to me. So I think that's what made this project so exciting for me to write. But then also, I think it's had longevity with other people, because they're probably being forced to encounter certain kinds of conversations and discourses that they hadn't really considered before, but that were just part of my daily life and daily upbringing for so long. Like, again, the problem of ... the paradox that you can't be Black and German, which is a lot of what my book is trying to destroy, I guess you could say, by looking at Black performances of Germanness, and also showing the long history of actual Black people on German soil. So that is something that I was committed to destroying, as well as, getting back to maybe one of your earlier questions, that I was also interested in trying to show what it means... how the politics of race and Blackness have functioned in the world of classical music, which has deliberately obfuscated these politics at work because of its myth of colorblindness and universality.

Will Robin 19:48

Yeah. I want to come back to that kind of double edged-ness of universality. And we haven't actually gotten to talk yet about Black musicians in Germany. But my question that will pivot us there is returning to talking about the first chunk of the book. It was very fascinating for me to read about these German music teachers in the US who are helping their Black students see Europe as a destiny for them in terms of training and in terms of their careers. Can you talk a little bit about what that dynamic was of these young Black musicians studying with German music teachers, and then realizing -- I should go to Europe.

Kira Thurman 20:27

right. So that was something that also... I mean, funnily enough, that only came at the end of my project, was realizing that the one thing I could... I could pretty much count on the one thing that many of these musicians had in common was that they had either a German teacher or some sort of international music teacher that was committed to, the Austro-German canon blah, blah, blah. And so there are a couple of -- and it changes, I should say, by decade, what their reasons are for doing it, how do we think about it. So it's no surprise to me that a lot of the German teachers who took on Black students during Jim Crow, during segregation, many of them were German Jewish musicians themselves, who had emigrated over to the United States in the 19th century or 20th century. And again, it comes in different waves or different moments. So as I think I have in the book, Scott Joplin's teacher was a German Jewish composer and pianist and musician who Scott Joplin was really close to, and they had it seems like a really loving relationship where Scott Joplin supported him, his teacher, the last 10 years of that teacher's life, so through his retirement and death. So that's sort of a moment where we see these kinds of connections. Also, of course, with the rise of the Nazis and musicians fleeing Europe, you have German Jewish teachers ending up at HBCUs, in general, and also teaching students that way. And I think this is another thing I have in my book is that some of them had seen musicians like Marian Anderson perform in the 1930s. And then when they fled to the United States, they were really committed to teaching Black students in part based on that experience of seeing Marian Anderson. And also I should say, based on their own experiences of being persecuted as a racial minority in Germany. So there was a certain solidarity, I guess you could say, that I suspect it made it easier for certainly German Jewish teachers to work with African Americans. And that for the rest, I guess, in general, there still also a sense of, yes, this is the new country that I live in, but I am not

necessarily as beholden to the racial politics of it, as other people are. And that perhaps allowed them to see things differently, and to take on students at a time when white Americans certainly would not.

Will Robin 23:05

Right, wow, it's fascinating. So let's talk about some of the first couple of waves of Black musicians in Germany, African American musicians in Germany that you look at, late 19th century, early 20th century, do you have a couple of representative examples of this dynamic playing out?

Kira Thurman 23:24

Yeah, I do. So examples that I find really fascinating still, are... I think the number one example I would probably point to for an earlier moment would be Hazel Harrison, in 1904. She's African American, and a pianist. She performed with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1904, which is wild to me. And as far as I know, I don't know if we've had a Black woman perform an instrumental concerto or work with the Berlin Philharmonic since, I don't think so. I don't know. I mean, there's Andre Watts, who's performed with the Berlin Phil, and who I think oftentimes was heralded as the first Black instrumentalist to perform with the Berlin Phil. But actually, it's Hazel Harrison, at least as far as I can ascertain, in 1904. So I think this is a really fascinating example of so many of the things that you just brought up, Will, meaning that she is from Laporte, Indiana, which is outside of Chicago, and is a really talented student who manages to attract, I suppose, a very prominent teacher in the area named Victor Heinze, who was German. And so he takes her on, she starts studying with him really seriously. And through him, he says, you need to go to Germany, and I'm going to give you the connections to get you there. And he does. That's how she ends up working with Egon Petri, for example, and a couple of other figures, in particular in Berlin, so she's in Berlin for off and on a decade or so performing and concertizing and studying. And so there's a way that she and her story doesn't fit, I think, what we're expecting from histories of classical music or histories of music in Germany, but it's this really fascinating moment of, I guess, cultural exchange and possibility. At the same time, though, I guess I would also say it is it is clouded by racial animus at the same time.

Will Robin 25:31

Yeah, like, what? So how is the German press, kind of interpreting her as a musician and as a racist person?

Kira Thurman 25:40

Right? I mean, this is what's terrible about it right? Here, right is this landmark performance of a Black woman with the Berlin Philharmonic in 1904. And the thing I found so fascinating, when I first started looking for reviews of her was how you I could find, and how quickly this moment got erased from German memory, or how little they were interested in documenting it or celebrating it or recognizing it at all. So that was one thing that I came to realize slowly over time, was happening, as I kept looking for reviews, or looking for mentions of her in German archives, newspaper archives, but also personal archives and accounts. So that's one thing I should say, is there's a there's a pretty quick, immediate erasure of her in the German consciousness, I guess you could say. But then on top of that, the reviews that did exist that mentioned her, focused explicitly on her race and gender, in terms of gender is the idea that, how could she take on a piano concerto that is a little bit too rigorous for a little lady to do. So that sort of is interesting gendered language that way, does she really have the stamina to take

on this kind of a musical work. But then the racial dimensions manifested in two different ways, which I found really fascinating. One of them is biological, one of them is cultural. So for biological racism, I'm trying to figure out what... I'll start with cultural racism. They're both terrible. It's just turtles all the way down. But nonetheless, so for cultural racism, it was the idea of that... So she performed a Chopin Piano Concerto. And the idea for this one reviewer was okay, well, Chopin's music is melancholic, and African Americans are a melancholy people. So it makes sense that she can perform the music of either the melancholy, the melancholic music of Chopin, because African Americans themselves are melancholy people. So that's what I mean by thinking about cultural racism. But her performance is never attributed to her own talents and brilliance and intellect, it has to be explained by something. So that's one way in which they were trying to explain away her talent and her gifts. But then the other way is more biological racism in which a reviewer noted or observed that he thought she looked biracial or mixed race. And so like, literally no joke, the line that I found was, "is it the white blood in her veins that is doing the work for she is not a full-blooded Negress." So in other words, there have to be some kind of explanation, the idea that Black people could be excellent. Just full stop, was not something that could be accepted, it had to be understood or explained away. So either it's because African Americans are somehow considered melancholy. Or if because she has "white blood in her veins," that is doing the work for her that makes her able to perform Chopin.

Will Robin 29:02

Wow. There are examples in this period, though, of Black musicians who are heralded in some way as like, "transcending their race," right? Can you talk about who are the musicians who the German press fell in love with in this period prior to Marian Anderson, we can get into that later.

Kira Thurman 29:24

I was going to use Marian Anderson as an example. I would say Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson are perhaps the biggest examples, the most iconic examples of Germans kind of losing their minds over these musicians and really gagging, so to speak, over the quality of their musicianship and that this absolutely is what's going to pose a stumbling block to so many listeners in German speaking Europe in the 19th and 20th centuries. It's this fundamental problem as far as they see it, that what they are looking at does not match what they are hearing. That's how they think about it. But if they close their eyes, this is the shocking bit, if they close their eyes and just listen with their ears, they couldn't tell that the musician before them wasn't German. And that is the unsettling truth that they have to wrestle with, that they then find different reasons for trying to accept or denounce in a variety of guises. And I think that in particular is one of the main argumentative thrusts of my work, is the mental gymnastics audiences are willing to do to try to figure out how to make sense of something that they think of does not sonically make sense.

Will Robin 31:01

So before we jump into the Nazi period, where obviously everything becomes extremely intensified in this regard: the musicians who are visiting are in some ways experiencing this a little bit differently: some of the musicians you talk about are really seeing Germany as this extraordinary safe haven compared to the racial segregation that they're witnessing and facing in the United States. So what does Germany represent for the visiting Black classical musician in 1905, or whatever?

Kira Thurman 31:34

That's a great question. Yeah. Which is that Germany represented a certain kind of land of freedom. And that Europe, in general represented a land of freedom to a lot of African Americans in the 19th and 20th centuries. And to be honest, it still sometimes plays that role as well. Certainly in the era of Jim Crow, and the deeply, deeply hostile racist institutions that for a lot of African Americans, like W E B Dubois, or Mary Church Terrell, or others stepping foot in Germany was wild. All of a sudden, it was like the rules of social behavior that they had known for so long had evaporated. So they could stay in any hotel they wanted, they could drink from any drinking fountain they wanted, there was no longer this exhausting fear of living in this dualistic society with two sets of rules that are weaponized against Black people and people of color. So it was extremely liberating for them. And I never want to take that away from them, that it was a liberating experience. I think the thing that's really complicated, I guess I would say, is that even though in a lot of ways it was so liberating and necessary for them to go and to experience that, that doesn't mean that we can't hold Europe to account for anti-Black racism at the same time. Both of those things can be true at the same time. And that's me wearing my hat as a European historian saying that.

Will Robin 33:09

You talk about how these musicians and intellectuals were often visitors and thus not really seeing the dynamics on the ground of folks who were living there. You have this amazing example of Du Bois, at Bayreuth, the Wagner Festival in 1936. And he's complaining... presumably, he's surrounded by Nazis. He's complaining about an American who seems chauvinistic, and racist...

Kira Thurman 33:36

Yes, and boorish to him. Yeah.

Will Robin 33:39

So obviously there's some kind of putting on blinders happening in that kind of situation as well.

Kira Thurman 33:48

Oh, absolutely. And I'm not, I should say, the only person who has been saying that, that there are a bunch of other German historians, European historians in general who have been pointing out lately... and this is an uncomfortable conversation that I think could happen more, that needs to happen more and better in Black Studies, in African-American Studies, that the ways that African Americans were willing to ignore other forms of anti-Black racism for the sake of maintaining their narrative that Europe was better than the United States. And by that, I mean that there is ... that there's a way that they're not willing or able, or however we want to put it, they're not always wanting to acknowledge a certain kind of privilege that comes from their own nationality. And that because of their nationality, they're being treated differently than an African student or an Afro-German student at the same time period. So there's a way that their nationality is protecting them from perhaps some of the harshest elements of anti-Black racism in a way that they're not necessarily willing to recognize, or able to fully think about or see.

Will Robin 35:05

Can you talk a little ... you mentioned Roland Hayes a little while ago. And in the book, you talk about the intensification of Anti-Black racism during the Nazi period, kind of being emblemized by the difference in how Hayes was received, performing as a vocalist in 1924, versus how Aubrey Pankey was received in 1932. Can you talk a little bit about what happened in those two performances? And what Germans thought of them, and did, that emblemizes this kind of difference?

Kira Thurman 35:34

Oh, that's really interesting. That's an interesting point of comparison. So I guess I would say, what we're seeing with the rise of the Nazis is a growing intolerance to the presence of any Black people in German speaking Europe, and it no longer matters under which guise. So in other words, I think the way that we used to think about it was that the Nazis were against jazz, in particular Black jazz musicians, which was certainly true. But really, the thing I found interesting that took a while for me to think about and wrestle with and uncover was that, over time, the right and the far right in German speaking Europe also came to think of Black classical musicians as an abomination as well, and for different reasons, for entirely different reasons. It was one thing for African Americans to perform jazz, which they could think of as primitive and inferior, but it was another thing and perhaps a bigger threat for them to perform the music of Beethoven and Mozart, and the like -- that this was a kind of... something like bastardization, that could not be tolerated. It was a form of sonic and racial miscegenation that they were wanting to stamp out. So that's how come when Roland Hayes performs in 1924, there's grumblings about it, certainly, and the like, although he eventually wins the audience over with his singing of Schubert. But almost a decade later, in 1932 with Aubrey Pankey, that's just no longer the case. Now they're just flat out rioting. Now they're just flat out trying to shut down the concert, and protesting any kind of Black performance, including of classical music. Which is also I should say, what happens to Marian Anderson by the late 1930s in Austria. Most Black musicians are out in Germany after Hitler comes to power in 1933. There are instead still trying to concertize in Austria and elsewhere. And her concerts are being threatened constantly with stink bombs and death threats, and the like. Because the message of her singing Beethoven is to their minds equally as harmful and deadly or threatening as a musician performing jazz.

Will Robin 37:54

Your writing on Anderson, and you have a wonderful New Yorker article on her as well -- we are so used to talking about Anderson in the US and performing in DC -- or not performing, and then performing in DC. How do you see the German reception of Anderson versus the American reception of Anderson, how do you compare the racial animus in this same period in these two countries?

Kira Thurman 38:21

That's a really great question, I think the thing I find so fascinating, and also really lovely is there's a way that people rallied around Marian Anderson in Europe in a way that she didn't get in the United States, which is part of the reason why she left the United States in 1930 to go to Europe in the first place. It wasn't that her voice wasn't well trained, because it was, which she said. And it had nothing to do with vocal technique. It had nothing to do with any of that. It was that she had reached the limit of what she could do with American institutions that had barred her from having access. So she went to Europe in part to of course, learn German Lieder, which was something that she really committed herself to, as well as Scandinavian music and things like that. But I think what transformed Marian

Anderson's career in Europe was the people who chose to rally around her at this moment of increasing hostility and the rise of the right and the rise of the far right in Europe. And I should say, these are some powerful, powerful backers. These are not only well-established sopranos who had sung, you know, premiered music with Gustav Mahler, for example. And people of course, like the most famous examples we know now like Toscanini, Arturo Toscanini and others. So it's a mix of different folks -- it could be anything from an Austrian Bishop, who is showing up in full bishop regalia, with like a ginormous hat on, to a concert, to demonstrate his support, to behind the scenes, women patrons organizing a tea concert, but really everybody who's everybody is at that tea concert. So there's a way that they're using their power and privilege and social networks to really launch Marian Anderson's career in a way that I found really fascinating. And again, quite lovely.

Will Robin 40:25

Do you see that as something in spite of her Blackness? Is the is the support because her voice is this universally great "thing"? Or do you see them supporting her as a Black woman performing this music?

Kira Thurman 40:42

That's a really good question. I know I keep saying that. But I do mean it!

Will Robin 40:51

I mean, I'll just say before ... I read this book when it came out, and I reread it in the last couple weeks. And it just raises so many interesting... it's just been churning in my brain. And as I said, I've been talking to two-year-olds, mostly, so I'm excited to talk about this.

Kira Thurman 41:07

Anything to help you talk about things beyond just like, I don't know, crackers and apple juice, to get back to the question of are they supporting Marian Anderson because of her race, or in spite of it, I would say it's a couple of different things, if there's a way we can probably get out of that binary. So for example, I would say in terms of because of her race, so to speak, that there is in Europe an awareness of a growing civil rights movement. And that this is before the era of Martin Luther King, Jr. In the 50s, and 60s, and Selma, and the like, so the Scottsboro Boys are perhaps the best example of that in the 1930s. And that the mother of the Scottsboro Boys traveled around Europe raising funds and raising awareness for the sort of racial and social injustices that her son faced in the United States. So really, there's a growing moral indictment among Europeans, certainly by the 1920s, if not earlier, that the United States is an unjust place, that it is a place of racial injustice, and that they want to lend their cause to supporting African Americans, I'm not the first person to say this, there's a long historiography of this. And it manifests in all kinds of different ways. So I think for some of them, this is a way to demonstrate something like their moral cause, I suppose. But then on the other hand, I would also say that at the same time, Marian Anderson as the particular figure lends herself really well to supporting. And I actually have an article about this coming out, hopefully soon, that there's a way that Marian Anderson's portrayal of Black womanhood is easier to understand, or for people to swallow than Josephine Baker. It's easy to rally around somebody like Marian Anderson, who presents herself as a pious Christian, as a practicing Protestant woman who is demure and quiet.

Kira Thurman 43:34

It's the respectability thing.

Kira Thurman 43:37

It is, and so it's easy to rally around her. And it makes it possible to support somebody like her because she's singing beautifully and behind the scenes she's not necessarily a Diva, causing a big stink, or anything like that, as well. So it's this combination of things that make it really easy to support her. And it's a morally easy choice, I guess you could say.

Will Robin 44:12

That's fascinating. So you talked earlier about the kind of two myths, or the dynamics that you see yourself playing into with this book, which are both for perhaps an American musicological audience and a German Studies audience and a bunch of other ... I'm wondering... it's very clear to me what the takeaways might be for the German Studies reader. And I think also, and I hope that this book is being read in American classical music, people interested in diversity and inclusion circles, but I imagine it's ... so there are not simple lessons, I think, to take away from it. And so I'm like wondering about what you want this book to say to American audiences versus German audiences, who do you see as the different types of readers for your book?

Kira Thurman 45:04

I will say that the reception of my book... for somebody who studies reception history, I really didn't see this coming. I didn't realize ... I hoped that it would have an impact. But I didn't realize it was going to have actually that big of an impact across so many different circles and communities. It's great. I think the thing that is interesting, what is interesting to me, you're right, I don't like simple tiny lessons. I don't think that's necessarily the work of the historian anyway, is to present messy, complicated things and contextualize them. And to say, well, you tell me what you think. I think that's oftentimes the work that historians like to do. Nonetheless, I guess I would say -- What would I say? This is a good question. I think one of the things that my work does, which is similar to this new wave of scholarship -- Jennifer Lynn Stover, Nina Eidsheim, and others -- is pointing out the politics of racial listening, that we cannot assume we listen with a neutral or objective ear. And this work comes out of American Studies, it comes out of sound studies, and the like, and so I think I really did become stubborn about that, over time, and that I was so grateful when Jennifer's book came out -- *The Sonic Color Line* -- in 2016, I want to say, and I defended my dissertation in 2013. And it came out after my dissertation was complete. And when I read it, I was like, this is what I had been looking for. This is what I had been talking about this whole time, but without knowing it, without realizing it. So I think in those ways across the board, I think for American audiences, it's been perhaps a necessary conversation about the politics of racial listening. And that it's not enough to simply add a Black clarinetist to an orchestra or a Black opera singer to a stage without being aware of how that musician is going to be perceived, I think, and being willing to think through that and think through the politics of that. And then certainly from the German perspective, that my work is equally as committed to supporting and amplifying a certain kind of Black activism in Germany right now that's trying to get white Germans to recognize Black Germans and to recognize a long history of Black people in Germany. And that in a weird way is what my book was also trying to do, which was to take a sort of musicological approach to the question of, can you be Black and German, by instead asking the question, what has it meant to be Black and perform German music? What has it meant to be Black and perform Germanness? That and how are white Germans

encountering that? And then what are the ways that they are either trying to ignore it, dismiss it, erase it... Are they able to occasionally recognize this possibility of being Black and German or being Black and performing German music, which is why I chose the title that I did, Singing like Germans, was because I was trying to, I think, be a little bit provocative. And getting people to think about how Black people can exist outside of America, or just getting them to think about this question, or just getting them to think about the reality and this history of Black people performing expertly German music, German identities, German linguistic fluency in all of these different ways.

Will Robin 48:56

So we're talking in February 2023. This DeSantis AP Black History thing ... AP African American Studies thing is playing itself out right now in pretty disgusting ways. You teach at a public university, and I also teach at public university. I'm sure we have thoughts about that as people who teach in public universities, but I'm wondering if you have thoughts about what's going on in the US right now, vis-a-vis the fact that you were talking about colorblindness as an important discourse in your work, and that's something that... you can't talk about colorblindness being bad in DeSantis's special rules for Florida. Do you see things you've learned in your work relating to what we're dealing with in the US right now?

Kira Thurman 49:45

Certainly, yes. And I would also say -- again, this is me insisting on being a Germanist, but I also see it having long standing repercussions in conversations that Germans are having right now as well about doing -- I think in a good way, even though it feels like it's just so painfully slow. In a good way, there are more conversations lately about recognizing people of color in Germany, Germans of color, people who can be Turkish-German, Black-German, Asian-German, this should not be a conversation anymore in 2023. And so I think on both fronts it's the insistence of mine, to allow, in particular Black people, Black diasporic people, whether they're Black-German, or Black-American, the freedom and ability to do whatever they want. And that is really a concern of mine. And how can they pursue what they want in a society that has so many strict rigid cultural rules all the time, that follow along a certain kind of racial fault line? So that's still is I think my commitment is to a certain kind of Black liberation in that way. I mean, the funny thing is, I can also see how to some, in some context, it might sound like what I'm saying is somehow regressive, or conservative, on the other hand, which is a different conversation, I think, altogether. And I'm not either not proposing or supporting either of those positions. I think the thing that still is a point of tension, is a question of how, for Black classical musicians in general, can you be a Black classical musician and committed to Black politics? And that's still something that I think, is a point of tension and conversation.

Will Robin 51:51

So how would you answer that question?

Kira Thurman 51:54

I'm hoping for that to be my next book project!

Will Robin 51:57

Tell me!

Kira Thurman 52:01

I wrote an essay about it ages ago in 2018 for Point magazine.

Will Robin 52:07

Yeah, I love that essay, I assign it a lot.

Kira Thurman 52:10

Oh, thanks. And I think in that essay, I was trying to struggle with this question of like, how do we get better at talking about Black classical musicians in a way that goes beyond respectability politics? How do we get better at talking about them and recognizing their agency? I think that's something that I still want to do. This is the historian's approach. I don't know if I necessarily have an answer to the thing that I am proposing. But more what I really want to do is think about how other people have answered that question. So in other words, I would love to trace the history of Black intellectual engagements with classical music and that question of like, is this music for us? And what if it isn't, or how do people respond when they say it is? And on what terms and on what grounds?

Will Robin 53:02

Well, I want to read that book. [both laugh] I hope you write it. Thank you so much for speaking with me. This was really wonderful.

Kira Thurman 53:11

Thanks, Will - this was really lovely. Thank you so much.

53:14

[Music]

Will Robin 53:20

Many thanks to Kira Thurman, Associate Professor at the University of Michigan, for that deep conversation. You can read more of her work at soundexpertise.org. As always, thank you to D. Edward Davis for his production work, you can check out his music on SoundCloud at [warmsilence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warmsilence). I'm grateful to Andrew Dell'Antonio for transcribing all our episodes to make them more accessible. And this episode of Sound Expertise was recorded at the National Foreign Language Center with support from the University of Maryland's School of Music. Next week on the show, the Soviet Union tries to put a synthesizer in everyone's home.

Unidentified Speaker 53:55

The question then becomes, well, how do we prove that we are the country that was worthy of producing Sputnik, worthy of sending Gagarin into orbit, in more realms of ordinary, everyday life? And so in music, it was synthesized music that really came to emblemize the space age in the Soviet Union.

Will Robin 54:18

See you then!

