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"Strange What Cosmopolites Music Makes of Us": Classical Music, the Black Press, and Nora Douglas Holt's Black Feminist Audiotopia

LUCY CAPLAN

Abstract
This article examines the music criticism of Nora Douglas Holt, an African American woman who wrote a classical music column for the Chicago Defender *(1917–1923) and published a monthly magazine,* Music and Poetry *(1921–1922). I make two claims regarding the force and impact of Holt's ideas. First, by writing about classical music in the black press, Holt advanced a model of embodied listening that rejected racist attempts to keep African Americans out of the concert hall and embraced a communal approach to knowledge production. Second, Holt was a black feminist intellectual who refuted dominant notions of classical music's putative race- and gender-transcending universalism; instead, she acknowledged the generative possibilities of racial difference in general and blackness in particular. I analyze Holt's intellectual commitments by situating her ideas within the context of early twentieth-century black feminist thought; analyzing the principal themes of her writing in the* Chicago Defender *and* Music and Poetry*; and assessing her engagement with a single musical work, Tchaikovsky's* Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, op. 36. *Ultimately, Holt's criticism offers new insight into how race, gender, and musical activity intersected in the Jim Crow era and invites a more nuanced and capacious understanding of black women's manifold contributions to US musical culture.*

Flipping page by page through the *Chicago Defender*, an early twentieth-century reader would eventually reach the penultimate "Woman's Page," a busy panorama of everyday life. On November 3, 1917, the page was, as usual, crowded with tidbits: reports on local clubs and fraternities, a reminder to put postage on one's mail, the alarming tale of a woman who "dropped dead while ironing clothes." Sandwiched among these items was an announcement whose inconspicuous appearance belied the remarkable nature of its content: a woman named Nora Douglas Holt was to become the newspaper's classical music critic.[1] Holt's column, which ran in the *Chicago Defender* for six years, was the first regular feature in an African

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[1] "Lena James Douglas to Write About Opera and Symphony," *Chicago Defender*, November 3, 1917. Holt's byline varied: at different points in her life, she went by Lena James, Lena James Douglas, Lena Douglas, Nora Holt, Nora Douglas Holt, and Nora Holt Ray. It is also worth noting that her criticism's placement on the "Woman's Page" was typical of the black press, which regularly shoehorned women's writing into this section of the newspaper, regardless of content. See D'Weston Haywood, *Let Us Make Men: The Twentieth-Century Black Press and a Manly Vision for Racial Advancement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018); and Kim Gallon, "Silences Kept: The Absence of Gender and Sexuality in Black Press Historiography," *History Compass* 10, no. 2 (2012): 207–18.

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American newspaper dedicated exclusively to classical music. In 1921, Holt also founded a monthly magazine titled *Music and Poetry*. In both venues, she wrote from a marginalized standpoint. Her race and gender located her at the periphery of a music-critical tradition dominated by white men. Further, although Holt was not the first nor the only critic to write about classical music in the black press, she distinguished herself among a mostly male coterie of early twentieth-century black cultural critics as an exceptionally insightful participant in a vibrant conversation about music, race, and gender.[2] Holt merits attention not simply because she was atypical, but rather because of the conceptually and socially ambitious substance of her work.

In this article, I make two claims regarding the force and impact of Holt's ideas. First, by writing about classical music in the black press, Holt advanced a model of embodied listening that rejected racist attempts to keep African Americans out of the concert hall and embraced a communal approach to knowledge production. Second, Holt was a black feminist intellectual who refuted dominant notions of classical music's putative race- and gender-transcending universalism; instead, she acknowledged the generative possibilities of racial difference in general and blackness in particular. The impact of Holt's bold thinking was heightened by its appearance within the black press, a key outlet for public discourse and community formation during an era otherwise marked by the repressive constraints of Jim Crow and the diminishment of black legal and political power. Ultimately, Holt's criticism worked toward the creation of a black feminist *audiotopia*, a term generatively theorized by Josh Kun. Kun emphasizes that the "American audio-racial imagination," which encompasses the myriad ways in which race is formed and experienced on the level of music and sound, is necessarily predicated upon racial difference and internal contradiction.[3] He posits further that an audiotopia might function as "an enacted, lived utopia that struggles against the constraints of racialization and nation-building."[4] In elucidating music's ability to challenge entrenched social and cultural hierarchies, Holt created an audiotopian space in which her readers could make alternate social relationships imaginable.

A number of scholars have analyzed Holt's music criticism in recent years. Juanita Karpf situates her work within a genealogy of early black music journalism; Lawrence Schenbeck analyzes her writing's relationship to racial uplift ideology and the social world of the urban black church; Jayne Marek argues that her editorship of *Music and Poetry* was a feminist project; and Samantha Ege shows how Holt was

[2] Other critics who wrote about opera and classical music in the early twentieth-century black press included Wellington Adams, Cleveland Allen, Columbus Bragg, Maude Roberts George, Sylvester Russell, and Lester Walton. See Mark Grant, *Maestros of the Pen: A History of Classical Music Criticism in America* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), 319–20. On music in the intellectual milieu of the Harlem Renaissance more generally, see Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

[3] Josh Kun, *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 25.

[4] Kun, *Audiotopia,* 23. Applying this capacious concept to diverse musical traditions from Jewish American musical comedy to *rock en español*, Kun further defines an audiotopia as "the space within and produced by a musical element that offers the listener and/or the musician new maps for re-imagining the present social world." Kun, *Audiotopia,* 22–23.

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vital to a local network of black women musicians.[5] I build upon these analyses to consider Holt's work in the more expansive, intersectional context of black feminist intellectual production. To do so, I first situate Holt and her ideas within the context of early twentieth-century black feminism. I then analyze the principal themes of her writing in the *Chicago Defender* and *Music and Poetry*, with particular attention to how the cultural politics of the black press informed her work. Finally, I offer a reading of Holt's engagement with a single musical work, Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 4 in F Minor, op. 36, that shows how her criticism engaged ideas about musical meaning that Kun theorizes as audiotopian. By tracing Holt's ideas across these varied contexts, I show that what ultimately set Holt apart from other African American intellectuals was the way that she imbued classical music criticism with a multifaceted commitment to black feminist thought.

Considered cumulatively, Holt's writing prompts a broader reconsideration of how race, gender, and musical activity intersected in the Jim Crow-era United States. Conventional wisdom holds that, prior to the modern civil rights movement, classical music was open exclusively to white participants, and remained so until monumental events—for instance, Marian Anderson's iconic performance at the Lincoln Memorial (1939) and subsequent Metropolitan Opera debut (1955)—catalyzed the breakdown of racial barriers in prominent national and institutional spaces. Yet segregation was never tantamount to absence. Holt's journalistic work makes clear that African American artists, in Chicago and throughout the nation, engaged with classical music on their own terms.[6] Despite limited access to the art form's major institutions, they created what Naomi André has recently theorized as a "shadow culture," operating parallel to (and in uneasy tension with) a dominant musical tradition.[7] In addition, Holt's work illuminates the heterogeneity of black women's contributions to US musical culture. To riff on the often-quoted words of Anna Julia Cooper, when and where do black women enter US music history and the cultural imaginary?[8] Most often, the answer is: as singers of popular music. Farah Jasmine Griffin has argued that the "spectacle of the singing black woman" is one of the "founding sounds" of the United States, an image so pervasive

[5] Juanita Karpf, "The Early Years of African American Music Periodicals, 1886–1922: History, Ideology, Context," *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* 28, no. 2 (1997); Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878–1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 171–208; Jayne Marek, "Women Editors and Little Magazines in the Harlem Renaissance," in *Little Magazines & Modernism: New Approaches*, ed. Suzanne W. Churchill and Adam McKible (London: Routledge, 2007), 105–18; and Samantha Ege, "Composing a Symphonist: Florence Price and the Hand of Black Women's Fellowship," *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 24 (forthcoming, 2020).

[6] Holt's criticism anticipates the work of field-defining scholars who have made pioneering contributions to the study of early twentieth-century black classical musicians, especially black women. Notable works include Josephine Wright, "Black Women and Classical Music," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1984): 18–21; and Doris Evans McGinty, "'As Large as She Can Make It': The Role of Black Women Activists in Music, 1880–1945," in *Cultivating Music in America: Women Patrons and Activists Since 1860*, ed. Ralph Locke and Cyrilla Barr (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 214–30.

[7] Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 9–13.

[8] Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South* (Xenia, OH: Aldine Printing House, 1892), 31.

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that it crowds out alternative notions of how black women shape national musical life.[9] At the same time, classical music criticism is often perceived as a male domain, and scholarship on this topic focuses almost exclusively on the contributions of white men.[10] Holt's status as a black female music critic thereby challenges dominant narratives of musical life in the United States on several fronts.

Holt was a wonderfully exuberant, even irreverent writer: "First night at the opera!" began one review for the *Chicago Defender*, which went on to describe an emotive tenor as having "outsobbed Caruso."[11] But she was also a serious thinker who wrote perceptively about topics including pedagogy, embodiment, affect, and cosmopolitanism. Her criticism illuminates the mutual constitution of African American musical and intellectual history, suggesting opportunities for productive exchange between these two fields of study. A central intervention by scholars of black intellectual history has been to show how African Americans produced ideas outside of traditional venues like universities and churches, instead thinking and theorizing while embedded within complex local contexts.[12] Black feminist scholars have expanded upon this idea: for instance, Brittney Cooper has characterized black women's intellectual production as "embodied discourse," contending that these thinkers' bodies and lived experiences are inextricable from their ideas.[13] Such conceptual interventions raise questions about the parameters of intellectual history writ large. As the editors of a recent collection on black women's intellectual history wrote: "What forms do ideas take? What are their modes of expression? Under what conditions may ideas be produced, and where do we look for them? What is the relationship between lived experience and the production of ideas? And what happens when ideas exceed or break apart social or analytic categories?"[14]

Holt's intellectual work, rooted in the quotidian material of musical life in Chicago, engaged precisely these questions. Her criticism not only resisted what Jennifer Stoever has called the "sonic color line"—that is, the systemic means by which sound and listening contribute to historical processes of racialization and the maintenance of racial boundaries—but it also transgressed the boundaries that separate listening from writing, and affective experience from scholarly

[9] Farah Jasmine Griffin, "When Malindy Sings: A Meditation on Black Women's Vocality," in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert O'Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 119.

[10] See Grant, *Maestros of the Pen.*

[11] Lena James Holt, "The Opera," *Chicago Defender*, November 17, 1917.

[12] Holt's Great Migration–era Chicago serves as a paradigmatic example of how and when such intellectual production occurred. See Davarian Baldwin, *Chicago's New Negroes: Modernity, the Great Migration, and Black Urban Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007). Although Baldwin provides a valuable reconsideration of the divide between intellectual history and cultural studies, he focuses primarily on popular culture and positions classical music in opposition to it. One of the goals of this article is to show how Holt's criticism, despite taking "high culture" as its subject, held cultural significance similar to that of the "popular arts" that are the focus of Baldwin's study.

[13] Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 12.

[14] Mia Bay et al., eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 9.

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knowledge.[15] It thus compels a revaluation of the arbitrariness of such boundaries, how they shaped the critical project under Jim Crow, and how they continue to shape scholarly work on race, music, and criticism. Herself a woman who delighted in boundary-crossing of the intellectual, musical, geographical, and social varieties, Holt is an apt figure for interdisciplinary study. From her perch in the concert hall balcony, or her few lines of column space on the "Woman's Page," she insisted on looking out upon a vast horizon.

Nora Douglas Holt, Classical Music, and Black Feminist Thought

Most accounts of Holt's life treat her music criticism as an aberrantly respectable pursuit in an otherwise exploit-laden life. Her personal life tended toward the sensational, and she is typically characterized as, in the words of one scholar, "an icon of Jazz Age hedonism."[16] The *Pittsburgh Courier* called her life "the best newspaper copy in the wide, wide world," and when she died in 1974 in Los Angeles, the *New York Amsterdam News* summed her up in a single word: "fabulous."[17] Yet no one word can encapsulate Holt; nor can the facets of her life be divided as cleanly as the panels of a comic strip might suggest (Figure 1). Rather, her music criticism reflected the full complexity of her lived experience.

Born around 1885 in Kansas City, Holt played the piano and organ as a child. In 1916, she was valedictorian of her class at Western University in Quindaro, Kansas, an important local hub for black musical culture.[18] She then studied harmony, composition, and music history at the Chicago Musical College, where, in 1918, she became the first African American to earn a master's degree in music.[19] The *Chicago Defender* reported that Holt's master's thesis consisted of a "symphonic rhapsody of forty-two pages for a hundred-piece symphony orchestra," but tragically, this and most of her other manuscripts were stolen from a suitcase during her travels in Europe, and only two short pieces, which were reprinted in *Music and Poetry*, have survived.[20] In Chicago, Holt also co-founded the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM) and Chicago Music Association (CMA), two immensely influential organizations serving black classical

[15] Stoever's theorization of the "sonic color line" offers a vital explanatory tool for understanding how both sound itself and the act of listening contribute to racial formation. Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

[16] Marek, "Women Editors and Little Magazines," 113.

[17] W. Rollo Wilson, "Nora Ray, Fresh From France and the Riviera, Says 'America First,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 12, 1927; Mel Tapley, "Nora Holt Dies on the Coast," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 2, 1974.

[18] According to Helen Walker-Hill, Western University was "the best black musical training center in the Midwest" at the time. "Western University at Quindaro, Kansas (1865–1943) and Its Legacy of Pioneering Musical Women," *Black Music Research Journal* 26, no. 1 (2006): 7. For more on Holt's biography, see Walker-Hill, "Western University at Quindaro, Kansas," 24–29.

[19] The Chicago Musical College trained a notable array of African American musicians, including soprano Florence Cole-Talbert and the composers Florence Price, Edward Boatner, and William Dawson.

[20] "Lena James Holt Takes High Honors at Chicago Musical College," *Chicago Defender*, June 29, 1918.

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Figure 1. A 1926 comic strip from the *Baltimore Afro-American* that details Holt's exploits. "Pretty Nora Holt Ray Couldn't Hide From Husband's Detectives," *Baltimore Afro-American*, January 30, 1926. Courtesy of the AFRO American Newspapers Archives.

musicians.[21] In 1917, while still a conservatory student, she married her third (or possibly fourth) husband, George Holt, a hotel and theater owner more than thirty years her senior. He died in 1921, leaving Holt a large inheritance. A subsequent marriage to Joseph Ray, a wealthy employee of steel magnate Charles Schwab, ended disastrously after nineteen months amid rumors of adultery and fraud. Holt then moved to New York and became a close friend of Langston Hughes, Carl Van Vechten, and other Harlem Renaissance luminaries (Figure 2).[22] In 1926, she embarked for Europe, where she joined many black artists and intellectuals in Paris and worked briefly as a nightclub singer. One European reporter described her voice as "astonishing. . . . It can produce sounds not comparable with orthodox singing at all."[23] By the 1940s, Holt returned to New York and to music criticism. She was inducted into the New York Music Critics Circle in 1945, becoming its first African American member.

Just as Holt's biography demonstrates the interconnectedness of music criticism with myriad other social and cultural pursuits—the scantily clad Parisian nightclub

[21] In *Music and Poetry*, Holt highlighted her centrality to the founding of NANM, noting that one of its inaugural meetings took place at her home and that she had encouraged black musical leaders to come together in "musicianal unity" in the interest of collective progress. "Chronological History of the NANM," *Music and Poetry*, July 1921, 15. On the founding of the NANM, see Willis Patterson, "A History of the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM): The First Quarter Century, 1919–1943" (PhD diss., Wayne State University, 1993). On Holt's role as co-founder of these organizations, see Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music,* 195–201.

[22] Van Vechten modeled the character of Lasca Sartoris in his notorious novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926) after Holt. Their friendship is discussed in Emily Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance: A Portrait in Black and White* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012), 111–14 and 292–96.

[23] On Holt's time in Paris, see T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Bricktop's Paris: African American Women in Paris between the Two World Wars* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015), 51–55. On black artists in Europe more generally, see Tyler Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1996); and Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

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Figure 2. Nora Holt, photographed by her close friend Carl Van Vechten, March 18, 1932. Carl Van Vechten Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Courtesy of the Carl Van Vechten Trust.

chanteuse could also be the writer exhorting readers to listen to symphonies—so, too, does the substance of her work. African Americans' engagements with classical music are often assumed to be straightforward expressions of racial uplift and the politics of respectability, two key ideological frameworks of early twentieth-century black intellectual life. The class-oriented concept of uplift ideology held that the exceptional achievements of a few, the "Talented Tenth," would catalyze black social progress, and the politics of respectability was a strategy by which individuals behaved in a socially sanctioned manner in order to contest degrading representations of African Americans and improve the standing of "the race."[24] Both refuted dominant notions of black inferiority, proving that white supremacy's racist

[24] The term "politics of respectability" was coined by Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham in *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). As Jane Rhodes has noted, the black press was a prime medium for the circulation of ideas about respectability, especially those directed at black women. Rhodes, "Pedagogies of Respectability: Race, Media, and Black Womanhood in the Early 20th Century," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 18, nos. 2–4 (2016): 205–9. Kevin Gaines offers a critique of uplift ideology in *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and*

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premises were logically indefensible. But because uplift and respectability focused on individuals' behavior, they necessarily maintained a conditional view of racial progress; social equality had to be earned via admirable behavior, and was not something that black people deserved on the basis of their inherent humanity.

Although Holt's choice to write about classical music was informed in part by the interlocking ideologies of racial uplift and the politics of respectability, the more capacious intellectual paradigm of black feminism ultimately offers deeper insight into her criticism.[25] The term did not come into common usage until the 1960s, but black feminism existed before it was named, and it is an apt descriptor for Holt even if it is not one she herself would have used. Like other early twentieth-century black women, including the educator and theorist Anna Julia Cooper and the musician and journalist Pauline Hopkins, Holt anticipated the nuance, subtlety, and commitment to intersectional analysis that stand at the core of twentieth-century black feminist thought.[26] Importantly, Holt was not a black feminist simply by virtue of her identity as an African American woman; rather, the specific ideas put forth in her music criticism enable her to be characterized as such. Although black feminism was—and remains—a heterogeneous project, Holt's thinking aligns with several of its central tenets. First, in her criticism, she adeptly detailed how her embodied experience as a black woman informed her ideas about music. Second, she prioritized education and collaboration, espousing a model of knowledge production rooted in multidirectional cooperation rather than strict hierarchy. Third, she was interested not only in reforming individual behavior, but also in creating systemic change within musical networks and institutions. Finally, as the utopian and speculative dimensions of her criticism show, she was committed to using ideas toward emancipatory and liberatory ends.[27]

Culture in the Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). On classical music and uplift, see Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music*.

[25] On classical music and black feminism during the late nineteenth century, see Juanita Karpf, "'As With Words of Fire': Art Music and Nineteenth-Century African-American Feminist Discourse," *Signs* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1999).

[26] Also like Cooper and Hopkins, Holt was a thinker whose ideas reflected her era in general and her societal position in particular. Her relatively privileged class status, for example, might explain the elitism that surfaces repeatedly in her writings about music, which I discuss in greater depth later in this article. Yet part of the utility of thinking "beyond respectability" and toward black feminism, as Brittney Cooper urges, is that it helps us identify and analyze black women's heterogeneous intellectual contributions in earlier eras, even if those thinkers' commitments do not correspond exactly to those of more recent intellectuals. As Cooper writes, "our contemporary commitment to rejecting the ideology of middle-class respectability should not foreclose our engagement with significant sites of Black women's knowledge production in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." Brittney Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 29. On black feminism's rich but vexed relationship to intersectionality and other tenets of feminist thought, see Jennifer Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

[27] This analysis of black feminist thought is based on Patricia Hill Collins's landmark *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990). On the development of black feminism, see Ula Taylor, "The Historical Evolution of Black Feminist Theory and Praxis," *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 2 (1998): 234–53; and Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). For a recent reassessment of black feminism's relationship to respectability and uplift, see Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*.

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Considering Holt as a black feminist thinker remaps the intellectual ground on which scholars typically locate black intellectual discourse, classical music criticism, and their intersections. It may seem surprising to associate the stereotypically staid world of classical music with early twentieth-century black feminism; previous scholarship has described blues performance of this era as the primary musical site through which these ideas found expression.[28] But if classical music criticism seems an unlikely avenue for black feminist critique, it is worth asking what that assumed opposition says about the complexity, or lack thereof, often ascribed to black women's musical lives. Black classical musicians occupied a strange space within a cultural-racial hierarchy that made them a logical impossibility. To participate in classical music as a black woman—as Holt and many others did—was necessarily to break the rules linking race, class, and music, asserting oneself in a cultural space that rejected one's presence. In the *Chicago Defender* and *Music and Poetry*, Holt made her intellectual commitments clear. Through music criticism, she articulated a black feminist politics invested with emancipatory potential.

Race, Pedagogy, and the "Music World" of the *Chicago Defender*

The majority of Holt's music criticism appeared in the *Chicago Defender*, the most influential black newspaper of its day. Founded in 1905, the newspaper ascended rapidly in popularity, reaching a circulation of over one hundred thousand by 1918.[29] Beginning in November 1917, Holt became a frequent contributor, and her byline ultimately appeared in the *Chicago Defender*'s pages more than 150 times. The first iteration of her column featured reviews of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chicago Opera Association, as well as opinion pieces. In 1919, Holt's work broadened in scope as she began to publish a column titled simply "Music." It included announcements and reviews of performances by black and white musicians alike. In 1920, she supplemented that work with a series of biographical sketches of sixteen well-known black musicians. Midway through 1921, the name of her column changed to "News of the Music World." Holt's work at the *Chicago Defender* concluded in July 1923 when she moved to Pennsylvania to marry Joseph Ray.

What did it mean to write about music, as Holt did, against the backdrop of Jim Crow and white supremacy? How were aesthetic experience and political progress intertwined? On whose terms would black cultural life be defined? These were not abstract questions in Great Migration-era Chicago, and the city's racial politics are essential to understanding Holt's music criticism. Chicago's black population was increasing rapidly, from about forty-four thousand in 1910 to 110 thousand

[28] Hazel Carby, "It Jus Be's Dat Way Sometime: The Sexual Politics of Women's Blues," *Radical America* 20, no. 4 (1986): 9–24; Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

[29] For a history of the newspaper, see Ethan Michaeli, *The Defender: How the Legendary Black Newspaper Changed America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016). On the black press more generally, see Patrick Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006); and Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002).

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in 1920. New migrants crowded into the city's already-congested South Side or began moving into white ethnic neighborhoods, and the backlash was immediate. Racial tensions came to a head in July 1919, when white teenagers killed a young black boy who strayed over an unmarked line at a segregated Lake Michigan beach. In the ensuing thirteen days of riots, at least forty people were killed. In a striking confluence of events, the National Association of Negro Musicians, which included Holt among its founders, held its first convention while the riots were still ongoing. At risk of getting caught up in the violence sweeping the city, members of the organization nonetheless made their way to a YMCA on Wabash Avenue on July 29, 1919 to discuss the future of black musical life.[30]

Race and segregation shaped the city's musical venues as they did other public spaces. As historian Amy Absher has noted, black musicians in early twentieth-century Chicago responded to segregation in two ways: some worked to create an autonomous black cultural sphere for classical music, and others sought to desegregate the existing, predominantly white one.[31] This project was complicated by the arrival of rural black migrants, whose presence exacerbated class tensions within black Chicago. Meanwhile, white progressive reformers vilified black popular music venues as spaces of vice and moral laxity, and white voyeurs flocked to those same spaces, curious to witness a cultural scene they found fascinatingly "primitive." And despite the existence of state antidiscrimination laws, white-owned entertainment venues increasingly refused to sell tickets to black patrons or confined them to certain sections of the theater. African Americans had successfully brought lawsuits against this practice in the 1910s, but by 1920 courts regularly struck down such legal challenges, and the segregation of cultural life became ever more entrenched.[32]

It was in this fraught context that Nora Douglas Holt began writing music criticism. Holt used her *Chicago Defender* column to challenge the racial segregation of musical public space via both the form of her writing and its content. On the level of form, she declined to organize her column according to what segregation demanded. Instead, the "Music World" she described became an aspirational evocation of W. E. B. Du Bois's well-known utopian vision, articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk*, of black and white artists as "co-workers in the kingdom of culture."[33] Holt's criticism traversed local, national, and international borders, sometimes within the space of a single column.[34] For instance, a dispatch from October 22, 1921 covered a recital by German-British pianist Harold Bauer; opening night at the Chicago Symphony; and an "autumn songfest" at Olivet Baptist Church, the

[30] Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music*, 198.

[31] Amy Absher, *The Black Musician and the White City: Race and Music in Chicago, 1900–1967* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014). On black music in Chicago during the Harlem Renaissance era, see Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 100–135.

[32] Absher, *The Black Musician and the White City*, 25.

[33] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1903), 4.

[34] This far-reaching perspective speaks to the global, transnational scope of the Harlem Renaissance or New Negro movement. See Davarian Baldwin and Minkah Makalani, eds., *Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

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city's largest black congregation.[35] The bringing together of these events had a flattening effect, a symbolic leveling of racial hierarchy.

Holt also wrote about events that were multiracial in practice, undermining the color line by documenting moments in which performers *and* listeners alike transgressed the norm of racial segregation. In so doing, she exemplified Jennifer Stoever's claim that "detailed written accounts served as listening experiences in their own right, a form of recording and a technology of discipline shaping a national listening ear."[36] In a review of a recital by pianist Mischa Levitski, Holt recounted running into the songwriter Eubie Blake, of *Shuffle Along* fame, in the audience. She compared Blake's pianistic skill and "thoroughly appealing" compositions to Levitski's performance, and added, "I feel no hesitancy in discussing Levistki and Eubie Blake in the same breath, for they are both great artists in their specific professions, contributing to the culture and joy of life."[37] Another example was an April 1918 recital at Walters A. M. E. Zion Church, which she described as follows:

> Gloria in Excelsio Mass in B Flat, a beautiful blended theme of tender airs, was rendered by the choir, along with the renditions of Miss Ruth Woolen, Mrs. T. Howell and N. Komo, who gave the affair a foreign touch of songs in Zulu language. The designed dedication of Von Suppe's "Poet and Peasant" was produced in a duet played by the Misses Thelma and Annie Pierce. Rev. Dr. B. Solin, Jew, pastor of the 12 street Hebrew Presbyterian Mission, lectured, giving a wonderful description of Jewish destiny and Christianity, which was followed by sentimental selections by Mrs. S. Mackler (white), soprano, and Hardy B. Woodfolk, tenor.[38]

The remarkable heterogeneity of this program, like Holt's encounter with Blake at the recital, offered a concrete example of how people, sounds, and ideas traveled across the borders that Jim Crow attempted to enforce.

This is not to say that Holt's criticism was entirely free of hierarchical logics. Like many of her contemporaries in Harlem Renaissance–era cultural criticism, including elite black male intellectuals such as Alain Locke and W. E. B. Du Bois, she articulated an ambivalent relationship to notions of musical hierarchy, and, like many other early-twentieth-century black feminist intellectuals, she adhered to some elitist ideas while also promoting cross-class, systemic change.[39] Holt assigned special value to classical music, praising it as "high class." Although she adored ragtime's "fascinating rhythmic pulsations," she was dismissive of jazz, which she provocatively called "America's enfant terrible, along with the Ku Klux Klan and Prohibition" (a startling claim that perhaps can be read as more tongue-in-cheek than sincere, given Holt's own "enfant terrible" social reputation).[40] She also celebrated the achievements of the exceptional few—for instance, her 1920 series

[35] Nora Douglas Holt, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender*, October 22, 1921.

[36] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 82.

[37] Nora Douglas Holt, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender*, December 16, 1922.

[38] Nora Douglas Holt, "Walter's Zion Church Has Brilliant Recital," *Chicago Defender*, April 13, 1918.

[39] On black male intellectuals and musical hierarchy, see Anderson, *Deep River*, 13–166. On class and elitism in early twentieth-century black feminist thought, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; and Cooper, *Beyond Respectability*, 12–29.

[40] Nora Douglas Holt, "News of the Music World: Jazz Troubles Martha," *Chicago Defender*, October 1, 1921.

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profiling "some of our best known musicians"—a strategy that seemed to equate racial progress with the success of elite individuals. Yet even these projects had a democratizing edge. As she upheld the idea of the symphony as the "highest class of music," Holt concomitantly expanded access to it, providing instructions on what to listen for and encouraging her readers to explore the art form. "It must be said that the symphony is not the crust most people unacquainted with the classics imagine it," she wrote playfully in one of her earliest columns. "Instead it is delectable salad, well proportioned as to ingredients and worth while acquiring a taste for."[41] Similarly, her focus on exceptional black musicians countermanded the pervasive racist idea that black musical ability was natural or innate, rather than the result of dedication and hard work. In short, Holt balanced an investment in conventional ideas about respectability with an interest in challenging racist ideas about black musical capability, all the while putting forth a more egalitarian conception of who could participate in classical music.

Holt also used her platform in the *Chicago Defender* to educate her readers. If criticism is inherently a pedagogical act because it models a way of responding to aesthetic experience, Holt's approach was notable in that she was less interested in establishing absolute critical authority than she was in circulating musical knowledge. Essays on topics such as "Program Making," "Music Appreciation," and "Audience Psychology" offered practical advice for readers who wanted to become better listeners and better musicians. For those seeking a more rigorous education, Holt suggested a "music interpretation course" encompassing "work in history of music, biographies of composers, schools of music, music form, operatic and symphonic discourses, and systematic attendance of concerts, interspersed with the use of the Victrola and player-piano."[42] Making use of the knowledge she had attained at the Chicago College of Music, she epitomized the black clubwomen's philosophy of "lifting as we climb," recognizing the atypical nature of her own educational opportunity and sharing the fruits of that opportunity with a broad audience.

Holt's pedagogical focus reflected the centrality of education to the black feminist intellectual tradition. Early twentieth-century debates around the education of African Americans are often framed as an opposition between Booker T. Washington's advocacy of vocational training and Du Bois's desire to provide the Talented Tenth with an elite liberal arts education, but black feminist intellectuals like Anna Julia Cooper took a different tack, emphasizing the need for higher education to be open to all without insisting upon its inherent superiority.[43] Holt's work can be situated in a Cooperian tradition, and its location in the *Chicago Defender* made that accessibility possible on an unprecedented scale. By offering music education to the masses via the press, Holt rejected white Americans' proprietary claims upon classical music and evaded the historical and institutional barriers that typically rendered it unattainable.

[41] Lena James Holt, "Cultivating Symphony Concerts," *Chicago Defender*, November 10, 1917.
[42] Nora Douglas Holt, "Music Appreciation, Non-Professional," *Chicago Defender*, November 2, 1918.
[43] On Cooper and black feminist philosophies of education, see Vivian May, *Anna Julia Cooper, Visionary Black Feminist: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

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Holt also transformed the concert review itself into an opportunity for transgressive pedagogy, particularly when she attended performances by the Chicago Opera Association and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—institutions that were nominally open to black audiences but had very few black attendees in practice. Using atmospheric details to convey her affective experience, she advanced an alternative model of embodied listening and invited readers to become, in effect, vicarious concertgoers. Reviewing opening night at the Chicago Opera Association in 1917, Holt wrote with characteristic vivacity, setting the scene with abundant sensory detail: "First night at the opera! Amber lights, accentuated by gold settings; greens and blues of peacocks, listless, tip-tilted and defiant; murmuring voices, Schonbergerian in nuances and dissonances; stately ladies, warm velvets and luxurious furs; a raised baton and Maestro Campanini has launched the Chicago Opera company into history as the most remarkable in the world."[44] These lines, which preceded an otherwise straightforward review of the performance, were not simply a bit of extraneous detail. Rather, Holt used her embodied subjectivity to invite African American readers into the predominantly white institutional space of the opera house, creating a discursive space in which music could create powerful affective bonds. Come with me, she seemed to say; imagine yourself basking in the glow of the amber lights. Moreover, by characterizing her fellow audience members' voices as "Schonbergerian," Holt reframed her preconcert listening in sonic terms. She reiterated her ability to critique both performance *and* audience, making clear that she was observing her fellow operagoers just as they were likely surveilling her, a black woman in a white space. With this characterization, Holt taught her readers how to listen to the voices that pervaded the unfamiliar terrain of the opera house, both onstage and off. Her further description of those voices as "dissonances" subtly spoke back to how other operagoers might consider her and others' racialized presence socially dissonant, implying that white listeners' voices, not black ones, held disruptive potential.

Conversely, Holt chastised African Americans who did not attend classical music concerts, making no secret of her frustration (and, once again, revealing her tendency toward classist rhetoric) when she found herself one of only a handful of black listeners at a given performance. But when they did attend, she embraced the opportunity for dialogue. In a column that previewed upcoming Chicago Symphony Orchestra concerts, Holt announced, "Students attending Saturday evening programs will find the musical critic in the lobby of the first balcony during the ten minutes' intermission, where she will be pleased to discuss various symphonic works with interested persons."[45] The image confirms Holt's dedication to pedagogy, but it also compels speculation: what might have happened when a group of black listeners congregated in the Orchestra Hall lobby, carving out physical space within a white-dominated institution and engaging with the music therein on their own terms? Their very presence and the sound of their voices joining in discussion—the colors and fabrics of their clothing, the murmuring expression of

[44] Lena James Holt, "The Opera," *Chicago Defender*, November 17, 1917.
[45] Lena James Holt, "The Symphony Concert," *Chicago Defender*, February 9, 1918.

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their ideas—would become part of the sensory ambience Holt evoked; their conversation about "various symphonic works" would constitute an instance of music criticism in its own right. Readers' heretofore vicarious experience of reading about the symphony would become an opportunity to forge a tangible, if ephemeral, black musical community rooted in a collective engagement with symphonic music. With this proposal, Holt showed how the multiracial "music world" that emerged in speculative form in her columns might take actual shape, and she harnessed the power of the press to begin writing a different future into being.

Sounding Emancipation in *Music and Poetry*

In January 1921, Nora Holt established a magazine that espoused and embodied her black feminist commitments and audiotopian ideas (Figure 3). *Music and Poetry* featured editorials, essays, and sheet music by a distinguished roster of contributors, including composer Clarence Cameron White, violinist Kemper Harreld, pianist Helen Hagan, and musicologist Maud Cuney Hare. Like the *Chicago Defender*, the magazine "cater[ed] to no one city or locality exclusively": it was sold in Chicago, Tuskegee, Boston, Montgomery, Indianapolis, Bowling Green, Dallas, and Washington, DC, and mailed to subscribers in such diverse locales as "Honolulu, South America, Cuba, Canada, England, France and Africa" at a cost of twenty-five cents per issue or $2.50 per year.[46] With about three thousand subscribers, *Music and Poetry* reached far fewer readers than the *Chicago Defender*, but it offered Holt editorial independence and the opportunity to reach a specialized audience.[47] Holt served as editor-in-chief. In contrast to the *Chicago Defender*'s male-dominated masthead, the majority of its editors were black women.[48] Published monthly, *Music and Poetry* was short-lived, depleting its funding after the death of Holt's wealthy husband. The magazine ceased publication in 1922.[49]

In the magazine's inaugural editorial, Holt situated its founding within an expansive set of ideas about music, race, and freedom. "'Music and Poetry' is born," she wrote, "at a time when we are just awakening to the surge and value of an inborn musical sense which has since our transmigration disturbed and conflicted with our turbid ethnical surroundings, waiting for its day of emancipation." She evoked

[46] "How We Found Subscribers," *Music and Poetry*, March 1921, 45.

[47] This figure (three thousand) comes from a notice in the August/September 1921 issue.

[48] Associate editors included Cleota Collins, Helen Hagan, Bertha Baumann, and Mildred Bryant Jones. As Jayne Marek has argued, the politics of editorship, gender, and race were deeply fraught during the Harlem Renaissance era, and editors often devalued or ignored black women's contributions. Black women editors like Holt were few and far between, but they played an important role in shaping black print culture. Marek, "Women Editors and Little Magazines," 106–7.

[49] Only the first nine issues are extant. The magazine ran monthly from January through October, except for a combined August/September 1921 issue. In a handwritten note (dated November 1942) in the Beinecke Library's copy of the January 1921 issue, Holt writes, "It ran until some time in 1922 and altogether there were about 24 numbers. The magazine was supported and financed by the editor's husband, and after his death was discontinued for lack of finances. It was a labor of great joy and of course great disappointment when it was finally given up." *Music and Poetry* (January 1921), James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of African American Arts and Letters, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

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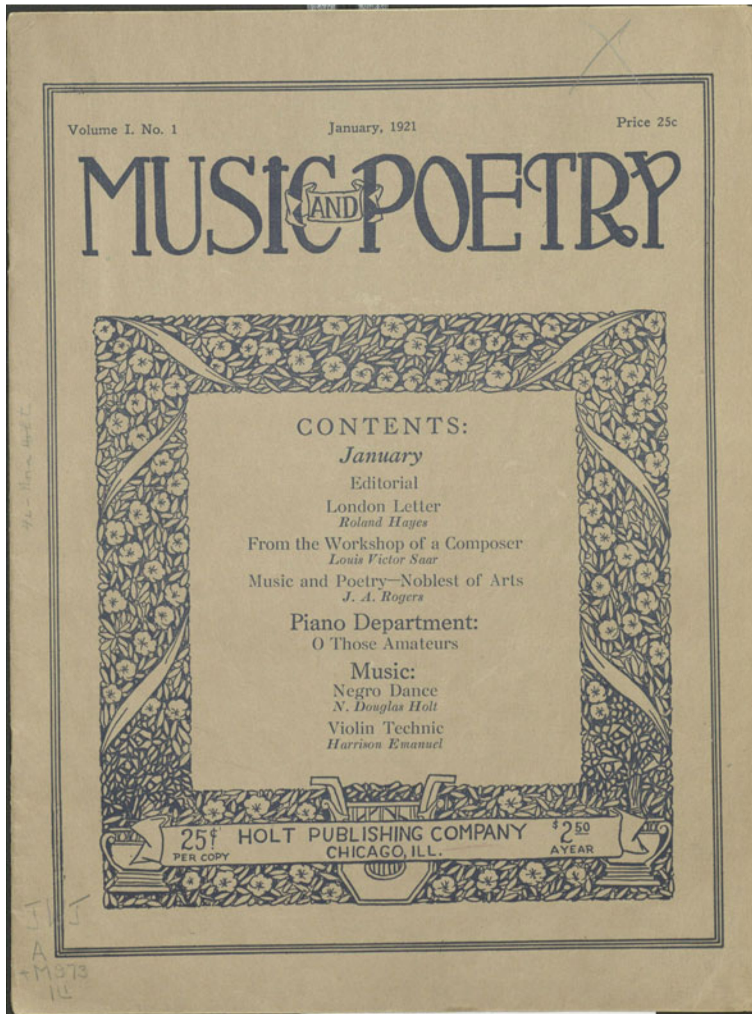

Figure 3. The cover of the first issue of *Music and Poetry* (January 1921). James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of African American Arts and Letters, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

the stereotype of black musicality as natural or "inborn," then repurposed it to highlight the impossibility of black musicians' flourishing under adverse social conditions. Her reference to "emancipation" suggested the magnitude of the magazine's aspirations, joining it with the long sweep of post–Civil War US history yet asserting that, in 1921, emancipation still remained unrealized.[50] Given the persistence of Jim Crow segregation and white supremacist racial terrorism, to some

[50] Holt's use of the term "emancipation" had precedents in the work of composer Nathaniel Dett, who wrote an essay with a chapter on "The Emancipation of Negro Music" in 1920, and that of Holt's mentor Nathaniel Clark Smith, who composed a musical piece for voices and orchestra called "Prayer from Emancipation" in 1917.

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extent legalized emancipation was, as Saidiya Hartman has written, a "nonevent."[51] Holt suggested that this state of affairs—which led directly to the racial violence and entrenched racism that permeated everyday life for her and other black Chicagoans —also rendered black artistic liberation impossible. Yet she remained defiantly hopeful that *aesthetic* emancipation might at last resolve the profound dissonance between the reality of black life under white supremacy and the utopian ideal of freedom.

Reaching that ideal would require a great deal of work, and *Music and Poetry* was prepared to do it. The magazine's collective ethos complicates what Tammy Kernodle, in her work on jazz and gender, has characterized as the trope of the "exceptional black woman," a stereotype that forecloses accounts of collaboration among artists and minimizes black women's offstage work as organizers of musical spaces and networks.[52] Instead, it centered the work of black composers, writers, and musicians, making clear that their shared expertise, rooted in racialized experience, would be at the foundation of classical music's future. In line with Holt's black feminist intellectual commitments, *Music and Poetry* prioritized the circulation and co-creation of knowledge over the hierarchical production of it. To that end, it featured detailed pedagogical advice. In the Piano Department and Violin Department, guest authors—mostly women—detailed their musical training for readers' edification. "Junior Music and Poetry," aimed at children, was filled with games, puzzles, and trivia, and an advice column called "Pianoforte Questions" provided information to piano students and teachers. The Voice Department, edited by Cleota Collins, offered guidance on subjects from vocal mechanics (letting the tongue "lie loosely in the mouth against the lower front teeth") to how to comport oneself when practicing (at a low volume, in front of a mirror, standing) to the proper diet ("it will require a little self-denial in the way of rich pastries").[53]

The ideological implications of *Music and Poetry*'s pedagogy were ambivalent. In one sense, the magazine echoed the rhetoric of racial uplift in its focus on individual responsibility and hard work. An article addressed to piano students, for instance, urged "unremitting diligence in faithful study and intelligent, thoughtful practice."[54] Yet while acknowledging the potential elitism of the assumption that such advice was needed or wanted by its recipients, it is also possible to read that same rhetoric as one of radical accessibility. Knowing that such pedagogical knowledge was normally shared only within the context of a student-teacher relationship, writers for *Music and Poetry* circulated what they had learned publicly, allowing interested parties to listen in on what were essentially private lessons.

In addition to advice directed at individuals, *Music and Poetry* promoted larger-scale change, offering a sort of blueprint for constructing the "Music World" sketched out in the *Chicago Defender*. Imani Perry has identified "black

[51] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 140.

[52] Tammy L. Kernodle, "Black Women Working Together: Jazz, Gender, and the Politics of Validation," *Black Music Research Journal* 34, no. 1 (2014).

[53] Cleota Collins, "The Practice Period," *Music and Poetry*, June 1921, 8; and "The Singer's Health," *Music and Poetry*, May 1921, 7.

[54] Mildred Bryant Jones, "Requisites for Success as a Pianist," *Music and Poetry*, February 1921, 26.

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associational life" as a key feature of post-emancipation African American life, by which communities established institutional spaces—schools, churches, clubs—to strengthen black cultural identity.[55] Holt used her magazine to advance a similar project. She asked "each reader to be a collaborator" in contributing relevant material to the magazine, and published an "Artist Directory," containing the addresses of eminent musicians across the country, at the conclusion of each issue.[56] A recurring item proclaimed "The Musician's Creed for 1921": "I Will Use Something of Negro Origin on Every Program," urging performers to adhere to a racial "spirit of loyalty" and program worthy compositions by black composers. Through these efforts, Holt worked toward circumventing the structural barriers that restricted African Americans' engagements with classical music, articulating an alternative future for the art form in which a culture of mutual support and collaboration helped build a robust musical infrastructure. This, too, was a black feminist project, committed not simply to reforming individuals' behavior but rather to changing the institutional texture of black musical life. Her ambitions were profound: a July 1921 editorial paraphrased Lincoln's Second Inaugural to assert that *Music and Poetry*'s generous outlook toward fellow musicians proved it "capable of loving and being just to all, with malice toward none."[57] As in her opening call for "emancipation," Holt again linked her work with African American history writ large, envisioning music as a path toward freedom.

In support of this endeavor, *Music and Poetry* actively refuted examples of anti-black racism in US musical culture. In one issue, Holt reported on Irving Berlin's contention that the nation's most popular songwriters were "pure white blooded." After disproving Berlin's claim and noting his indebtedness to black musical traditions, Holt opined that African Americans needed to advocate for themselves in the musical public sphere; otherwise, she admonished, "our contribution to music in America is doomed to be shelved . . . our only avenues for its preservation are through Negro composers and propagandists."[58] Along similar lines, Holt tore down the Spanish journalist and novelist Vicente Blasco Ibáñez's absurd claim that "The Negro could never write an opera nor a symphony, but he has an unquestioned superiority in musical emotion that can be expressed through the feet." Dismissing Ibáñez's sentiments as "illogical," "fallacious," and "the ultimatum of inadequate and fragmentary information," Holt provided counterexamples (for instance, the Afro-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor) and urged African Americans to continue "educating the ignorant."[59] By refuting these claims in the public forum of *Music and Poetry*, Holt not only demonstrated her own expertise, but also modeled a way for her readers to do the same when they encountered racist ideas about black musicality in their own lives.

[55] Imani Perry, *May We Forever Stand: A History of the Black National Anthem* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018), 6–8.

[56] "A Letter to Our Readers," *Music and Poetry*, January 1921, 5.

[57] "Passing Notes," *Music and Poetry*, July 1921, 5.

[58] "Reviving Irving Berlin's Memory," *Music and Poetry*, January 1921, 18.

[59] "Thus Spake Ibanez," *Music and Poetry*, March 1921, 45.

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Holt also noted white composers' propensity to misrepresent blackness musically, resorting to what she termed stereotypical "caricatures" rather than complex, multidimensional "portraits." She observed sardonically that "The procedure is patented now—a quick downward intonation on a minor third, jiggling figures and syncopated rhythms in various choirs, one good spirited tune that everyone has heard . . . the shuffling of a sand bar, clap-clap of a paddle, a boom and a crash and there you are, a correct caricature of the Negro."[60] She had made a similar critique in the *Chicago Defender* in 1918, expressing her concern that black music was "being sacrificed on the altar of popularity by ambitious [white] composers."[61] In both instances, Holt called for black composers to take control of the narrative by writing and publishing their own music.

To that end, each issue of *Music and Poetry* featured a piece of sheet music. Two of Holt's own compositions were published: *Negro Dance*, for piano, in the January 1921 issue, and *The Sand-Man*, an art song with text by Paul Laurence Dunbar, in the June 1921 issue. *Negro Dance*, just four pages long and clocking in at under two minutes in performance, zooms by in 2/4 time (Figure 4).[62] Its style evokes ragtime, and, as Samantha Ege notes, the work also "pays tribute to the Juba" in its rhythmic complexity.[63] A syncopated G-major melody, bobbing over a busy accompaniment, falls nearly two octaves in the span of four measures, while the bass line inches chromatically upward. In the following section, in E minor and marked *agitato*, irregular phrase lengths of nine or seven measures lend the piece off-kilter momentum. Later on, the phrases regularize in length while the piece becomes more harmonically adventurous. The final measures of *Negro Dance* return to G major, and the piece ends with a definitive final cadence. Even this small-scale work departs notably from the "caricature" style Holt decried, replacing the simplicity of a "good spirited tune" with winding virtuosity. Like her articles refuting Berlin's and Ibáñez's false claims, *Negro Dance* served a corrective function, refuting prevalent misrepresentations of blackness. But like *Music and Poetry* more generally, it was also generative, offering a glimpse into an emancipated future for black feminist cultural production.

Strange Cosmopolites: A Black Feminist Critic Listens to Tchaikovsky

"Do you realize," Holt once mused, "what a tremendous moral weapon the Negro holds by virtue of his wonderful music? Negro music if used as propaganda might easily become the most potent factor in ameliorating conditions, softening prejudice

[60] "Caricatures and Portraits," *Music and Poetry*, April 1921, 65.

[61] Holt made these comments in the context of a review of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's performance of Henry Gilbert's "Comedy Overture on Negro Themes." "The Symphony Concert," *Chicago Defender*, March 9, 1918.

[62] For recordings of "Negro Dance," see Helen Walker-Hill, piano, *Kaleidoscope: Music by African-American Women*, Leonarda #LE339, 1995, compact disc, and Samantha Ege, piano, "Negro Dance," YouTube video, 2:13, posted on February 19, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8i1ORmC6EUY.

[63] Samantha Ege, "Florence Price and the Politics of Her Existence," *Kapralova Society Journal* 16, no. 1 (2018): 8.

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Figure 4. Mm. 1-20 of *Negro Dance*. Transcribed by Zach Sheets. *Music and Poetry* (January 1921), James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of African American Arts and Letters, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

and creating an understanding between the races."[64] The claim encapsulates Holt's faith in the inherent worth of black music and musicians, but it also elucidates a more capacious belief: that music in general was a tool that might contest racial prejudice and compel interracial harmony. These were conditional outcomes, not inevitable ones; they would occur only if dedicated listeners used music as "propaganda," harnessing it to specific ethical and political goals. Bringing to mind Josh Kun's assertion that an audiotopia is a "musical space of difference, where contradictions and conflicts do not cancel each other out but coexist and live through each other," Holt's black feminist audiotopia did not imagine a music world where racial

[64] Nora Douglas Holt, "Music," *Chicago Defender*, February 28, 1920.

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distinctions fell away.[65] Instead, she linked her ideas to her lived experience as a black woman attending concerts in primarily white spaces that featured primarily music by white composers. By professing faith in musical possibility but maintaining a black feminist commitment to the inseparability of ideas from experience, Holt worked against tired arguments for classical music's supposed universalism or transcendence; it was not despite but rather because of her race and gender that she fully grasped music's potential.

This perspective emerges in nuanced detail in Holt's criticism of a single musical work, Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony.[66] She wrote about the piece on two separate occasions: first in a 1917 *Chicago Defender* review of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and again in a 1922 "News of the Music World" column. Although quite different in terms of interpretive substance, Holt's two analyses together constitute some of her most perceptive criticism. Both contextualized her personal affective response to Tchaikovsky within a broader consideration of how that music forged connections across borders of genre, race, and nation.

In her review of November 17, 1917, Holt detailed her complex response to Tchaikovsky's symphony and characterized it as a conduit for interracial understanding. She began by claiming the symphony as her own in deeply personal terms. When she was a child, her mentor (the composer and bandleader N. Clark Smith) took her to hear a performance of the work. "I remember," Holt reminisced, "When the last song of each instrument had gone away I was crying softly, not knowing why, but cognizant of but one thing—supreme joy." Upon hearing the same music in 1917, she "found [her]self the same child again, adoring music and experiencing the same supreme joy." Emotions intermingled with expertise, as Holt also noted that she studied the score in advance of the concert, "reading and re-reading it, making tone images of how that passage or some other would sound, until I felt somewhat up to receiving it." After assessing the performance and the audience's rapturous reception ("the applause was deafening and continuous"), Holt concluded by describing an interpersonal interaction:

> Strange what cosmopolites music makes of us. The lady to my left had sat stoically through the five concerts until this symphony was read, then with no thought, evidently, of the usual stand of the Anglo-Saxon, began an animated discussion of the fine points of the number and inquiring of the tonal qualities of the various instruments. Truly Tschaikowsky [*sic*] achieved an ethnical success as well as a musical one, for the lady was gazing through the spirit of art and saw the soul instead of the skin.[67]

Holt and her fellow concertgoer became co-*listeners*, as it were, in a Du Boisian kingdom of culture. Refracting the hackneyed idea of musical universalism through a black feminist lens complementary to but distinct from that of Du Bois, Holt

[65] Kun, *Audiotopia*, 23.

[66] Tchaikovsky composed his Fourth Symphony in 1877 and 1878, during a famously turbulent period in his personal life. The composer described the work's central motif as evoking the theme of "fate," and it has been the subject of myriad programmatic interpretations. Among the best-known analyses of the work is Susan McClary's assessment of how its harmonic strategies relate to the composer's sexuality. McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 69–79.

[67] Lena James Holt, "The Opera," *Chicago Defender*, November 17, 1917.

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showed how music could cause a white female listener to reconsider her beliefs about racial difference. If this was an "ethnical" success, it was also an ethical one. In another context, the white woman's "gazing" might function as racial surveillance, a way of marking Holt's black female body as an interloper and a threat. But their shared listening instead created a world in which the social power of race was diluted, if only on a temporary, microcosmic basis.[68]

Of particular note is Holt's use of the term "cosmopolite," a word that evokes the crossing of national borders as well as racial ones. The word had multiple antecedents in the black press. In the 1850s, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* featured discussions of racial identity among contributors writing under the pen names Ethiop, Communipaw, and Cosmopolite; at the turn of the twentieth century, the journalist and novelist Pauline Hopkins used "cosmopolite" to describe a modern black subject who rejected national and racial boundaries.[69] Holt understood the term not as a static marker of identity, but rather as an elective affiliation. Music "*makes* of us" cosmopolites, she argued. It was a telling construction: anyone might become a cosmopolite via the affective responses that music produced in listeners, as they moved from being strangers to sharing the status of "strange" cosmopolites. The concert hall transformed into a site of interracial encounter in which Tchaikovsky's symphony made it possible to reject the national imperatives of Jim Crow segregation, creating a social reality unconstrained by the color line.

Holt also moved beyond the limits of the segregated nation by situating Tchaikovsky's music as the ideal conduit for the creation of an audiotopia that celebrated racial difference. Although this association might seem unlikely, in fact Holt's criticism frequently analogized Russian and African American versions of cultural nationalism, showing how Russian composers successfully created racialized music with a universal reach. For instance, she devoted *Music and Poetry*'s February 1921 editorial to an admiring overview of the Russian "Five" and their music's "racial stamp of musical individuality," predicting that African American composers would follow in the Five's footsteps.[70] Another article praised Rachmaninoff's Prelude in C-sharp minor, op. 3, no. 2, "mighty with the untamed passions of a

[68] Holt's narrative also links her to other black listeners, symbolic and real, who entered white-dominated music performance spaces. Canonical examples include Booker T. Washington, who, in his 1895 Atlanta Exposition Address, stated, "The opportunity to earn a dollar in a factory just now is worth infinitely more than to spend a dollar in an opera house." Booker T. Washington, "The Standard Printed Version of the Atlanta Exposition Address," September 18, 1895, in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan, vol. 3, *1889–95* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 586. In his short story "Of the Coming of John" in *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois recounts a black man whose ejection from a performance of Wagner's *Lohengrin* launches a course of events that culminates in a lynching, suggesting how racial terror is intertwined with less overtly violent practices like social segregation. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 228–49. Holt's experience also recalls the activism of Sarah Parker Remond, the African American abolitionist who, in 1855, purchased a ticket to a Donizetti opera in Boston, was pushed down the stairs by a guard, and successfully sued the venue, setting into motion the desegregation of Massachusetts theaters. See Mia Bay, "The Battle for Womanhood Is the Battle for Race: Black Women and Nineteenth-Century Racial Thought," in Bay et al., eds., *Toward an Intellectual History of Black Women*, 84.

[69] Gretchen Murphy, *Shadowing the White Man's Burden: U.S. Imperialism and the Problem of the Color Line* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 81–82.

[70] "Visions," *Music and Poetry*, February 1921, 25.

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newly awakened, half-barbaric race, vital with the essence of a tremendous historic situation." Yet the piece not only expressed "the savage exultation of the Russian people," the author noted, but also "stirs the depths of us all."[71] The November 1917 timing of Holt's review, in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution, suggests a further political valence. Many African Americans at the time looked to Russia as an example of how oppressed groups could effect successful social change. Earlier in 1917, a *Chicago Defender* article had asked, "The peasants and Jews and women of Russia have wrung from the hands of the despotism and tyranny of their country in war the too long delayed rights and justice as men and freemen. . . . Will the United States continue to discriminate against her Colored citizens?"[72] Without making such a direct comparison, Holt nevertheless raised the possibility of Russian music as an audiotopian space that fostered interracial understanding.

On March 11, 1922, Holt published a second article focused on Tchaikovsky's symphony. As in 1917, a local performance occasioned her criticism. But this time she cast the work in a different light. Holt again began by recalling her personal memories of the piece, even echoing the precise language of her previous review: in the years since last hearing a live performance, she had resorted to "reading and rereading the score, conjuring up the orchestral sounds as faithfully as memory and mental tone coloring would permit." Yet just before attending the performance she had so highly anticipated, she learned of the death, on March 4, of Bert Williams, "that inimitable comedian, whose humor always throbbed with a substrata of pathos." In a passage both poignant and virtuosic, Holt connected these events and her affective responses to each: "The depression which resulted could only find solace in the work of a great master like Tschaikowsky. And as I listened to the unfolding of the intensive life symbolisms so vividly depicted in this symphonic masterpiece, the life of the comedian, as I knew him, with his aspirations and disappointments, successes and failures, came before me as a counterpart of the musical thoughts Tschaikowsky painted 45 years ago." Replacing the notion of the symphony as an auditory space for interracial exchange with a focus on the affective affinities between two very different musical experiences, Holt delved further into the work's layers of meaning. In an idiosyncratic yet insightful movement-by-movement analysis of the symphony, she explained its well-known "Fate" motif and characterized the first movement as a contest between idealized dreams and the "weariness" of reality. The second was a "melancholy complex of suppressed desires. . . . The utter dejection of being misunderstood;" the third "a masterpiece in musical irony. The tragedy of laughing as we weep." The fourth movement, Holt concluded, represented a desperate attempt "to thwart fate," yet

[71] Ethel Minor Gavin, "Interpretation," *Music and Poetry*, April 1921, 74.

[72] "Discrimination in the United States Navy," *Chicago Defender*, March 31, 1917. On cultural connections between Russians and African Americans during this era, see Joy Gleason Carew, *Blacks, Reds, and Russians: Sojourners in Search of the Soviet Promise* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008). Holt also anticipated the ideas of black intellectuals like Claude McKay and W. E. B. Du Bois, who, during the 1920s and 1930s, idealized the Soviet Union as an antiracist political paradise.

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"Fate wins and another soul passes into that nebula of death whose veiled mysteries are impenetrable."[73]

These programmatic evocations—dreams interlaced with dejection, humor underscored with pathos, ambitions cut short by death—apply, of course, as much to Bert Williams as they do to Tchaikovsky's music. Clarifying without idealizing, Tchaikovsky spoke to something that Williams, too, conveyed: finding beauty and humor even in a world made ugly by powers beyond one's control. By introducing this analogy, Holt also suggested the symphony's ability to exemplify the affective dimensions of black cultural life in the age of Jim Crow. The work evoked what Holt had termed, in *Music and Poetry*, the black musician's struggle toward a yet-unrealized "day of emancipation." Its Sisyphean trajectory—one can strive and aspire with endless ambition, only to be crushed by larger forces, be those Fate or Racism—is Williams's, but it might also be familiar to any African American enduring everyday life under Jim Crow and white supremacy.

Holt's analysis here was audiotopian not because it depicted an idealized world, but because it revealed music's ability to clarify previously obscured connections among people, showing what Tchaikovsky had to do with Bert Williams and what both had to do with her own life as an African American woman. Deeply personal and situational, her criticism of the piece refuted the assimilationist assumption that classical music was a respectable way to get closer to whiteness; Tchaikovsky instead offered a way to understand blackness on more expansive terms. In contrast to the "love and theft" model that Eric Lott and others have used to characterize white artists' and audiences' appropriative relationship to black music, Holt's model was one of love, identification, and radical affinity.[74] Her love for Tchaikovsky's music did not lead her to steal it, but rather enabled her to expand the range of possible meanings that it offered to listeners.

If this sounds idealistic, it was. A sincere belief in music's world-making potential was central to Holt's criticism. Moreover, that belief was inseparable from her intellectual rigor and her black feminist commitment to harnessing critique toward emancipatory ends. She did not force a choice between entrance into a predominantly white classical music sphere or the creation of an autonomous black one. Rather, as her divergent analyses of Tchaikovsky's symphony show, a single musical work could catalyze interracial understanding *and* it could give expression to fundamental tenets of black experience. For her community of strange cosmopolites, music's function was simply to create new ways of understanding the world—a quixotic notion, perhaps, but one that had a profound impact upon Holt and her readers.

Conclusion

Through hundreds of articles in the periodical press, Holt made a significant contribution to early twentieth-century music discourse as a black feminist intellectual. In both the *Chicago Defender* and *Music and Poetry*, she put musical knowledge into

[73] "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender*, March 11, 1922.

[74] Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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circulation, sharing her ideas and experiences with a national African American readership. Her writing rejected the status quo of racial segregation and imagined more egalitarian alternatives that were rooted in pedagogy, the communal production of knowledge, and the creation of spaces where black musical life could flourish. Positioning herself explicitly as a black female subject rather than an anonymous or generalized listener, Holt envisioned a musical future that acknowledged the generative possibilities of racial difference. Close attention to her criticism of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony illuminates the depth of her ideas, as well as the sincerity of her belief that music really could improve the world.

As documentation of everyday musical life and as record of an audiotopian imaginary, Holt's criticism reveals new facets of racialized musical life in the early-twentieth-century United States and suggests directions for further research. For one, Holt's accounts of her experiences as a black woman in primarily white performance spaces, and interactions with other listeners therein, illuminate how even in the age of Jim Crow—an era marked by pervasive spatial and social segregation, the political and economic disenfranchisement of African Americans, and the omnipresent threat of white supremacist violence—concert halls could be sites of meaningful, if rare, interracial interaction. Moreover, Holt's attention to the varied and robust world of early twentieth-century African American classical music significantly augments our understanding of that world's richness and heterogeneity—a project that has deep roots in the musicological work of Eileen Southern, Doris McGinty, Josephine Wright, and others, yet remains in urgent need of further study.[75] In both its transgression of the musical color line and its attention to classical music's vibrancy in African American communities, then, Holt's work calls into question the efficacy of desegregation as the dominant framework for analyzing the lived experience of black classical musicians in the United States and suggests alternative possibilities for scholarly inquiry. The desegregation of classical music *performance* cannot be equated with the desegregation of classical music *listening*, and there remains much to learn about how audiences experienced music along and against the sonic color line.

The heterogeneity of Holt's endeavors also highlights the many ways that black women contributed to musical life in the age of Jim Crow: not only as singers or performers, but also as writers, educators, and editors. Moreover, her markedly multifaceted life—music critic, socialite, free spirit, composer, teacher, radio host, and more—suggests the importance of narrating black women's musical lives in ways that are complex not only in aggregate but also on the level of the individual. Holt's work and life illuminate how inadequate it is to cordon off black women's musical contributions within narrowly defined parameters, as well as the way that gendered and racialized historiographical biases continue to shape music history.[76]

[75] Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York; W. W. Norton, 1971); McGinty, "'As Large as She Can Make It'"; and Wright, "Black Women and Classical Music." Notably, Southern briefly discusses Holt's criticism. Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, 474.

[76] On the "specific practices of exclusion embedded within musicology" (782), see Matthew D. Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)Making of Musicological Discourse," in "Special Issue on Music, Race, and Ethnicity," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 781–823. On black women's contributions to classical music history, as well as the pervasiveness of

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Finally, the complexity of her thought attests to the sheer breadth and variety of black feminist intellectual life during the age of Jim Crow, suggesting more nuanced ways of theorizing black women's contributions to discourses of respectability and uplift, as well as their ideas about education, embodiment, affect, social change, and music itself.

After *Music and Poetry* ceased publication in 1922 and her tenure at the *Chicago Defender* concluded in 1923, Holt took a long break from criticism to travel, sing, socialize, scandalize, and, by all accounts, live well. When she returned to music criticism in 1944, writing for the *New York Amsterdam News* and, later, producing a radio program, "Nora Holt's Concert Showcase," which aired on the New York station WLIB from 1953 to 1964, her work shifted somewhat in focus. On the precipice of the modern civil rights movement, the desegregation of public musical spaces seemed a more immediately feasible goal, and Holt's tactics shifted accordingly: she spent less time imagining an audiotopian future and more arguing for specific changes, such as the long-overdue desegregation of the Metropolitan Opera.[77] Similarly, her move to the medium of radio responded to shifts in the broader landscape of black media production.[78] But her basic critical ethos remained the same. In a 1946 *Amsterdam News* piece titled "The Role of Music Critic," she argued that black music critics needed to be well-educated and highly knowledgeable, to write in an accessible style, and to promote talented artists so as to advance "the musical progress of the race."[79] By doing so, they could continue to challenge the racial and cultural hierarchies that stymied black musical life.

A century has passed since Holt's writing appeared in the early twentieth-century black press. In many ways, the audiotopias that she imagined have not yet come into being. Her beloved Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO) did not have a black musician on its roster until 2002, when trumpet player Tage Larsen joined the ensemble; to this day, its repertoire features almost exclusively works by white male composers. Yet in other ways, reality has moved closer to Holt's dreams. The CSO's African American Network, established in November 2016 and presently directed by Sheila Jones, hosts preconcert gatherings at Orchestra Hall for black ticketholders at select performances—events akin to those Holt envisioned when she invited readers of the *Chicago Defender* to meet her in the lobby at intermission.[80] The group also maintains a robust Facebook page, using today's mass-communication media to similar ends as Holt used the black press. In May 2018, the African

associations between classical music and whiteness, see Kira Thurman, "Performing Lieder, Hearing Race: Debating Blackness, Whiteness, and German Identity in Interwar Central Europe," in "Special Issue on Music, Race, and Ethnicity," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 825–65.

[77] Nora Holt, "Negroes Eye Opera, But—," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 22, 1950.

[78] Though outside the scope of this article, the emergence of black radio as a platform for music criticism is an important topic worthy of further study. On the history of black radio, see William Barlow, *Voice Over: The Making of Black Radio* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

[79] Nora Holt, "The Role of Music Critic," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 14, 1946.

[80] In July 2018, Jones was appointed Director of Community Stewardship/African American Network by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association. "CSOA appoints Sheila Jones as its Director of Community Stewardship," CSO Sounds & Stories, July 18, 2018, https://csosoundsandstories.org/csoa-appoints-sheila-jones-as-its-director-of-community-stewardship/.

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American conductor Roderick Cox received the Sir Georg Solti Conducting Award, an honor affiliated with the CSO. As associate conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra, Cox recently went viral in a video in which he conducts none other than Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony.[81] Holt's criticism is an apt reminder that such developments have deep historical roots. With her criticism as a guide, the musical future she imagined might, at long last, begin to take shape, creating a "music world" more just and more free.

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[81] The video reached over eight million viewers worldwide. "Biography," Roderick Cox, http://www.roderickcox.com/bio.

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