

# PEOPLE OF COLOR WHO WRITE CLASSICAL MUSIC: RECOVERING “LOST” MUSIC BY BLACK COMPOSERS AS RESISTANCE AND REVOLUTION

By John Michael Cooper

Would anyone seriously assert that people of color don't write or consume concert music, or that, if they do so, they must be doing so inauthentically? Such a situation would certainly be consistent with the marginal position of music by Black composers in the programs of orchestras, opera companies, chamber ensembles, and soloists in concert life. Moreover, it would be consistent with the tokenizing of their contributions as presented in the many textbooks that lay the foundation for US students' knowledge of the world of concert music, as well as the courses that use those textbooks. The concert halls and classrooms alike give the undeniable impression that while Blacks are vitally important and great in repertoires outside the concert halls (such as blues, jazz, and spirituals), the concert halls themselves are, and have always been, the domains of Whites—most of them men, most of them European. This impression is only corroborated by the music-publishing industry, which offers precious little to challenge the notion that few Black composers have written concert music, and that what concert music they have produced has centered on repertoires that exist mainly outside of the concert hall.

But that impression is false. In fact, the annals of Western music history should include a star-studded litany of Black creative voices that have effectively been written out of them. To name but a few, this roster includes Joseph de Saint-Georges, Chevalier de Boulogne (1745–99; a composer worthy of comparison with Mozart); George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower (1778–1860); José Julián Jiménez (1823–80); Edmond Dédé (1827–1901); Louisa Melvin Delos Mars (ca. 1860–after 1926); Maurice Arnold Strothotte (1865–1937); Harry Burleigh (1866–1949); Scott Joplin (1867–1917); Will Marion Cook (1869–1944); Harry Lawrence Freeman (1869–1954); Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875–1912); Clarence Cameron White (1880–1960); Florence B. Price (1887–1953); Helen Eugenia Hagan (1891–1964); William Grant Still (1895–1978); Marian Anderson (1897–1993), William Levi Dawson (1899–1990); Undine Smith Moore (1904–89); Howard Swanson (1907–78); Irene Britton Smith (1970–99); Zenobia Powell Perry (1908–2004); Margaret Bonds (1913–72); George Walker (b. 1922); Julia Perry (1924–79); Leontyne Price (b. 1927); Valerie Capers (b. 1935); Mary Watkins (b. 1939); Dorothy Rudd More (b. 1940); and Regina Harris Baiocchi (b. 1956). Despite multifaceted careers as composers, teachers, and in some cases performers, most of these Black concert musicians figure only marginally on today's concert stages and in classrooms. Most are not even mentioned in the music-appreciation and music-history textbooks that crucially inform performers' and lay audiences' perspective on music's history.

Of course, many complex issues are in play here—not least of all the politics of canonicity with regard to race and sex, the influences of exoticism and colonialism in constructing cultural identities, and so on. Most pressing, however, is the question of whether Black composers and performers of concert music were essentially doing what Langston Hughes memorably dubbed “*climbing the racial mountain*”—roughly, cultivating “White” music, and in so doing either speaking inauthentically or failing to meet an ethical and moral imperative to give artistic voice to a Black experience that had been brutally repressed for centuries.<sup>1</sup> Yet Hughes's essay, written and published in 1926, was intended not least as a defense of jazz and blues, a rebuttal of widely held perceptions of those characteristically Black musical genres as decadent and artistically insubstantial. The view articulated by Joel A. Rogers in an essay first published a year before Hughes's essay and reprinted in Alain Locke's anthology *The New Negro* is typical:

*For the Negro himself, jazz is both more and less dangerous than for the white—less in that, he is nervously more in tune with it; more, in that at his average level of economic development his amusement life is more open to the forces*

*of social vice. . . . The tired longshoreman, the porter, the housemaid and the poor elevator boy in search of recreation, seeking in jazz the tonic for weary nerves and muscles, are only too apt to find the bootlegger, the gambler and the demi-monde who have come there for victims and to escape the eyes of the police.*<sup>2</sup>

Hughes was almost certainly acquainted with this essay (and probably others like it), since it was published in the same issue of *The Survey* as his poem “I, Too.”<sup>3</sup> Given the context that Black art forms were decried as degenerate and (elsewhere in Rogers’s essay) “primitive,” we may assume that Hughes himself intended primarily to defend those art forms. His profession of shame for “the colored artist who . . . fears the strange unwhiteness of his own features” should be taken as an injunction against Blacks fearing to create authentically, *not* as one against Blacks creating authentically. The point is the authenticity of expression, not the medium in which that authenticity is manifest.

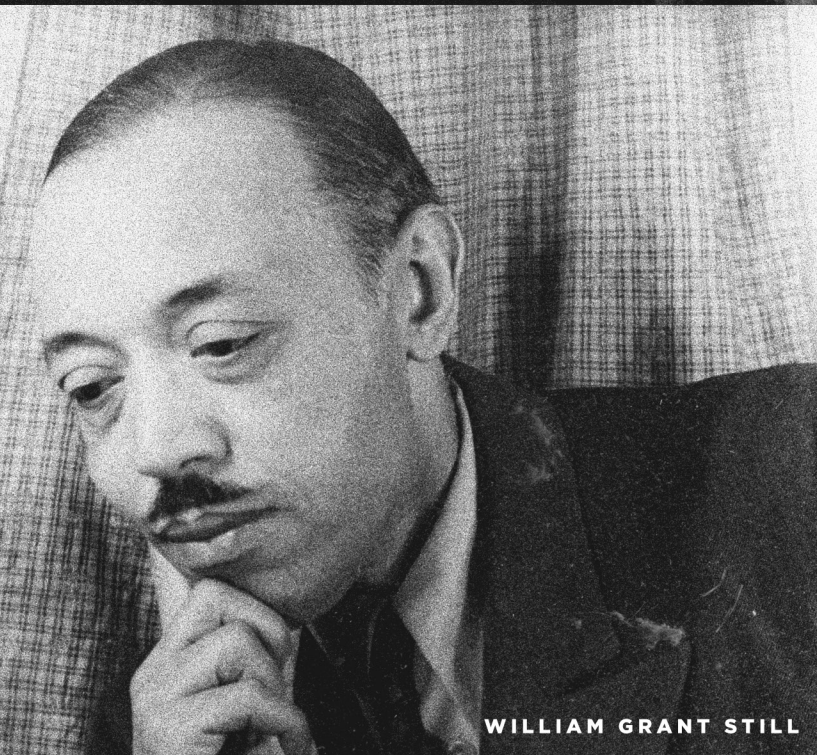
Three short case studies (out of a great many possible) illustrate the artistic and social richness of that authentic Black self-expression in the realms of concert music:

**William Grant Still (1895–1978)** occupies the firmest place in the academy and the concert hall. Born in Woodfield, Mississippi, he grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas, and attended Wilberforce University and the Oberlin Conservatory.<sup>4</sup> He studied composition with George Whitefield Chadwick, worked closely with jazz great W. C. Handy, and was taught and mentored by the pioneering modernist Edgard Varèse. Rejecting spirituals as a source of inspiration because they “exhibit the influence of Caucasian music,” he turned instead to jazz and blues, asserting that “the pathos of their melodic content bespeaks the anguish of human hearts and belies the banality of their lyrics.”<sup>5</sup> His *Afro-American Symphony* (No. 1, 1930) remains his best-known work, though it must be said that today’s world sorely needs a revival of his dramatic oratorio *And They Lynched Him on a Tree* (1940). He was the first African American to have his compositions played by a major symphony orchestra, the first to have an opera performed by a major opera company, and the first to have an opera performed live on national television. His output includes eight operas, four ballets, five symphonies, a sizeable number of other orchestral works, several pieces for chorus with orchestra, and instrumental and vocal chamber compositions. He

was the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships (1934 and 1935) and a total of nine honorary doctorates.

**Florence B. Price (1887–1953)**, born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, has experienced a resurgence in popularity in recent years, but remains on the peripheries of the concert and recital canons as well as the academic classroom.<sup>6</sup> She pretended to be Mexican in order to ensure admission to the prestigious New England Conservatory, where she received degrees in piano and organ and studied composition with Chadwick before returning to the South. She taught at the Cotton Plant—Arkadelphia Academy, Shorter College, and Clark University (Atlanta) before returning to Little Rock, where she taught privately and composed until the tide of lynching and the threat of racial violence against her two daughters forced the family to migrate to Chicago in 1927. In Chicago she taught voice, piano, organ, and composition and served as a church organist, composing prodigiously all the while. The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s performance of her Symphony No. 1 at the Chicago World’s Fair in 1933 made her the first African American woman to have her music performed by a major orchestra, and she won numerous prizes for her music—both ambitious pieces such as the first *Fantasia nègre* and the Piano Sonata in E minor, as well as smaller works. In the 1930s and ‘40s, at least nine major orchestras performed her works—a feat to be envied today, but all the more remarkable because these works were composed and performed in a time when Blacks had to enter through back doorways and use separate restrooms and water fountains. She became a Chicago musical institution in her own right, with a glee club and an *a cappella* choir named after her; indeed, her name was borne by Chicago’s Florence B. Price Elementary School for many years (it closed in 2012), and it is carried on by the Florence B. Price 21st Century Community Academy. The extent of her output is still not fully known: she composed five symphonies, two violin concertos, many choral works, art songs, and arrangements of spirituals, many organ works, and well over two hundred pieces small and large for piano (the vast majority of these still uncatalogued and unpublished). Her style reflects a profound creative fusion of repertoires that traditionally are kept apart: the grammars of concert music are synthesized with those of blues, jazz, spirituals, and folk music Black and White.

Finally, Price’s friend and student **Margaret A. Bonds (1913–72)** personified the expansion of the mid-twentieth century African American renaissance from coast to coast, as well as a remarkable facility in a variety of musical genres



**WILLIAM GRANT STILL**



**MARGARET A. BONDS**



and a pronounced commitment to the role and relevance of concert music in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>7</sup> Born and raised in Chicago, she received her bachelor's and master's degrees from Northwestern University and did additional graduate study at the Juilliard School. She befriended Langston Hughes in 1936 and over the course of her career collaborated with him on numerous projects, including the cantatas *The Ballad of the Brown King* (1954) and *Simon Bore the Cross* (1965), as well as the incidental music to his *Shakespeare in Harlem*. In addition to composing complex chamber music, art songs, song cycles, and solo piano works based on everything from spirituals to erudite polytonal fugal technique, she composed pop songs, music for Broadway musicals and Hollywood films, and works for amateur choirs, all the while touring as a performing pianist (usually in piano duos) and teaching Black children in New York and Los Angeles. Her commitment to invoking Black experience in music is evident partly in her settings of texts by African American authors (her final major work, written in 1966, is a setting for chorus, soloists, and orchestra of W. E. B. Du Bois's 1904 *Credo*<sup>8</sup>) but also in her social work—including, in 1936, the founding of Chicago's Allied Arts Academy, a school for talented Black children.

Was William Grant Still expressing himself inauthentically when he composed operas, when he cast *And They Lynched Him on a Tree* as an oratorio? Was Price a sell-out because she composed art songs, piano sonatas and fantasies, and symphonies, or because she synthesized blues, jazz, and spirituals with the forms and genres of concert music? Was Bonds betraying Du Bois when she set his *Credo* for chorus and orchestra, or whitewashing her Black experience when she used the texts and ideas of Black authors in concert music rather than the blues?

Certainly not. Neither were other Black composers of concert music. All were simply exercising their freedom to speak, musically, in the idiom that best met their own personal needs. In all likelihood, the reason their music is not more widely heard is the prevalent assumption that people of color don't cultivate or consume concert music. That assumption is learned, however, and the above evidence refutes it. So, to fail to question it is not only to perpetuate the system that denied these—and countless other—Black concert musicians their voices and their places in the musical discourses of their own time and posterity. Worse, it is also a way to allow the rules, the standards, the essential criteria by which we know the world of music to be set by the very people and institutions who worked zealously to write Blacks and other people of color out of White society. If we fail to recognize Black concert musicians, we ourselves segregate them out of the world to which they, in their own Black voices, made powerful artistic contributions. We ourselves silence Black experience as a part of the musical discourse of the concert music of their time, and of ours.

Students, teachers, performers, and other scholars are able—*today*—to forcibly challenge prevalent misguided assumptions about the world of concert music and let voices be heard that have been wrongfully silenced. Many early twentieth-century publications of music by Black musicians are now in the public domain and easily accessible on the Web through open-access platforms such as the Petrucci Music Library ([www.imslp.org](http://www.imslp.org)), and modern scholars of Black music are working to publish and arrange for the performance, recording, and study of previously unpublished music. That same community of musical scholars, in turn, can integrate the historically silenced voices of Black composers into academic courses in music history and music theory and encourage colleagues who teach applied lessons and direct ensembles to include these voices in students' lessons and recitals. And students, once made aware that high-quality concert music has been made by Blacks, can study those lives and perform those works, eventually teaching their own students to do the same. Finally, the music-publishing industry can reprint public-domain works and produce new editions of the many thousands of still-unpublished ones—thus revitalizing itself by righting the wrong of artistic racism and celebrating the creative voices that have been silenced because of their race.

Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" closes with a pair of ringing exhortations that apply well to the quiet sonorous revolution that will result if we celebrate the voices of the many Black composers of concert music in the classroom and concert hall: "An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he must choose. . . . We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves."<sup>9</sup>

Bonds, Price, Still, their many predecessors, and the countless beneficiaries of their brilliance and creative imagination deserve to have that freedom—finally—as an act of resistance. That act of resistance will be both powerful and empowering,

for it facilitates a view of concert music's history that is as affirmative as it is revolutionary—a narrative of concert music's historical discourses that shows not what that history would look like *without* Black creative genius, but rather, what it actually *did* look like *with* it. Yes, people of color *do* write classical music.

### Notes:

1. Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," *The Nation* 122 (1926): 692-94.
2. Joel A. Ferguson, "Jazz at Home," *The Survey* 53, no. 11 (1925): 712.
3. Langston Hughes, "I, Too," *The Survey* 53, no. 11 (1925): 683.
4. The information given below, though widely available from a variety of sources, is primarily adapted from Gayle Murchison and Catherine Parsons Smith, «Still, William Grant,» *Grove Music Online*, accessed August 7, 2018, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000026776>. The best print biography is Catherine Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Readers are also encouraged to consult Judith Anne Still, Michael J. Dabrishus, and Carolyn L. Quin, *William Grant Still: A Bio-Bibliography* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996).
5. William Grant Still, draft preface to the *Afro-American Symphony*, quoted from Parsons Smith, *A Study in Contradictions*, 121.
6. Information freely adapted from my own research and Rae Linda Brown's article for *Grove Music Online*: Rae Linda Brown, «Price [Smith], Florence Bea(trice),» *Grove Music Online*, accessed August 7, 2018, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000048286>.
7. A full-length life-and-works study of Bonds is still lacking. The strongest general resource is Helen Walker-Hill's chapter on Bonds in *From Spirituals to Symphonies: African-American Women Composers and Their Music* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 141-88. See also Barbara Garvey Jackson, «Bonds [née Majors], Margaret Allison,» *Grove Music Online*, 2001; accessed August 7, 2018, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000048286>.
8. See W. E. B. Du Bois, "Credo," *DuBoisopedia*, accessed August 9, 2018, <http://scua.library.umass.edu/duboisopedia/doku.php?id=about:credo>.
9. Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," 694.



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**LESSON/UNIT PLAN:****YES, PEOPLE OF COLOR WRITE CLASSICAL MUSIC**

By John Michael Cooper

**Goals of Lesson Plan:** To teach students to think critically, engage in in-depth analysis, and explore how interactions among music, societal systems of oppression, belief systems, and other cultural elements lead to the marginalization of the contributions of Black classical composers.

**Objectives:**

1. Students will compare examples of spirituals, the blues, and African dance music with concert music based on those models.
2. Students will consider whether the concert music presented is true to its inspiration and debate the issues involved in studying this music.
3. Students will explore the contributions of Black classical composers and their contributions to concert music.

**National Council of Social Studies Standards:****History****Teacher Expectations**

- assist learners in developing historical research capabilities that enable them to formulate historical questions, obtain historical data, question historical data, identify the gaps in available records, place records in context, and construct sound historical interpretations;
- help learners to identify issues and problems in the past, recognize factors contributing to such problems, identify and analyze alternative courses of action;

**Individuals, Groups, and Institutions****Teacher Expectations**

- help learners analyze group and institutional influences on people, events, and elements of culture in both historical and contemporary settings;
- assist learners in identifying and analyzing examples of tensions between expressions of individuality and efforts used to promote social conformity by groups and institutions;

- enable learners to describe and examine belief systems basic to specific traditions and laws in contemporary and historical movements;

**Culture and Cultural Diversity****Teacher Expectations**

- assist learners to apply an understanding of culture as an integrated whole that explains the functions and interactions of language, literature, the arts, traditions, beliefs and values, and behavior patterns;
- have learners interpret patterns of behavior reflecting values and attitudes that contribute or pose obstacles to cross-cultural understanding

**Description:** After comparing examples of spirituals, the blues, and African dance music with concert music based on those models, students will consider whether the concert music is true to its inspiration and participate in discussions and/or debates that explore the issues involved in studying this music.

**Activity 1**

1. The class should be divided into three groups (Spiritual, Blues, and African Dance).
2. As preparation, each group must listen to the music and/or read the lyrics assigned.
3. After completing the assigned preparatory tasks, students in each group should:
  - A. develop and present answers to the questions presented, or
  - B. lead discussions about those questions.

**Group 1: Spiritual**

Preparatory Tasks: Reading/listening:

1. Read the lyrics while listening to the spiritual "Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass."  
Lyrics: [http://www.negrospiruals.com/songs/sinner\\_please\\_don\\_t\\_let\\_this\\_harvest\\_pass.htm](http://www.negrospiruals.com/songs/sinner_please_don_t_let_this_harvest_pass.htm)
- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebJFhhygOFM>

2. Read the lyrics while listening to Bessie Smith's version of "St. Louis Blues."

Lyrics:

<https://genius.com/Wc-handy-st-louis-blues-lyrics>

- YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rd9IaA\\_uJI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rd9IaA_uJI)

3. Listen to Florence Price's *Fantasie nègre*.

- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ml8wLG4WLE>

4. Ask: What are the lyrics of "Sinner, Please Don't Let This Harvest Pass" about? What is the "harvest" that the lyrics speak of? How does that idea connect to the idea of Christian salvation? To the experience of Blacks in the US? What are the connections between these two?

5. Ask: What is the emotion or mood of the music? How does it create this emotion or mood? Consider things such as tempo (speed), whether the melody has a narrow or wide range, harmony, instrumentation, etc.—depending on the students' musical knowledge and abilities.

6. Ask: How does Price's *Fantasie nègre*, which is based on this spiritual, capture its spirit and meaning? What other stylistic elements or influences do you hear in Price's work? Is it fair to describe this composition as an authentic elaboration on the spiritual? Why or why not?

## Group 2: Blues

Preparatory Tasks: Reading/listening:

1. Read the lyrics while listening to Bessie Smith's version of "St. Louis Blues."

Lyrics: <https://genius.com/Wc-handy-st-louis-blues-lyrics>

- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Us30o0ZakKo>

2. Listen to the first movement of Still's *Afro-American Symphony*.

- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AktZeVcJE>

3. Ask: The first movement of Still's *Afro-American Symphony* is strongly influenced by blues. What elements of the original blues does it use, and what instruments does it use that do not fit with Smith's blues? Does Still's symphony capture the spirit of the original? Is it fair to describe this as an authentic elaboration on the original blues?

## Group 3: African Dance (Juba Dance)

Preparatory Tasks: Reading/listening:

1. Listen to either the third movement of Florence Price's *Symphony No. 1*

- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VgbElxk1S5A>

**OR** the "Juba Dance" by Nathaniel Dett (the last movement of his piano suite *In the Bottoms*, 1913)

- YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gq834hTosEw>

2. Read History of Master Juba:

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Master-Juba>

3. Read History of the Juba Dance:

<https://www.britannica.com/art/juba-dance>

4. What is the history of the Juba dance, and how does it relate to the experiences of Blacks in the US before and during the twentieth century?

5. Original Juba dance featured call-and-response, usually between a soloist and a group. Does Dett's "Juba Dance" or the third movement of Price's *Symphony No. 1* capture or recreate this feature?

6. How is Dett's "Juba Dance" or the third movement of Price's symphony like its model, and how is it different? Is it fair to say that the concert music recaptures the spirit of the original? Why or why not?

## Activity 2: "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

1. Have the class read and discuss Langston Hughes's poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers."

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44428/the-negro-speaks-of-rivers>

A recording of Hughes himself reading this poem:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8cKDOghMU>

2. Ask: What, in their opinion, is the message of the poem? What is its mood? Do the images it employs have any symbolic meaning or associations? How, in your opinion, would it have been relevant to Black readers of its time? Is it still relevant today? Is there anything particularly interesting about its form (rhymes, line lengths, etc.)? Do you think that Hughes probably directed this poem at readers who were likely to attend “classical” concerts, or not?
3. Have the class listen to Margaret Bonds’s setting of this poem:
  - Either the original version for solo voice with piano  
YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8ap6lk0Qkc>
  - OR** Bonds’s later arrangement for chorus with piano
  - YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GI7HcoHrN2U>
4. Ask: Does Bonds capture the message and mood of the poem? Does her setting add anything to that message and mood, or miss anything about them? In your opinion, which is more powerful or moving, the poem or Bonds’s setting of it?

**Activity 3:** Have individual students or groups of students research individual Black composers of concert music from the sites provided in the previous activities, the teacher resources, or other sites. Ask the students to find one work by the composer they choose and give a short (three-minute) presentation on the composer and her or his music.

**Activity 4:** Have students divide into groups and, using the Internet, find out about some of the many separate venues that currently exist for promoting concert music by Black composers. Some useful websites and blogs to start with are:

- “Africlassical.com” (<https://chevalierdesaintgeorges.homestead.com/>)
- The Africlassical Blog (<https://africlassical.blogspot.com/>)
- The Colour of Music Festival website (<https://www.colourofmusic.org/>)
- Wikipedia’s category for African-American classical composers ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:African-American\\_classical\\_composers](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:African-American_classical_composers))
- Wikipedia’s list of composers of African descent (includes non-classical composers) ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_composers\\_of\\_African\\_descent](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_composers_of_African_descent))
- WQXR’s Timeline of African Americans in classical music (includes performers and other musicians as well as composers) (<https://www.wqxr.org/story/266404-timeline-history-black-classical-musicians/>)

### Teacher Resources

- This site is devoted to traditional African American spirituals, and some information is given about the early gospel songs: <http://www.negrospirituall.com>
- Genius is the world’s biggest collection of song lyrics and musical knowledge: <https://genius.com>
- AfriClassical.com shares information about 52 classical music composers, conductors, and instrumental performers, including Africans, African Americans, and Afro-Europeans: <http://chevalierdesaintgeorges.homestead.com/index.html>