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The Mask of the African Mahler: Embracing the Black Past of American Classical Music

Colin Holman PhD

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“The Mask of the African Mahler: Embracing the Black Past of American Classical Music”

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BIOGRAPHY: Dr. Colin Holman maintains an active professional career in Chicago where he divides his energies between conducting and musicology.

Dr. Holman's extensive conducting credits include work in opera and musical theatre, with orchestras and concert bands, and in early music. His conducting has taken him to twenty of the United States, to Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Germany, Holland, Belgium, and New Zealand. Since moving to Chicago, he has conducted many of the orchestras in the area, including a tenure with the Fox Valley Symphony Orchestra and guest appointments with the Wheaton College Symphony Orchestra, the Elgin Symphony Orchestra, the Harper Symphony Orchestra, the West Suburban Symphony Orchestra, and the Chicago Virtuosi.

Dr. Holman has lectured at both the undergraduate and graduate level at Northwestern University, Northern Illinois University, Wheaton College, and North Park University. He has published diverse materials on early eighteenth-century American keyboard music, sixteenth-century English choral music, Martin Luther, and the American brass band. He is currently writing a book on the history of the cantata.

Dr. Holman began his tenure as Symphony Orchestra Director at Loyola University in the Fall of 2007.



We begin this presentation story in the south London suburb of Croydon, the place where my parents met, the home of dubstep, a genre of electronic dance music and also the home of modern rap artists such as Stormzy (b. 1990) and Nadia Rose (b. 1990), both winners of MOBO awards--Music of Black Origin--which honor the achievements in hip hop, grime, R&B, soul, reggae, jazz, gospel, and African music. In fact, Croydon has a long history of producing significant figures in history, including three that have recently been memorialized through murals on the wall of platform six at a local railway station: Amy Johnson, who in 1930 flew from Croydon airport to become the first woman to fly solo from England to Australia, civil engineer William Jessop who designed the Surrey Iron Railway that linked together the south London suburbs of Wandsworth to Croydon and the main subject of my presentation today,

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor who, as an Afro-British composer, was at the forefront of composers and music teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and inspired a generation or more of black American composers beyond the Harlem Renaissance.

Born in London in 1875; Samuel was the illegitimate child of Dr. Daniel Hugh Taylor, a native of Sierra Leone, and Alice Hare Martin, an Englishwoman and medical student at Kings College Hospital where they presumably met. Daniel Taylor returned to Africa, not knowing Alice was pregnant. There is confusion, perhaps deliberate, about Coleridge-Taylor's upbringing, but recent genealogy studies tell us that a couple by the name of Sarah and Benjamin Holman provided financial support for the single mother and son.¹ Benjamin Holman gave Samuel his first violin, along with his first violin lessons and the family moved to Croydon.

Samuel was surrounded by a contrasting atmosphere of Victorian gentility amid racial pressure of which he spoke publicly later in life with immense dignity and grace. He sang in local church choirs, studied the violin, and won an open scholarship to the Royal College of Music to study with Charles Villiers Stanford--an incredible achievement for someone who had both admirers and racial critics. Samuel's music was published by Novello (one of the most respectable music companies of the last two hundred years), he twice won the Royal College of Music composition prize, became close friends with England's leading composers of his day who included Holst, Vaughan Williams and Elgar, and was socially accepted through his artistic identity and integrity. His relationship with Elgar led to his first commission from the Three Choirs Festival, a nearly 200 year-long running festival supported by the Cathedral cities of Hereford, Worcester and Gloucester. Coleridge-Taylor wrote a short orchestral work for this commission, the [Ballade in A minor](#) which is English in character, yet not without a nod to Grieg and Dvorak. This contribution to symphonic music in addition to those in choral and chamber music, piano music and songs led to the writing of incidental music for a series of London plays, and his Hiawatha trilogy of cantatas which fully established his international reputation as a composer.

Shortly thereafter Samuel was appointed professor of composition at Trinity College of Music, London in 1903, and at the Guildhall School of Music in 1910; two of England's finest music schools. He also conducted throughout the UK; from amateur orchestras of provincial Britain to the renowned Halle Orchestra in Manchester. The biographical stature of Coleridge-Taylor is, therefore, unquestioned; a thoroughly professional series of accomplishments and all before he was thirty years old. This would be an extraordinary life story for anyone but especially for someone with a father from Sierra Leone in late Victorian and Edwardian England. Unlike the often-unbridled nationalism of his contemporaries reveling in the new English renaissance of music, Coleridge-Taylor focused much of his artistic effort in the realm of exoticism, in tandem with a number of his contemporaries such as Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Sadko*, Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila*, Verdi's *Aida* or Sullivan's *The Mikado*. Possibly this was a means of escapism from the rather jingoistic mood of the British at the time, as well as a mode of enquiry exploring his own personal background. Coleridge-Taylor set texts to music of many typical themes drawn from the historical, literary, romantic, light-hearted and dramatic, and especially the exotic, such as those of the United States, Africa, Haiti, Japan, and China. But Coleridge-Taylor went far further than his English contemporaries for certain, further than Elgar's *Crown of India* and further than the dabbling exotic examples of his teacher Villiers Stanford. He drew

¹ How could I not resist to share this since my wife's name is also Sarah Holman?!

upon poets including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (respected and read by Villiers Stanford and Elgar) for inspiration in his cantatas, ballet and choral ballads, and also Walt Whitman who was to probably exert the largest literary influence on 20th century British and American composers. Other poetic sources don't surprise us; the poet Samuel Taylor-Coleridge (after whom Coleridge-Taylor was named), Shakespeare, Browning, Rossetti, Wordsworth; Heinrich Heine, Hans Christian Anderson, and *especially* Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) who became one of the first influential Black poets in American literature.

Dunbar's meeting with Samuel at a summer garden party hosted by the writer and journalist Henry Francis Downing in London and the series of recitals they undertook were life-changing, through music of social change and through the collaborations of future artists that comprise the Harlem Renaissance.



As Zimbabwe poet and scholar Tsitis Jaji, describes it in her article *Art Song Poetics* “the collaboration offered a rich dialogic reflection on the pleasures and paradoxes of musical performance, production and consumption.” Jaji continues:

Their cross-cultural, trans-national exchanges as African-American and Afro-British thinkers at the end of the nineteenth century are recorded in imaginative, sometimes counterintuitive musical “hearings” of the text: the vernacular voice in Coleridge-Taylor’s musical settings of portions of the poem in “dialect” imagine “black sound” in ways that reference spirituals he had heard performed but his sonic archive is principally British rather than American, while shifts in key and meter emphasize structural elements of the poem.

There are many interesting parallels between Dunbar and Coleridge-Taylor; they were almost exact contemporaries, both with international reputations as black artists, both representing the artistic culture of turn-of-the-century Britain and the U.S; displaying mastery of technique in their fields, providing perspectives on their race, writing sympathetically, aspiringly and artistically at the forefront of their professions, and both living tragically short lives. I cannot help thinking about the contemporary nature of Dunbar’s poetry:

“We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes.
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see thus, while
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!"

On the surface, these words by Paul Laurence Dunbar from his *The Lyrics Of Lowly Life* seem, literally, so very timely. But underneath there is so much cultural tension in this poem; a mask that hides the suffering of its wearer while presenting a more joyful face to the world.

On the strength of his poetic acclaim, Dunbar with *The Lyrics of Lowly Life* commenced a six-month reading tour of England. There he found publishers for a British edition of this collection, and in 1897 in the same year he befriended musician Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. After meeting, they collaborated on a song collection, the op. 17 *Seven African Romances* (1897), light tuneful pieces but with very little actual "African" content, and an opera *Dream Lovers* op. 25, the story of a Moroccan prince and his friend finding true happiness with two sisters.

Two years later Coleridge-Taylor heard concerts in London given by the Fisk Jubilee Singers which left an indelible impression. Coleridge-Taylor enjoyed the full rights and privileges as an upper middle-class Englishman of musical genius and professional leadership in music, without having been regarded as a "slave descendant;" but racial challenges encountered by Samuel caused him to consider moving to the US where he was to be openly and warmly welcomed. Yet on the podium, his artistry brought only respect and openness. This was beautifully encapsulated and memorialized on his gravestone:

"He lives while music lives. Too young to die, His great simplicity, His happy courage in an alien world, His gentleness Made all that knew him love him."



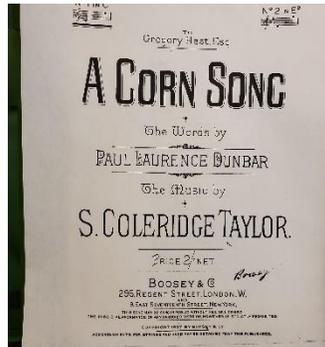
Coleridge-Taylor travelled three times to the US, 1904, 1906 and 1910 (as well as Canada in 1906) where he was honored by an invitation from the Coleridge-Taylor Choral Society of

Washington, DC, founded in 1901 by 200 black choral singers who sponsored his first U.S. visit, and he conducted them at a concert in Constitution Hall. Other choral societies taking Samuel's name consequently sprung up across the U.S. Coleridge-Taylor was received at the White House by President Theodore Roosevelt and conducted the Presidents Own Band; a remarkable honor to this day when civilians are still typically not permitted on the podium of this group. This trans-Atlantic relationship, therefore, brought together a successful black British composer of status with black American music lovers. Coleridge-Taylor's reputation today still largely rests on his cantatas; but his third visit to the U.S. and to the New York Philharmonic who were conducted by Gustav Mahler earned Coleridge-Taylor the label the "African Mahler" by the players of the Philharmonic. And as a return gift, Coleridge-Taylor composed [The Bamboula: Rhapsodic Dance, op. 75](#)

This accolade was not merely a reflection of his work in the fields of symphony and symphonic song, of course--because Coleridge-Taylor's output included only one symphony, a symphonic variations (of which Elgar's 1899 *Enigma Variations* had much more coverage) and some orchestral character pieces--but this title was a tremendous mark of respect. Mahler was considered the leading composer of symphonic music and symphonic song following Dvorak's death in Coleridge-Taylor's lifetime and in the western musical world, placing Coleridge-Taylor as it did not just equal to, but most certainly above other English symphonists such as Elgar, Parry and Vaughan Williams.

Longfellow's popular poem *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* from 1893 was set by Coleridge-Taylor as a cantata, and somewhat in contrasting style since much of the typical British choral repertoire of the time lent heavily on the oratorio tradition. The music is light, melodious and without complication. But it met the need for new choral music at a time when amateur choirs were popular and well-supported. Coleridge-Taylor composed two sequels: *The Death of Minnehaha* (October 1899) and *Hiawatha's Departure* (March 1900). This trilogy became his most popular pieces, works that I sang as a teenager in an attempt to rekindle both the music and tradition of annual performances, but music I confess that I could not fully appreciate, having not read Longfellow, having not been to the U.S. and not having any real life and deep experience in racial or cross-cultural issues. I think my "gaze" was likely just as provincial as many of those who both heard and sang those early performances. *Scenes from Hiawatha* was performed almost every year from 1899 to 1959 at the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts (arguably the world's most prestigious music festival), including two First Night performances during Coleridge-Taylor's life and one prestigious Last Night performance. And despite the flamboyant conductor Sir Malcolm Sargent's attempt to resurrect them during the 1930s with a series of *Hiawatha* ballets, they receive fewer performances today, I think, because of the gradual decline of the amateur choral society. But clearly these were personal works for Coleridge-Taylor. *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* received over 200 performances in the first six years and Coleridge-Taylor named his son *Hiawatha*, born in 1900. Coleridge-Taylor's sustained presence in the British concert scene included seven Proms performances of the *Ballade in A minor* during his lifetime and almost every year until 1930, as well as Proms performances of *Bamboula* almost every year until 1934. Many of his songs were also featured at the Proms, even with the occasional premiere tucked between operatic favorites or Friday evening English reminiscences that followed mighty Wagnerian tributes. These seem strange musical bedfellows. But the very popular *A Corn Song*, for example (still not professionally recorded) with words by Dunbar used

dialect speech in the refrain to elevate the humble dignity of the enslaved person. Rather than ridicule enslaved dialect speech, the refrain is the persistent reminder of beauty, and African cultural memory, and an authenticity of the enslaved human's spirit of which the listener is repeatedly reminded to listen.



From an entirely historical perspective, I think this all makes Coleridge-Taylor possibly the most important composer of color in Western music since Chevalier de St Georges (1745-1799). No other composer of this personal heritage had corresponding influence and respect, and no other composer had this position in society; a trans-Atlantic reputation, music published by one of the world's leading publishers, head of *two* national schools of music simultaneously--an amazing accomplishment when there weren't any black Americans in influential positions of music leadership at American Colleges and Universities until George Walker's contributions in the 1970s.

Prior to Coleridge-Taylor's arrival, one would imagine that the nineteenth century as a period of artistic individualism would have appealed to such American sensibilities. Aside from exceptions such as Anthony Philip Heinrich (1781-1861) or Charles Ives (1874-1954), it was not. American composers largely imitated their European counterparts, partly because there were no established music departments in higher education until the last quarter of the nineteenth century and also, I think, because of a surprising long-standing (largely unspoken, counter-cultural and personally observed) inferiority complex which seems to subtly exist in the broad American culture and sustained in modern times though the media. Bearing this, then, in mind, it might also seem that Coleridge-Taylor was, as a colleague of mine describes in operatic terms, a "Deus ex Machina" type of artist appearing on the American scene as part of the social uplift created by his influence. But America was not devoid of black American influence in classical music in the late nineteenth century. Here are brief biographies on three interesting and contrasting examples:

Francis Johnson, musician, composer, and bandmaster (1792-1844) in Philadelphia was the first black American band leader in the U.S. to have his music published (1817), the first African American bandleader to conduct public concerts and in 1837 he led the first American ensemble to perform before Queen Victoria in England. Johnson was also the first black musician to perform in integrated musical events in the United States, and the first musician to introduce keyed brass instruments to American bands. He composed over 200 pieces including marches and dance music.

Thomas Greene Wiggins (1849-1908) was a blind and autistic pianist and composer. His astonishing ability to memorize music at a single hearing were compared to Mozart's. At the age of 10, he became the first black American performer to play for President James Buchanan at the White House. Like Johnson, he also travelled to Europe to give recitals where his repertoire included music that required the highest musical and technical demands. His best-known composition was a programmatic work for piano [Battle of Manassus](#) (1863).

Joseph Henry Douglass (1871-1935) was a black American concert violinist and grandson of abolitionist Frederick Douglass (who also played the violin!). Douglass performed at the World's Columbian Exposition (Chicago World's Fair 1893) as a part of Colored American Day. He was also the first black American violinist to tour internationally (accompanied by his wife Fannie Howard Douglass) and was the first violinist anywhere to record for the Victor Talking Machine Company.

I have asked myself why these names, three composers who had international reputations and compared to other musical contemporaries on equal terms, are not regularly explored (actually, largely ignored) as part of the American music culture? I lament within the nearly 1000 pages of text in each of the three standard one-volume publications on American music that they are not mentioned once.

Contemporaneous to Coleridge-Taylor is an equally important music missionary for the black American community in this story; Harry Burleigh (1866-1949). Raised by his mother in Erie, Pennsylvania after his father's early death, Burleigh did not begin formal music study until he was 26 when he accepted a scholarship at the National Conservatory of Music in New York and also won the position of baritone soloist at St George's Episcopal Church without racial opposition. If Coleridge-Taylor was the violinist/composer, then Burleigh was the singer/composer, working closely with Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904) "the immigrant composer who predicted a different future" during Dvořák's tenure as director of the conservatory from September 1892 to April 1895, hired at the invitation of Jeanette Thurber (1850-1946) who championed racial integration, promoted women musicians, and had an inclusive stance toward the disabled. It was the bohemian composer Antonin Dvořák who believed that the future of American music was in using the material of African-American songs and Native-American legends.



Burleigh's success as performer, composer and arranger was in the "reimagined" black spirituals for the concert stage, not only mentoring but also providing music material for Marian Anderson (1897-1993) and one of my parent's favorites, Paul Robeson (1898-1976), among many others. In a continuing life story, Coleridge-Taylor and Burleigh met and toured together in the U.S. Burleigh was given the accolade as "the greatest singer of my songs" by Coleridge-Taylor and in 1908 and 1909 as a return engagement Burleigh visited London, singing for King Edward VII and other English nobility. Unlike the rather brief career of Coleridge-Taylor, Burleigh's was long and fruitful as composer and recitalist, earning honorary degrees from Atlanta and Howard University and establishing a common tradition among singers for using his spirituals as popular encore selections.

Just as importantly, it was Burleigh's influence on Dvořák's Symphony No. 9 "From the New World" as well as Coleridge-Taylor's influence on New York City musicians that extended into the flourishing of a Black American School of Symphonic Composers (my label) which bore fruit in the 1930s. William Grant Still's [Symphony No. 1 in A-flat major](#) (1930) was the first symphony written by a black American and performed by a leading orchestra, including as it did poetic quotations in the score by Paul Laurence Dunbar as epigraphs for each symphonic movement. This was followed by Florence Price's [Symphony No. 1 in E minor](#) (1931–32), winning first prize in the Rodman Wanamaker Competition (1932) and the first symphony composed and performed by an black American woman in the U.S. Shortly thereafter came William Dawson's [Negro Folk Symphony](#) (1934) conducted by Leopold Stokowski and performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra. Just as important, however, were the performances of Chicago pianist Margaret Bonds, a close friend of Florence Price, the first black musician to perform with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and to conclude the decade a landmark open-air recital given by [Marian Anderson in 1939 at the Lincoln Memorial](#).²

In the midst of this, racial and artistic forces join hands in George Gershwin's [Porgy and Bess](#) (1935), one of the most significant cross-over works of the twentieth century, and a work that some writers consider a climax in American music—but many others blame for further racial divisiveness and stereotypes on the stage. Then came the war, deepening racism, and unsustained support from philanthropists, each aspect contributing in its own way to place a dent, small or large, into the progress of symphonic music from black American composers.

I still don't think it is an exaggeration to say that these creative projects and works of art probably would not have occurred without the social and racial uplift created through the careers of Coleridge-Taylor and Burleigh. Harvey Cohen's review of Lawrence Schenbeck's study *Racial Uplift and American Music 1878–1943* poses the following thoughts:

The concept of African American "uplift" remains contentious. Did the fervent pursuit of high culture provide status elevation for African Americans recently released from bondage, or did it denote an accommodationist strategy doomed to bear no fruit? Was it a more European than African American–derived endeavor? Did it rend unhelpful class divisions between blacks? Did

² Just this week (February 2021), PBS have released an *American Experience* film documentary of her life; well worth checking out.

it lead to lasting art? The story is more nuanced than simple answers to such binary questions might reveal Uplift represented a strategy mostly advocated by middle- and upper-class blacks for racial advancement in response to decades of post-slavery racism and violence that often made life more dangerous for blacks than it was during slavery. Much like in the concurrent temperance movement, women and churches played a central role. Uplift advocates believed that encouraging African American artists to achieve mastery of European classical forms, then perceived as the pinnacle of serious musical art, would demonstrate to whites the equality of the two races, spread black pride, and inculcate proper behavior in African Americans. Seen through the historical prism of the intractability of white racism during the century after the Civil War, and the snarling refusal of whites to grant blacks equal facilities let alone equality itself, such magical thinking appears naïve at first glance to the post-civil rights generation. But, as Lawrence Schenbeck demonstrates repeatedly, declaring that certain African Americans exhibited first-rate talent when most of society considered them second-rate human beings was a brave stand on its own, even if most Americans remained blithely ignorant or even dismissive of African American musical achievements until Marion Anderson's nationally broadcast April 1939 Lincoln Memorial concert.

And Cohen concludes that

Jazz proved a more successful medium for the diffusion of African American motifs, pride, and history than classical music. One could argue that jazz icons such as Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington squashed the world of [black classical music] but we dismiss the history and achievements of the uplift crowd at our historical peril. Proponents of uplift fought for the civil rights and musical equality of their race in a manner often little different than did Ellington and provided him with some of the weapons and wedges that he commandeered more effectively.

This is a complex issue, far beyond the myopic scope of this short presentation. But to return to the initial opening premise, how do we more effectively “embrace” all this? My narrow Anglo-Saxon soap-box respectfully offers the following for discussion:

1. Teach, study and promote more American music in the fullest sense; why not even require studies in American music like we typically require American literature or American history? A contextual interdisciplinary course, for example, that combines such elements really excites me for its potential.
2. Celebrate our American music history and music traditions with honesty and balance while also understanding its place in this world.
3. Support, encourage, nurture, collaborate and celebrate with under-represented artists of all kinds but especially our musicians so that this country’s rich, vibrant and diverse culture in all its manifestations has a well-earned place.