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Diva, Ambassador, and Activist: The Multifaceted Career of Black Opera Singer Lillian Evanti

By

ELIZABETH GRACE CAMPBELL
DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Musicology

in the

OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

of the

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

DAVIS

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2023

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Abstract

This project focuses on the long-neglected career of Lillian Evanti (1890-1967), one of the first African Americans to sing opera in Europe. I employ a biographical lens to explore how Black classical singers in the first half of the twentieth century negotiated expectations to perform their race sonically, investigating Evanti's background and motivations, along with the varying social and artistic contexts of her performances in Europe, North America, and South America. She was type-cast into exotic roles for her debut as the Indian princess Lakmé in Delibes' eponymous opera in France in 1925. However, in Italy she frequently portrayed white characters, whereas in Germany and the U.S., discrimination limited her to the recital stage. On her song programs she placed African American spirituals alongside Lieder and opera aria thus responding to ideas held by the Black elite who saw opportunity for cultural vindication through merging Black folk music with classical forms.

In the 1940s, Evanti sang African American spirituals across Latin America as an informal cultural ambassador thus promoting Black American art as an element of American culture that could unite the Western hemisphere. In 1943, she finally got her chance to perform an opera on American soil, singing the role of Violetta in Verdi's *La Traviata* with the National Negro Opera Company (NNOC). Throughout, I draw on newspaper reviews and archival records to analyze style and genre expectations for Black singers, which promoted stereotypes while also offering opportunities for subversion and infiltration that challenged the whiteness of opera and classical song.

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Author's Note

I was drawn to this research because the contributions of Black opera singers are a rich and important part of the history of music in the United States that receives insufficient attention. This dissertation will include quotations of racist comments. I have done my best to contextualize these remarks and mobilize them as evidence of discriminatory treatment. The term "Negro" also appears repeatedly in this text. Although the word has fallen out of common usage, for many years it was the preferred term for a person of African American descent. I have attempted to limit its usage to occasions where the individual or organization self-identified as "Negro." I also capitalize the word "Black" when writing about Black people, reflecting its usage describing a group of people with a shared cultural identity.

Acknowledgments

This dissertation would never have reached its final form without the guidance and support of many. My studies were greatly enhanced by the generosity of the Russell J. and Dorothy S. Bilinski Educational Foundation, the Smithsonian Institution, and the University of California, Davis Humanities Institute, and Womxn's Resources and Research Center. I thank the the librarians and staff at the Anacostia Community Museum, in particular Jennifer Morris, for sharing their many treasures with me. And thank you, Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr., for your foresight and generosity in donating the papers and memorabilia of your grandmother, Lillian Evanti, to the Anacostia Community Museum.

I owe deep gratitude to my teachers and mentors at the University of California, Davis. They include: Christopher A. Reynolds, who encouraged my curiosity while steering my first encounters with Lillian Evanti; Pierpaolo Polzonetti, for guiding an instrumentalist through opera; Beth E. Levy, for asking questions that clarify my thinking leading the graduate student writing group; and Gail Finney, for advice on German translation. And most of all, my advisor Carol A. Hess, who pushes me to do my best with a combination of insightful feedback and dry humor. I appreciate your time and clear investment in my success. I have learned so much from you and will carry that knowledge with me wherever I go.

Thank you to my friends and fellow graduate students for advice and a listening ear. And to my many writing partners, in particular Emily Baumgart, Gillian Irwin, Sarah Miller, Esther Delozier, and Melita Denny. To my pandemic roommates, Sarah, Kristin, and Rex, thanks for keeping me sane when it felt like the world was falling apart. And with greatest love to my parents and sister who always support me, no matter how many miles separate us, I dedicate my dissertation to you.

Introduction: Evanti, The Toast of Three Continents

Image 0.1: "The Toast of Three Continents," *Baltimore Afro-American,* 20 November 1948.

> If you can persuade multitudes to sing together — or even to listen together — you have solved many of their most wearisome problems. Walt Whitman was right when he prophesied . . . I Hear America Singing . . . We shall come to that one day.
>
> – Lillian Evanti

These words grace an advertisement printed on 20 November 1948 in the *Baltimore Afro-*

American. Like many Black newspapers of the early-twentieth century, it published brief biographies of pioneering African Americans, presumably to inspire readers. This advertisement, by the bread company Old Home Bakers, celebrated the international career of the African American coloratura soprano Lillian Evanti (1890-1967), proclaiming her to be the "Toast of Three Continents." Evanti — born Annie Lillian Evans but whose professional name I use here — was one of the first African Americans to sing with an opera company in Europe. She made her debut in Nice in 1925, thus opening a path for future stars such as Marian Anderson and Jessye Norman. In the 1940s, she traveled across Latin America as a cultural ambassador, giving lecture-recitals on African American spirituals to promote Pan-American unity. Back home in the United States, Evanti mainly sang in recitals but also performed with the National Negro Opera Company. The advertisement shown here positions her as a performer who used her voice to connect across divisions of race and nation. Indeed, Evanti spent her life pushing against boundaries. However, racism limited her career opportunities, revealing deep contradictions in the perceived cultural value of African American music and musicians.

Evanti adapted Whitman's celebrated poem to her own purpose. His ode to working-class labor honors the individual's place among the whole in a cacophony of "varied carols" as each worker metaphorically sings their contribution. For Evanti, the most "wearisome problems" were generated by racial prejudice rather than class. In the din of the first half of the twentieth century, isolating Evanti's voice allows us to consider questions such as: How do race and class affect music making? Why are Black musics and musicians such a powerful symbol of the United States even in light of racial prejudice? How do African American classical singers confront and counter racism? And, in light of these other questions, how should we understand the limited presence of Black singers in opera?

In this dissertation, I argue that Evanti, who has never been the subject of an extended scholarly study, fought for the recognition of the Black experience in opera. I also join other recent scholars, surveyed below, who are increasingly considering the antecedents and echoes of the Harlem Renaissance to create a richer understanding of Black art and thought in the United States. In addition, I broach the largely unexplored topic of African American participation in the cultural diplomacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt's Good Neighbor policy, which preceded the better-known — and racially charged — jazz diplomacy of the Cold War. In sum, examining Evanti's career illuminates the techniques, networks, and institutions that African American musicians developed to combat racism and create art.

Sources and Approach

I encountered Lillian Evanti during my first-ever graduate seminar. In this course, on middlebrow culture and women song composers with Dr. Christopher Reynolds, I noticed Evanti, not in her primary role as a singer but as a composer. On first encounter, I neatly tucked her away, weaving her into the footnotes of a paper on another subject. But my thoughts kept turning to her and I began to assemble the rough outlines of her life from webpages and the single scholarly article dedicated to her.[1] I discovered that Evanti was connected to many key Black scholars and artists of the twentieth century. She collaborated with the Harlem Renaissance poet Georgia Douglas Johnson, was a frequent correspondent of W.E.B. Du Bois, and traveling companion of Jessie Redmon Fauset, the magazine editor. Evanti rubbed shoulders with Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson, her father was a protégé of Booker T.

[1] Eric Ledell Smith, "Lillian Evanti: Washington's African American Diva," *Washington History* 11, no. 1 (1999): 24-43.

Washington, and she was photographed by Carl Van Vechten. In a moment of startling serendipity, during another graduate seminar, with Dr. Carol Hess on musical Pan Americanism, I discovered that Evanti was also connected to this movement.

I was stunned by the lack of secondary literature on this vibrant figure, especially as I became increasingly aware of the wealth of primary sources from archives and newspapers. The Evans-Tibbs Collection at the Anacostia Community Museum, a Smithsonian-affiliated institution, is a rich source of information on Evanti. It includes some material from the Evans-Tibbs Art Gallery, initially run by Evanti's grandson Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. In 1996 the gallery closed, and Tibbs Jr. gave a part of the collection to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which was transferred to the National Gallery of Art in 2014 when the Corcoran closed.[2] After Tibbs Jr. died, many items were gifted to the Anacostia Community Museum, including, letters, travel documents, sheet music and scores, photographs, concert programs, and Evanti's piano.

Of particular interest in this collection is Evanti's unpublished 179-page autobiography, "The Negro in Grand Opera." Harry B. Webber, a Black journalist employed by the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Baltimore Afro-American*, wrote the introduction and may have edited the document.[3] Of its seventeen chapters, the first thirteen are devoted to Evanti's life story and four to biographical sketches of other Black singers. The early chapters are well-formed, but further into the manuscript, the quality of the writing declines, with many lapses in clarity. Additionally,

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[2] "In the Library: The Evans-Tibbs Archive of African American Art," National Gallery of Art, 21 January-12 April 2019, https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2019/evans-tibbs-archive-of-african-american-art.html.

[3] Lillian Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera" (unpublished autobiography), typescript, box 32, folder 17, Evans-Tibbs collection, Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution, gift of the estate of Thurlow E. Tibbs, Jr. (hereafter E-T collection); Harry Webber, "The Other Harry Webber," MadisonAveNew, 6 April 2008, https://madisonavenew.wordpress.com/2008/06/04/the-other-harry-webber/.

Evanti wrote this document decades after the events depicted and sometimes scrambled the timeline of events.[4] Thanks to a Smithsonian Institution Fellowship, I traveled to Washington, D.C., in the fall of 2021 to peruse all these materials. Other archives I visited were the Howard University Archives, the National Negro Opera Company Collection at the Library Congress, the Moten Family Papers at the Library of Congress, and the Center for Black Music Research at Columbia College in Chicago.

Another significant source of information for this study was full-text searchable online newspaper databases. Journalists chasing the newspaperman's mandate of "who, what, where, and when" tracked Evanti's journeys across the globe. Newspaper reviews granted insight into concert halls, bringing Evanti's voice to life through the pens of critics. Most of the reviews I analyze are found in African American newspapers which, in the absence of primary sources, recorded Black life in America with remarkable care and reflection. Black newspapers of particular importance to this project include *The Washington Bee, The New York Age, The Chicago Defender, The Pittsburgh Courier, The New York Amsterdam News,* and *The Chicago Bee.* In addition to covering events, Black journalists wished to influence African American society. As in Evanti's product endorsement for Old Home Bread, shown above, newspapers worked to build a positive reputation for Black people, and constantly encouraged African Americans to achieve. In addition to newspapers, Black periodicals also sought to influence Black communities. One of the most famous of these was *The Crisis,* the official magazine of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), founded in 1909. Under the editorship of Fauset, the publication served as a cradle for many Harlem Renaissance writers.

[4] Evanti offered the book to the publisher Lippincott who never responded. Lillian Evanti to Lippincott Publishing, nd., box 32, folder 24, E-T collection.

These two primary-source groups, archival materials and newspapers, balanced each other: whereas periodicals provide an outside account, Evanti's own papers flesh out newspaper headlines through the personal experiences of one individual.

It would be wonderful to check the glowing press reviews of Evanti's singing against sound recordings, but such recordings remain tantalizingly out of reach. Although Evanti made recordings for Voice of America and for a radio station in Vienna, the only recording I was able to locate was a self-made recording of her own compositions "On Furlough Mañana" and "My Little Prayer." When I tried to obtain this recording from an online bookseller, I learned that it would cost me $2,000, far too much for any graduate student's budget, especially considering that the record was badly scratched and might not even play.

White supremacist historiography erases Black experiences and achievements. By examining the details of Evanti's life I hope to further the field of musicology's recent acknowledgement of the richness of the Black classical music tradition. Additionally, an intimate portrait of an individual counters the dehumanizing effects of racism. This case study highlights the effects of the tides of history on an individual and in doing so, can alter the reader's perception of the past.

Literature Review

Although there is only one published scholar article about Evanti, there is a wealth of scholarship on African American music in the United States.[5] Pioneers such as Josephine Wright and Eileen Southern were among the first seriously to consider Black classical musicians in the

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[5] Smith, "Lillian Evanti: Washington's African American Diva."

United States.[6] The *Black Music Research Journal,* founded in 1980 by Samuel A. Floyd, was another important source, as it offered a platform to publish scholarship on Black musicians. Examining these efforts invites the question: What is Black about Black music? Floyd locates a mythological core rooted in African cultural memory and argues that all Black music is culturally and musically related.[7] Floyd's essentializing approach risks becoming too general but, by focusing on myth, he captures music's importance in forming individual and group identity. His careful scrutiny of the tension between the rituals expected in a classical concert hall as opposed to a church or a jazz club reveals how communities interact with music, a subject to which I remain attentive in my research on Evanti. In contrast, Ronald Radano emphasizes Black music's heterogeneity.[8] He asserts that Black music draws upon other cultures rather than resulting from an inherent Blackness, thus opening discussion on how music helps construct a changing Black identity. To be sure, acknowledging outside influences opens up claims that Black music is derivative and unintelligible. Radano, however, contends that Black music gains definition through a shared belief in racial difference enacted in sound. Both points of view are important to our understanding of Evanti, who specialized in white European classical music, but also performed spirituals.

To contextualize Evanti's formative environment in the Black middle and upper classes in Washington, D.C., I have drawn on the work of Willard Gatewood. According to him, this

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[6] Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971); Eileen Southern and Josephine Wright, *African-American Traditions in Song, Sermon, Tale, and Dance, 1600s-1920: An Annotated Bibliography of Literature, Collections, and Artworks* (New York: Greenwood Press).

[7] Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 10.

[8] Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

group emerged after Reconstruction as some elite African Americans, mostly well-educated, light-skinned individuals, integrated into white society.[9] These "colored aristocrats" separated themselves from the Black masses by adopting white high-society values. Yet, by the time Evanti was born in 1890, socially and legally mandated Jim Crow segregation threatened these carefully cultivated divisions within Black society. Whereas Gatewood emphasizes the elites' strategies to show their separation, Jacqueline M. Moore argues that the upper class increasingly strengthened relationships with lower-class Black people as they sought to become leaders of the race.[10] Among the many questions these new leaders faced was the role of women in African American society. In the early-twentieth century, women were thought to play a special role as virtuous figures who upheld family values which included inculcating a love of the arts. Instilling appreciation for music was one of their duties as Marian Wilson Kimber, Jessica Foy, and Craig H. Roell all argue. Not only was music education a part of a woman's duty as keeper of the family ethos, but by extension, women acted as custodians of community morals as well.[11] In addition, music was often performed at women's club meetings, where it was understood by club members to be elevating.

Indeed, art was a crucial avenue for racial uplift. Producing and consuming Western European fine art, literature, and music demonstrated refinement. As musicologist Lawrence

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[9] Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 49.

[10] Jacquline M. Moore, *Leading the Race: The Transformation of the Black Elite in the Nation's Capital, 1880-1920* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

[11] Marian Wilson Kimber, *The Elocutionists: Women, Music, and the Spoken Word*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Jessica H. Foy, "The Home Set to Music," in *The Arts and the American Home, 1890-1930,* 62-85, edited by Jessica H. Foy and Karal Ann Marling (Knoxville University of Tennessee Press, 1994); Craig H. Roell, "The Piano in the American Home," in *The Arts and the American Home, 1890-1930,* 85-110, edited by Jessica H. Foy and Karal Ann Marline (Knoxville University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

Schenbeck notes, Black urban churches viewed music as a means to an end, a tool they could use to enhance social status.[12] Patronage of classical music outside of the church also reflected dignified bourgeois behavior. This same logic applied to opera, the area to which Evanti devoted so much energy.

Uplift continued to be linked to the fine arts during the Harlem Renaissance. However, scholars David Levering Lewis and Nathan Huggins find the movement self-defeating in its focus on Western standards of art rather than African American traditions.[13] Jon Michael Spencer, on the other hand, resists this contention, arguing that the Harlem Renaissance artists were protesting the stereotypes that lived in the white public's imagination, not dismissing African American culture.[14] For example, Karen Bryan and Christi Jay Wells have studied the National Negro Opera Company (1941-1962) and its efforts to "further the dreams of our racial group," as its founder Mary Cardwell Dawson declared.[15] Evanti would contribute to making Dawson's vision a reality during her performances with the Company in the 1940s.

Scholars have recently addressed the broader presence of Black artists in classical music, with the Fall 2019 issue of the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* dedicated to the subject.[16] Contributing authors trace the reception of Blackness in performance and composition

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[12] Lawrence Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift, and American Music*, *1878-1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 176.

[13] David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979); Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[14] Jon Michael Spencer, *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of the Harlem Renaissance* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997).

[15] National Negro Opera Company, souvenir program for *Aida,* Pittsburgh, PA, 1941, box 1, folder 3, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., quoted in Christi Jay Wells, "Grand Opera as Racial Uplift: The National Negro Opera Company 1941-1962," master's thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009; Karen M. Bryan, "Radiating a Hope: Mary Cardwell Dawson as Educator and Activist," *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 25, no. 1 (2003): 20-35.

[16] Special Issue on Music, Race, and Ethnicity, *Journal of the American Musicological*

while framing genre formation and racial formation as interdependent processes. The Black voice and Black opera, in particular, are compelling as shown by Julia Chybowski, Kristen Turner, John Graziano, Naomi André, Hilde Roos, and Nina Sun Eidsheim whose work will be discussed later in this text.[17] Presently, Carol J. Oja is researching the first generation of Black classical musicians who performed at the Met and New York Philharmonic.[18] A particularly important study by Kira Thurman details how virtuosic performances by Black Lieder singers in Germany and Austria challenged expectations for Black people in classical music, expectations that Evanti also confronted.[19] These scholars, who establish historical facts about long-overlooked performers such as Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, Sissieretta Jones, and Theodore Drury, also consider how voices are racialized and what the Black voice is believed to represent.

The connection between the body and the voice has long been a source of fascination. Roland Barthes imagined that he could hear the body of the singer in the grain of the voice.[20]

Society 72, no. 3 (Fall 2019).

[17] Julia J. Chybowski, "Becoming the "Black Swan" in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America: Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield's Early Life and Debut Concert Tour," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 67, no. 1 (2014): 125-165; Kristen M. Turner, "Class, Race, and Uplift in the Opera House: Theodore Drury and His Company Cross the Color Line," *Journal of Musicological Research* 34, no. 4 (2015): 320-351; Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018); John Graziano, "The Early Life and Career of the "Black Patti": The Odyssey of an African American Singer in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 53, no. 3 (2000): 543-96; Hilde Roos, *The La Traviata Affair: Opera in the Age of Apartheid* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018); Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan and Eric Saylor eds. *Blackness in Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (London: Duke University Press, 2019).

[18] Carol J. Oja, "Before the Lincoln Memorial: Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and the Infrastructure of Jim Crow in Washington, D.C.'s Concert Halls," (paper presented at the American Musicological Society Conference, Online, 12 November 2021); Carol J. Oja, "Everett and the Racial Politics of Orchestral Conducting," *American Music Review* 43, no. 1 (2013).

[19] Kira Thurman, *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

[20] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image-Music-Text,* trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 179-189.

Susan Rutherford distills this idea saying, "voice is body made aural."[21] Eidsheim delves into the practice of listening for the body, demonstrating how auditors connect certain sounds to an essentialized racial identity forming a *phantom genealogy* that may have little to do with the singer's identity. Rosalyn M. Story, Robin Elliot, and Alison Kinney explore expectations for visual realism in opera.[22] Story, for example, draws on first-hand accounts from African American opera singers to contend that the requirements of verisimilitude were stricter for race than for age or body type. The idea that audience members should be able to both hear and see racial difference continues to endure, with many opera companies continuing to rely on blackface for roles such as *Otello* and *Aida* even in the twenty-first century.[23]

Along similar lines, André employs what she describes as *engaged musicology,* through which we consider the ways in which understanding the lived experiences, including the gender, sexuality, race, and nationality, of both the performers and the audience alike, transforms opera's meaning.[24] As both André and Eidsheim observe, Marian Anderson's acclaimed Met debut in 1955 — the first showcasing a Black singer in that world-famous institution — was in the role of Ulrica, a non-white character in Verdi's *Un ballo in Maschera* and thus a representation of the Other. In sum, non-white singers were most welcome onstage when

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[21] Susan Rutherford, "Voices and Singers," in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies* ed. Nicholas Till (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 124.

[22] Rosalyn M. Story, *And so I Sing: African-American Divas of Opera and Concert* (New York, NY: Warner Books, 1990); Robin Elliot, "Blacks and Blackface at the Opera," in *Opera in a Multicultural World: Coloniality, Culture, Performance,* eds. Mary Ingraham, Joseph So, Roy Moodley (New York: Routledge, 2016), 34-50; Alison Kinney, "As the Met Abandons Blackface, a Look at the Legacy of African Americans in Opera," *Hyperallergic,* August 3, 2015, https://hyperallergic.com/226687/as-the-met-abandons-blackface-a-look-at-the-legacy-of-african-americans-in-opera/.

[23] Lucy Caplan, "A Small Step Toward Correcting the Overwhelming Whiteness of Opera," *The New Yorker, 18* March 2017.

[24] André, *Black Opera,* 1.

performing “ethnic” roles (in her 1925 debut, Evanti played Lakmé, a princess from India). Yet André and Eidsheim interpret this phenomenon differently. André embraces it as an opportunity for the singer to imbue the character with personal life experiences, demonstrating opera’s flexibility as a living art form that comments on current social issues, such as racial justice. Eidsheim, however, detects a “failure to disrupt the phantom genealogy,” one that forces the singer to comply with listeners’ expectations.[25] To keep Evanti’s choices from becoming lost among expectations, stereotypes, and phantoms, I employ André’s analytical tool of engaged musicology, and consider Evanti as an individual who, while trapped within the bounds of her own time and place, had agency to make her own decision, even when embedded in institutions shaped by systemic racism — whether in the opera house or the U.S. State Department.

The U.S. State Department’s strategic deployment of African American music in cultural diplomacy has been amply explored by Lisa E. Davenport, Danielle Fosler-Lussier, and Penny von Eschen.[26] Fosler-Lussier, for example, details Louis Armstrong’s highly visible work in the 1950s. Armstrong used his platform to criticize the government, which complicated his role as an ambassador. Apropos a possible tour to the Soviet Union, Armstrong announced, “the way they are treating my people in the South, the government can go to hell.”[27] All these scholars, however, concentrate on the Cold War. Cultural diplomacy by African Americans during the Good Neighbor period, during which Roosevelt eaimed to foster stronger relationships with Latin American Nations, merits the same attention. The Division of Cultural Relations was

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[25] Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound,* 89.

[26] Lisa E. Davenport, *Jazz Diplomacy: Promoting America in the Cold War Era* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); Danielle Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America’s Cold War Diplomacy* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[27] Fosler-Lussier, *Music in America’s Cold War Diplomacy,* 154.

established in 1938 and its conference on Inter-American Relations in the Field of Music in October of 1939 was attended by three Black musicians, including Evanti. Darlene Sadlier and Jennifer L. Campbell chronicled the workings of the OIAA (Office of Inter-American Affairs), a government agency responsible for promoting commercial and cultural cooperation between American countries.[28] Campbell and Carol A. Hess identify the criteria the OIAA Music Committee, founded in 1940, had for the music they sent to Latin America: the music needed to be high quality music accessible to the public and promote an American identity.[29] Folk music, including spirituals, was recommended, but jazz was not acceptable. Hess, surveying the committee's debates over the "exportability" of works by African American composers, notes that Latin American countries have their own fraught racial sensibilities which Evanti would experience during her travels.[30] Ultimately, the OIAA Music Committee never realized its plans to send African American singers to Latin America under government auspices.

Bureaucratic lassitude did not prevent Evanti from seizing the moment and touring Latin America in an unofficial (i.e. nongovernmental) capacity. Evanti made three Latin American tours, traveling to Cuba, Dominican Republic, Curaçao, Venezuela, Trinidad, Haiti, St. Thomas, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. On these trips she performed classical music, Latin American songs, and gave lecture-recitals on spirituals. Like any official U.S. Diplomat, she was welcomed

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[28] Darlene J. Sadlier, *Americans All: Good Neighbor Cultural Diplomacy in World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012); Jennifer L. Campbell, "Creating Something Out of Nothing: The Office of Inter-American Affairs Music Committee (1940-1941) and the Inception of a Policy for Musical Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 26, no. 1 (2012): 29-39.

[29] Campbell, "Creating Something Out of Nothing."; Carol A. Hess, *Representing the Good Neighbor: Music, Difference, and the Pan American Dream* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). For differences between the Division and the OIAA with respect to music, see Carol A. Hess, "Copland in Argentina: Pan Americanist Politics, Folklore, and the Crisis in Modern Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 66, no. 1 (2013), 197-98.

[30] Carol A. Hess, *Aaron Copland in Latin America: Music and Cultural Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2023), 104, 204.

by local governments and cultural actors. Yet despite these honors, back in her home city segregation restricted her movements. Nor was her Black voice allowed on the operatic stage.

Chapter Summary

Chapter one will address the question: Why was opera important to Evanti and her community? Evanti's early life constitutes a case study on how education and so-called genteel behavior — which included consuming and producing classical music — served as both a marker of social class and a means of claiming dignity and protesting against racism. I uncover the values that her parents and community transmitted to Evanti through her early education, whether through social events, personal presentation, or her nearly quarter-century involvement with the Washington D.C. public school system. One significant influence on this community was W.E.B. Du Bois's model of the Talented Tenth wherein a small elite group of high-achieving African Americans would provide leadership and uplift the race.[31] Thus Evanti's formative environment instilled in her a deep sense of racial pride and motivation, as the ideology of the Talented Tenth framed her own personal achievements and those of her race as both an obligation and a birthright.

In chapter two, I evaluate Evanti's burgeoning professional career and explore the role of other African Americans and Black social organizations in her early success. Through her repertoire, Evanti challenged the idea that music must be white to be classical. In concerts in the U.S. in the late 1910s and early 1920s, she established a pattern of singing African American spirituals alongside Lieder and opera arias, thus responding to ideas held by the Black elite who

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[31] W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem,* ed. Booker T. Washington (New York: J. Pott and Company, 1903), 31-76.

saw opportunity for cultural vindication through merging Black folk music with classical forms. Unsatisfied with the options available to her in the U.S., she traveled to Paris for additional vocal training in 1924, which I discuss in chapter three. In March 1925, she sang the title role in Delibes's *Lakmé* in Nice, becoming one of the first African American to sing with a European opera company. She spent the late 1920s and early 1930s traveling back and forth across the Atlantic, performing in opera in Italy and France, and singing concerts in Germany and England.

In chapter four, I contrast Evanti's reception in Europe with her career in the United States. Although Evanti sang to sold-out opera houses in Europe, at home she struggled to break into the mainstream. After facing frustration while working with white managers, Evanti relied on her own connections. By analyzing reviews of Evanti's performances, I reveal audiences' expectations for Black singers, who frequently wished to hear her perform spirituals. She performed less frequently than she had in Europe and did not sing in opera despite four auditions for the Metropolitan Opera Company (1932, 1933, 1936, 1946). After Marian Anderson finally broke the color barrier at the Met in 1955, Evanti reflected wryly that her own auditions were "a few years too soon."[32]

As Evanti became increasingly frustrated with the discrimination she faced, she began advocating for civil rights. In chapter five, I detail Evanti's work as an advocate and how her involvement in domestic and international politics plays into dialogues on classical music, race, and nationalism. With war brewing in Europe and stages in the U.S. closed to her, Evanti became not only an informal goodwill ambassador in Latin America but tested her mettle as a composer writing an anthem of unity, *Himno Panamericano* (1941). This composition, along with her other works, show another aspect of her abilities as a musician and her creative commitment to the

[32] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 122.

causes she supported.

In chapter six, I examine Evanti's role in the National Negro Opera Company (NNOC). Although she was only briefly involved with the organization, it provided crucial performance opportunities to her and others, including La Julia Rhea, Carol Brice, and Robert McFerrin. She sang Violetta in *La Traviata*, a role she had also performed abroad, thus revealing alternative perspectives on an opera classic. As opera companies integrated, the NNOC pivoted from performing works by European composers with African American casts to performing works primarily by African American composers that rarely made it to the stage.

My conclusion is in two parts. First, I survey Evanti's activities in the immediate postwar, when she became more politically active, singing in Liberia, Ghana, and Eastern Europe. However, her voice had begun to show signs of strain and she gradually ceased performing. She continued to advocate for African Americans in classical music, however, beginning her autobiography and a book on Black concert singers, neither of which she finished. In 1967, beset by financial problems but with a number of projects, thoughts, and dreams (some unrealized) lodged in her memory, Lillian Evanti died in her native city. In the second part of my conclusion, I reflect on Evanti's rich legacy. In our current hour of racial reckoning, it is clear that we must move beyond discussing the Black perspective as an afterthought. How many other careers of African American musicians, replete with triumphs and disappointments, have been similarly overlooked? What might their stories reveal to us today? Evanti's experiences and struggles, like theirs, are essential to the history of opera in America.

Chapter 1: Black Washington

“To Suffer For Humanity’s Sake”: Family History

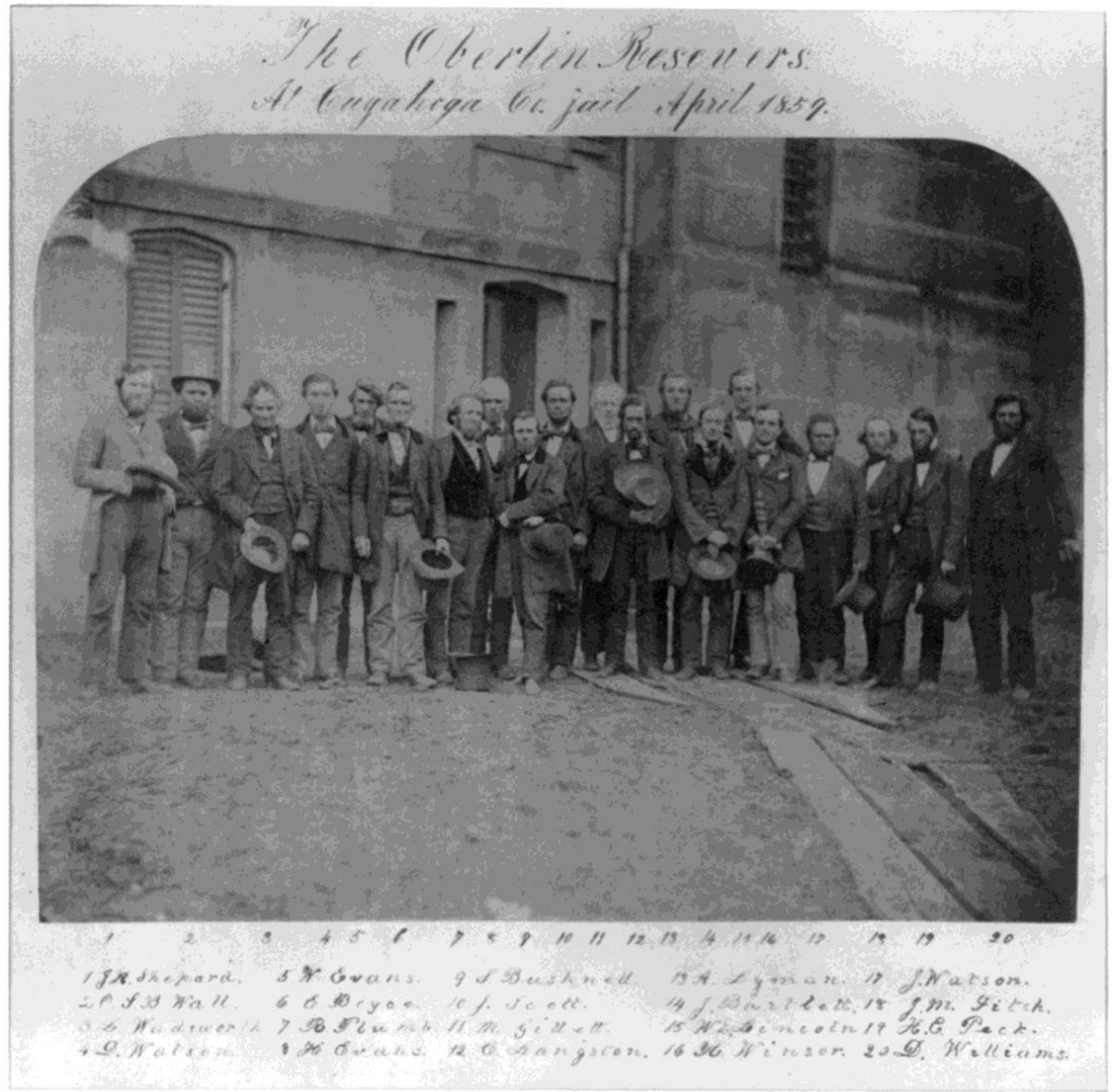

Image 1.1: Photo by T.J. Rice, Oberlin, Ohio, 7 May 1859, LC-USZ62-73349, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

In the spring of 1859, a group of twenty men stood outside of the courthouse, posing in a ragged line. They were among the thirty-seven indicted under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, accused of rescuing an escaped enslaved man. In 1856, John Price had escaped from his enslavers and settled in Oberlin’s free Black community. Two years later, he was apprehended by a slave catcher, a member of the so-called Reverse Underground Railroad, who intended to

return Price to Kentucky. Slave catchers were not especially diligent in confirming their victims' identities and would traffic whomever they could snare into slavery. Children were especially vulnerable. In a rare rescue, Oberlin college students and citizens, including three of Lillian Evanti's relatives, her grandfather Wilson B. Evans (Sr.) (1824-1898), his brother Henry Evans (1817-1886), and Evans's brother-in-law, Lewis Sheridan Leary (1835-1859), chased after Price. These rescuers liberated Price in Wellington before ferrying him to safety in Canada. Federal Marshals arrested them and other Oberlin residents for assisting Price. Objecting to federal intervention, Ohio state officials arrested the slave catcher and four others, all on kidnapping charges.

In early1859, the enslavers and the rescuers faced the judge. The soul of the United States was at stake as the country teetered on the brink of the civil war. Of the thirty-seven, only two would stand trial. One of those was Charles Langston, the great-uncle of the future poet Langston Hughes. Prehaps anticipating his grand-nephew's verbal finesse, he gave this thunderous testimony:

> When I come to be claimed by some perjured wretch as his slave, I shall never be taken into slavery. And in that trying hour I would have others do to me, as I would call upon my friends to help me; as I would call upon you, your Honor, to help me; as I would call upon you [to the district-Attorney] to help me; and upon you [to Judge Bliss], and upon you [to his counsel], so help me GOD![1]

After spending eighty-four days in jail in Cleveland, the Evans brothers and the other rescuers were released with the stipulation that the charges against the enslavers would also be dropped.[2]

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[1] "Charles Langston's Speech at the Cuyahoga County Courthouse," Cleveland, 12 May 1859, Electronic Oberlin Group, 11 February 2009, https://www2.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/Oberlin-Wellington_Rescue/c._langston_speech.htm.

[2] Robert Ewell Greene, *The Leary-Evans, Ohio's Free People of Color* (Washington, D.C.: Keith Printing Company, 1979), 28-31.

Henry Evans had no regrets about his imprisonment and at a church meeting celebrating the rescuers return he proclaimed that their actions were "a victory on the side of truth, a triumph, indeed, over wrong," and that "to suffer for humanity's sake has been to me a pleasure and not a pain."[3] These words, and this episode more generally, hint at Evanti's formative influences.

Unlike many other Black people in the United States whose ancestral identity was devoured by slavery, Evanti could trace her family's history to before the American Revolution. Her family background included many people who challenged racism, which likely inspired her to do the same. Her father, Dr. Wilson Bruce Evans (called Bruce), came from a prominent family of free people of color, originally from North Carolina.[4] Evans's paternal great-grandfather was Jeremiah O' Leary, of mixed Irish and Native American heritage. O'Leary married Sarah Jane Revels, who was the daughter of Aaron Revels, a free person of color who fought in the Revolutionary War. Sarah Revels O'Leary was also related to Hiram Revels (1827-1901), the first African American to serve in the U.S. Congress representing Mississippi in 1870-71.

Dropping the 'O from his name, Jeremiah and Sarah's son Matthew Nathaniel Leary (1802-1880) had a successful business as a harness and saddle maker in North Carolina. Although Leary himself was light-skinned, with Native American, African, and European heritage, he confirmed his identity as a free Black by marrying a woman with darker skin. Leary had conflicting views on slavery. He gave money to several slaves so they could purchase their freedom. However, he also owned slaves and had them bound to his service to learn his trade,

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[3] "Speeches Made When the Rescuers Returned Home," Electronic Oberlin Group, 11 February 2009, https://www2.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/Oberlin-Wellington_Rescue/welcome_speeches.htm.

[4] Greene, *The Leary-Evans*. See Appendix 1 for a family tree.

freeing them after they had worked off their debts.[5] Among these men was John Scott, the maternal grandfather of composer and violinist Clarence Cameron White whose work the great-granddaughter of his enslaver would one day admire.[6] As a light-skinned, mixed-race man who profited from the racist exploitation of Black men but also maintained strong ties to the free Black community, Leary defies easy categorization.

Leary's wife, Juliette Memorell (alternate spelling: Meimoriel), was a woman of African descent born in French holdings in the Caribbean. Together they had six children. Two of their daughters, Henrietta Leary (1827-1908) and Sarah Jane Leary (c.1828-1900), married a pair of brothers Henry Evans and Wilson Bruce Evans. Sometime in the 1850s, the couples moved to Oberlin, Ohio home to Oberlin College and Conservatory, which began admitting Black students in 1835.[7] Later that decade, they were joined by Sarah and Henrietta's brother Lewis Sheridan Leary, who was especially close with Henrietta.[8] Ohio had a reasonably large free Black population and bordered slave-holding states. Free people of color often assisted escaped slaves, sometimes leading to violent clashes with white authorities.

Unlike their forbears, the Evans-Leary family were staunch abolitionists starting a tradition of protest, one Evanti would continue. In addition to playing a pivotal role in the Oberlin-Wellington rescue, the Evans-Leary family was connected to another, bloodier, precursor to the Civil War, John Brown's famous raid on Harper's Ferry.[9] A white abolitionist

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[5] Matthew Nathaniel Leary, "Fifty Dollars Reward!," *Fayetteville Semi-Weekly Observer,* 31 March 1853.

[6] Greene, *The Leary-Evans,* 10.

[7] Roland M. Baumann, *Constructing Black Education at Oberlin College: A Documentary History* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), 2.

[8] Ibid., 11.

[9] For more on John Brown and the Harper's Ferry raid see: David S. Reynolds, *John Brown, Abolitionist: The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

from Ohio, Brown attempted to spark a slave revolt by stealing the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry in Virginia. Brown convinced twenty-one other men to join him on his doomed quest, including Lewis Sheridan Leary. Brown expected that large numbers of slaves would rebel after he captured the arsenal. When these reinforcements didn't materialize Brown and his followers were defeated. Ten of the raiders were killed including Leary who was fatally wounded while fleeing across the Potomac. Seven others, including Brown, were tried and executed while the remaining five escaped. Henrietta, Evanti's grandmother, remembered her brother in a speech she gave to the Niagara Movement, a precursor to the NAACP, at a meeting in Harper's Ferry in 1906.

Henrietta and Henry Evans had eleven children. Education was highly valued, and ten of the eleven children went on to become schoolteachers.[10] Daughters Anna (1858-1955) and Mary (1866-1928) were musically gifted and likely took lessons at Oberlin.[11] Their youngest son, Wilson Bruce Evans, was born sometime in 1868. Named after his uncle, he was called by his middle name, Bruce. The family relocated to Washington D.C. in 1875, joining one of the largest, best-educated, and wealthiest communities of African Americans in the United States.

Black Washington

In 1875 the United States was moving toward racial equality with Reconstruction-era policies that expanded civil rights for African Americans. One of the critical questions facing the

[10] Elizabeth Dowling Taylor, *The Original Black Elite: Daniel Murray and the Story of a Forgotten Era* (New York: Harper Collins, 2017), 94. Greene, *The Leary-Evans,* 40. Greene leaves Henrietta Jr. out of the family tree and takes "Jane" from the 1860 census to be a new child whereas I believe that Jane is actually Anna because Anna's middle name was Jane and their ages matched.

[11] Taylor, *The Original Black Elite,* 97.

nation after the Civil War was how to incorporate the newly freed Black slaves into the fragile union.[12] Several pieces of legislation provided legal protections designed to integrate formerly enslaved people into the polity. The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) abolished slavery, the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) made former slaves citizens, the Fifteenth Amendment (1870) enfranchised Black men, and the Civil Rights Act of 1875 called for equal inclusion on juries and in public accommodations and transportation. These requirements were unevenly enforced, but in Washington D.C., African Americans served in the Senate and the House. Additionally upper-class Black people such as Senator Blanche Bruce (1841-1898), who was born into slavery in Virginia and became the first African American senator to serve a full term, would socialize with upper-class whites.[13]

However, this period of tolerance was short-lived. The Hayes-Tilden Compromise of 1877 removed from the South the federal troops who were enforcing the recently passed civil rights legislation. Reconstruction was thus replaced by the "Redemption," named for Southern Democrats who sought to reestablish white supremacy and "redeem" the ways of the Old South. The Supreme Court overturned the Civil Rights Act of 1875 in 1883, and state laws disenfranchised almost all Black people. In addition to these political ramifications, informal mixing in Washington D.C. was replaced by strict social segregation. After the degradation of slavery and the suffering of war, Reconstruction was a precious moment when anything seemed possible. The Evans family members who lived through the Redemption watched the widening door of opportunity slam shut as a supremacist social order crystallized around them.

Cut out from white society, the Black upper class in Washington, D.C. formed their own

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[12] For more on the Reconstruction see: Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

[13] Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, 35.

circle known as the "Black 400." From their homes in Northwest Washington, these "colored aristocrats" separated themselves from the Black masses by adopting high-society values. Inclusion in this group was not a matter of wealth but rather family and social connections, appearance, respectable behavior, education, and occupation.[14] The aristocratic families had more money than other Black households, but they never equaled the white upper class in wealth. In the absence of traditional markers of gentility and worthiness, this foundational generation after slavery created social codes that privileged dignified, upright conduct. A doyenne of this group, Senator Bruce's wife Josephine, defined the "lines of cleavage" that distinguished Black social levels as "moral first, and then education and means."[15] In addition to dressing and acting in a reserved aristocratic manner, skin color was also important. Although a darker-skinned person could enter these elite ranks if they were well educated or had a good job, most of the "Black 400" were lighter-skinned mixed-race people, sometimes called "blue veins" because their skin was light enough to see the color of their veins.

Establishing elite status was a way to make demands for political rights. In the 1890s some Black people began using the term "New Negro" to describe an emerging group of upwardly mobile African Americans.[16] These individuals asserted property and educational rights as a step toward full participation in society. Thus insisting upon dignified conduct was part of an effort to ensure Black people would be treated with dignity. The New Negro is often linked with a strategy known as racial uplift. Although W.E.B. Du Bois, whom I will discuss in more detail later, is the figure most commonly associated with this idea, uplift strategies

[14] Ibid., 39.

[15] Josephine Bruce, "What Has Education Done for Colored Women," *The Voice of the Negro* 1, no. 7 (1904), 295.

[16] Henry Louis Gates Jr., "The Trope of a New Negro and the Reconstruction of the Image of the Black," *Representations,* no. 24 (1988), 136.

circulated in the Black community well before he wrote about the concept in *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903). According to this evolutionary model, a small group of Black people would show through correct behavior that they were worthy of political rights, rights that would eventually be extended to all Black people. This ideology positioned Black people's lower status in society not as a biological fact but as a cultural problem that could be resolved through education and assimilation.

Of course, racial uplift had limitations. For one thing, it placed the burden of eliminating racism back on the Black community. In addition, it pushed Black people to adopt white middle-class values and behaviors. Kevin K. Gains explains why many people nonetheless favored it:

> Uplift, among its other connotations, also represented the struggle for a positive Black identity in a profoundly racist society, turning the pejorative designation of race into a source of dignity and self-affirmation through an ideology of class differentiation, self-help, and interdependence.[17]

Instead of looking to gain recognition from the outside, African Americans often found belonging and value within their communities.

There was an increasing need for such advocacy. In the 1890s, Black Americans civil liberties were rapidly eroding. The tolerant tenor of the 1870s was now long past, and the Supreme Court held up legalized segregation in 1896 with *Plessy v. Ferguson.*[18] This decision also confirmed a bi-racial framework where mixed-race persons were categorized as Black.[19] Additionally, it constituted a significant blow to the Black elite in Washington D.C., most of

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[17] Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

[18] Thomas J. Davis, "Race, Identity, and the Law," in *Race on Trial: Law and Justice in American History,* ed. Annette Gordon-Reed (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 51.

[19] F. James Davis, *Who is Black?: One Nation's Definition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 7.

whom considered themselves mulatto and therefore a step above darker-skinned people of African descent. Jim Crow laws did not recognize the distinctions that the upper class had so carefully cultivated. Segregation increasingly aligned elite Blacks economically and politically with the lower classes although they still understood themselves as socially distinct. Therefore many of the elite adopted leadership roles within Black society, motivated by a sense of *noblesse oblige.*[20]

Institutions for Uplift: Washington's Black Public Schools and Black Churches

Inside this small community, control of Black-run institutions such as churches and the Black public schools prompted constant and fierce struggles. In Washington's segregated school system, publicly funded institutions for Black children were established in 1868 and overseen by the Superintendent for Colored Schools, George Frederick Thompson Cook. A separate school system gave the Black community some autonomy and prevented Black children from experiencing racist discrimination at school, although Black schools were never as well funded as schools for white children. The nine-member Board of Education, which oversaw Black and white schools, customarily reserved three spots for Black people, giving the Black community a voice.[21] The Black schools in D.C. were exceptional in quality compared to other regions of the United States. Employment as a school teacher in the district was highly sought after, especially for women, as it was one of the few acceptable occupations for a lady of the "colored aristocracy."

Leaders agreed that education was crucial for improving the lives of Black people.

[20] Moore, *Leading the Race*, 165.

[21] Rachel Deborah Bernard, ""These Separate Schools": Black Politics and Education in Washington, D.C., 1900-1930" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2012), 2,4.

However, schools were roiled with conflict between those who supported industrial education and those who favored a broader course of study. In the late nineteenth century, many Black-serving institutions were supported by white patrons. This was the model promoted by Booker T. Washington, president of the Tuskegee Institute, who relied on white philanthropists to fund industrial education for Black students as part of his Atlanta Compromise of 1895. According to this agreement, African Americans would not seek civil rights or a classical education but would be permitted to train for working-class jobs.[22] Washington focused on industrial instruction for African Americans to build economic power, which he saw as a necessary precursor to the advancement of the race.

In *The Souls of Black Folks*, W.E.B. Du Bois openly challenged Washington and the Atlanta Compromise. Du Bois understood the need for patience and caution but believed that Washington had played into the hands of people who wanted to limit the civil liberties of Black people. In a 1903 collection of essays, *The Negro Problem,* Du Bois declared that "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth."[23] An "aristocracy of talent" whose power lies "in its knowledge and character, not in its wealth," would spread its knowledge broadly and improve conditions for all Black people.[24] Du Bois thus offered a philosophical underpinning for racial uplift widely adopted by the Black upper class.

For Du Bois, art and music — including African American music — were an essential part of a classical education and a good life. Du Bois criticized industrial education as a "gospel

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[22] Michael Scott Bieze and Marybeth Gasman, eds., *Booker T. Washington Rediscovered* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

[23] Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," 33.

[24] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1940), 109.

of Work and Money to such an extent as apparently almost completely to overshadow the higher aims of life."[25] The antidote to this idolatry was a classical curriculum consisting of "old time-glorified methods of delving for Truth, and searching out the hidden beauties of life, and learning the good of living."[26] First among these hidden beauties are what he calls "sorrow songs" (African American Spirituals) to which he devotes an entire chapter in *Souls*. He praises African American folk-song as "The sole American music," and "the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the sea."[27]

The two Black high schools in Washington stood as physical manifestations of these opposing views on education. M Street School (later known as Dunbar), formed in 1891 supported by the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, offered a classical curriculum. In 1898 the school board approved money for the construction of a manual training school for Black children, the Armstrong Manual Training School, which also had a pre-college track.[28] When it opened in 1902, Evanti's father, Bruce Evans, would be its principal. On 24 October Washington himself attended the opening of the school.

The other major institutional network for the "Black 400" involved churches. Important elite Black churches included Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church, St. Luke's Protestant Episcopal Church, Union Bethel A.M.E. (later Metropolitan A.M.E.) and the Nineteenth Street Baptist Church.[29] All were located in Northwest Washington. These congregations eschewed the emotive worship style usually associated with Black churches, preferring intellectual sermons

[25] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903; repr., New York: Paperback Classics, 1990), 42.
[26] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, 64.
[27] Ibid., 181.
[28] "Local Legislation," *Evening Star,* 17 February 1898.
[29] Moore, *Leading the Race,* 16.

and classical music, elements more in line with the values of white Victorian America.

St. Luke's was led by Alexander Crummell, an influential Black minister and pioneer of pan-Africanism.[30] Music was central to the internal life of the community at the newly-formed St. Luke's church. By January 1880, the church had a regular choir directed by Christian Fleetwood. However, Fleetwood and Crummell clashed over control of the choir. The conflict came to a head in 1880 when, just days before the Easter service, the Rector informed Fleetwood that the music he had been meticulously preparing for the service was not appropriate for Easter. Ultimately, Fleetwood's choir broke away from the church. However, without the support of a larger institution like a church, the choir soon foundered. In spite of desire and proven talent there was no space open for these talented Black singers as professional singers of art music outside of the church. Some of the singers joined other churches. While others drifted back to reconstitute the St. Luke's choir which now included Evanti's aunt, Anna Evans Murray.[31]

The Evans Family in D.C.

The well-educated, light-skinned Evans family, who could claim free ancestors several generations back, quickly established themselves as members of Black high society. Bruce Evans and his sister Mary had studied at Lucretia Mott Elementary School, where their older sister Anna was a third and fourth-grade teacher.[32] Bruce was particularly close with his sister Anna,

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[30] Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[31] *People's Advocate,* 17 January 1880; Henry Johnson, "St. Luke's Choir, a Threatened Rupture in the Church," *National Republican,* 26 March 1880; "Dr. Crummel and His Choir," *People's Advocate,* 27 March 1880; "Resignation of a Church Choir," *Evening Star,* 24 March 1880; *National Republican,* 30 March 1880; "St. Luke's Church Bazaar," *National Republican,* 1 April 1880; "A New Choral Society," *National Republican,* 20 April 1880.

[32] Taylor, *The Original Black Elite,* 59.

whom he affectionately called "Sis."[33] The Evans family's status was cemented in 1879 when Anna Evans married Daniel Murray, a young Black man from a prominent family who held a prestigious position as an assistant librarian at the Library of Congress.[34] They were married by Francis Grimké at the Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church because their home church, St. Luke's, was under construction.

In addition to singing in church, Anna Evans Murray occasionally performed in public. Her most important performance took place in 1882, when she appeared in a benefit concert with the famous African American singer Marie Selika.[35] This connection endured, and in 1885 Daniel Murray helped Madame Selika arrange two performances in D.C. followed by a reception at the Murray residence.[36] Murray was a fine model for women's activism in Black Washington, however much Du Bois may have privileged "exceptional men." She was one of the most influential leaders in social charity work in the city. For example, she was active in the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), which coordinated the efforts of Black women's clubs nationwide. It was a unique institution in that it was independent of Black men's or white women's organization.[37] The motto of the NACW was "lifting as we climb," a direct reference to racial uplift ideologies of self-help and community engagement. Another one of Murray's projects was childhood education, another critical part of racial uplift. The NACW recommended that every club consider forming a nursery or a kindergarten. In 1896, Murray successfully lobbied for kindergarten classes in D.C.'s public schools, essentially creating kindergarten for

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[33] Ibid., 187.

[34] For more on Daniel Murray see Taylor, *The Original Black Elite.*

[35] "Benefit Concert," *National Republican,* 5 June 1882.

[36] Taylor, *The Original Black Elite,* 92.

[37] Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Quill William Morrow, 1984).

the Black schools.[38] As detailed below, Murray was a likely role model for Evanti.

In 1885, Bruce Evans passed his teacher's examination and began working in the public schools while also pursuing a degree in medicine at Howard University.[39] In 1889 he met his future wife Annie Brooks. Annie's parents were formerly enslaved and moved to Washington D.C. after the Civil War.[40] Annie swiftly took full advantage of her opportunities in D.C. and graduated from the public high school for Black students in 1887.[41] She showed great promise as a singer with *Washington Bee* commenting, "Miss Annie Brooks showed the possession of a magnificent soprano voice, that ought to be highly cultivated. If this is done, Miss Brooks will rank among the Queens of Song."[42] Instead of pursuing further music training, she became a school teacher and then a housewife, marrying Bruce Evans the same year they met. Their first child was born on 12 August 1890. Named Annie Lillian Evans after her mother, young Annie began using her middle name in adolescence before adopting the name "Lillian Evanti," as detailed below.

Bruce Evans graduated with his M.D. from Howard in 1891 and very briefly worked as a doctor before returning to the public schools. Later that year, he was offered the post of principal of Mott Elementary School where he was enmeshed in the cultural battle between those who supported industrial education and other Black activists who thought that the best chance for advancement was through a liberal arts education.[43] Bruce Evans took the same position as Washington: most Black people needed a practical education that would prepare them for work.

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[38] Giddings, *When and Where I Enter,* 100.
[39] "The Public Schools," *Evening Star,* 10 June 1885.
[40] Smith, "Lillian Evanti," 26.
[41] "The High School," *Washington Bee,* 18 June 1887.
[42] "The High School Concert," *Washington Bee,* 19 May 1888.
[43] Taylor, *The Original Black Elite,* 102.

Accordingly he campaigned for industrial education in his capacity as president of St. Luke's Men's Guild.[44]

In 1898, Evans invited a white journalist and commander of the District of Columbia National Guard, George H. Harries, to talk on the "Duty of the Negro Press to the Negro." Evans suggested the topic of the address, which encompassed industrial education. In my analysis of this speech, the press serves as an allegory for the upper-classes in Black society. Harries captures well the attitudes of many white people and Evans's circle when he says, "The plain duty of the Negro press is to inform the ignorant, admonish the erring, and encourage every rational effort that may be made to elevate a race which is destined to play so conspicuous a part in the civilization and material growth of this great republic."[45] Harries then goes on to argue in favor of industrial education:

> At the risk of being assailed by those who insist that a persistent effort is being made to compel your race to occupy a menial plane, let me say that you need men who will encourage your boys and girls to do those things for which they are best fitted. Every boy cannot be a lawyer or a doctor or an educator. Every girl cannot be a school teacher or a teacher of music or painting… Is it not sense to prepare the boys and girls for the future that must inevitably be theirs?[46]

Although Evans encouraged others to pursue modest goals, he himself was a doctor. Also, his wife was music teacher and his son would go on to law school. Clearly industrial education was good enough for others, but not for the Evans family. As for Evans's daughter, another point Harries made in his speech concerned music. He noted that the role of music educator was one of the highest positions in society for which a Black woman could aim. The Evans family, with its love for music, was preparing young Lillian to fulfill this goal.

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[44] "The High School," *Washington Bee*, 5 February 1898.
[45] "The Negro Press," *Washington Bee*, 5 February 1898.
[46] Ibid.

Even after Evans was installed as principal of Armstrong Manual Training School in 1902, the question of industrial education was far from settled. In 1906, Evans was unsure that he would be able to retain his position there because the Black members of the school board supported classical education. However, Booker T. Washington still had a tremendous amount of political power and was able to control appointments to political positions in D.C. Evans wrote him for support and was able to keep his job.[47] Evans was also an active participant in civic life and in various fraternal organizations. In addition to pursuing civil rights indirectly through culture and education, Evans advocated for suffrage. D.C.'s situation was unique as none of the district's citizens, Black or white, could vote. Until the 1970s, there were no local elections as the district was governed by Congress and a board of commissioners appointed by the President. Although Jim Crow and white supremacy were still dominating forces, mutual disenfranchisement was one factor that made life in D.C. marginally more egalitarian for Black citizens.

In August 1895, Evans spoke at a meeting for Republicans in the district.[48] It is not clear if this gathering was mixed-race or all Black. Advocating for the party of Lincoln, he also expounded on "the duties and responsibilities of American citizenship." As a dedicated educator, he then addressed the young men in the audience and "urged upon them the necessity of being good citizens, and to make themselves useful men to their race and country." After this message, he then endorsed voting rights for the district. From his address, it is clear that Evans saw himself and the men he was speaking to as full citizens desiring and deserving the duties and

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[47] Wilson Bruce Evans to Booker T. Washington, 6 September, 1906 (21), Booker T. Washington Papers, Special Collections, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland, in Douglas Eugene Pielmeier, "Roscoe Conkling Bruce and the District of Columbia's Public Schools, 1906 to 1921," Master's Thesis, University of Maryland, 1992.

[48] "For Mr. Bradshaw," *Evening Star,* 30 August 1895.

responsibilities that he outlined in his speech. While often caught-up in society cat-fighting, Dr. Evans was at heart passionate about the civil rights of African Americans.

In 1906, Bruce Evans was elected president of the Mu-So-Lit club. One of the most exclusive clubs in the city, the three syllables of its name stood for Music, Society, and Literature.[49] He was a member of its glee club and presided over a visit by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, a renowned English composer of African descent.[50] For the elite men of this club, discussions of music and literature were not merely entertaining; they were part of a bid to claim full citizenship rights by demonstrating the tremendous talents of select Black people. This is evident by the inclusion of political topics among club presentations. In 1909, when Bruce Evans was once again president of the club, one of their meetings hosted not a famous musician or writer but Howard law professor W.H.H. Hart, who spoke on equality. According to the *Advocate,* "Prof. Hart gave some vivid picture of the rights and privileges of the race, presumed to be guaranteed to all American citizens, but which are grossly denied to a very large portion thereof."[51] Long before the Civil Rights Era, groups such as the Mu-So-Lit club fought for African Americans' rights.

Evanti's Girlhood and Adolescence in D.C.

While the Evans family was never wealthy, they were educated, genteel, socially aware, and well-connected. After Lillian was born, Bruce and Annie had a son, Joseph Henry Brooks Evans. They used all of their resources to give their children the best possible education in both

[49] Taylor, *The Original Black Elite,* 344.
[50] "Accession to Membership," *Evening Star,* 24 April 1905; "Musician is Entertained," *Washington Post,* 9 December 1906.
[51] "At the Nation's Capital," *The Advocate,* 14 October 1909.

academics and society manners. Evanti's early schooling in comportment and style served her well as a foundation for the cosmopolitan diva persona she strategically performed later in life. Her parents also made sure that their daughter was well rounded with the musical skills necessary for a refined young lady, prepared to entertain guests in the parlor. Evanti's mother and her aunt encouraged her to sing at home.

Image 1.2: Evanti as a fashionable tot. E-T collection.

Some of her father's acquaintances encouraged her interest in music. For example, at Howard University Evans met the father of composer Will Marion Cook. The younger Cook

studied at Oberlin and the Hochschule für Music in Berlin and had a brief career as a violin soloist before finding a more hospitable environment as a composer of popular songs and musicals.[52] Evanti later recalled seeing the famous man at her house. She wrote, "once when [Will Marion Cook] called upon us he remarked, 'a celebrated musician will come out of this family.' He had seen Mother holding both my brother Joe and myself on her knees, telling us stories, and singing us lullabies."[53] Indeed, Evanti showed early musical talent as she performed in public for the first time when she was only four at a charity event:

> Perched on a table I had on a starched white pinafore and cotton stockings and my hair was tied with red ribbons. There was nothing backward about me. I simply burst forth into song. I curtseyed and grinned back at them, not realizing I was learning one of the tricks of winning an audience. The different [charity] groups present called for four encores and made a great pet out of me.[54]

Having demonstrated musical talent, Evanti began formal piano lessons in 1895. As she wrote in her memoirs, "Papa, observing my love of music, bought an upright Gabler piano…I am afraid the purchase was made with considerable sacrifice on his part. I was with him when he paid the first down payment at Droops. It was a good instrument and we were proud of it."[55]

1904 was a year of transition for Evanti. Now fourteen, she was starting to become interested in the wider world. After graduating from Lucretia Mott Elementary School, Lillian moved on to her father's school, Armstrong Manual Training School.[56] Although Armstrong was a technical high school, both Evans children attended Armstrong in the college-prep track. In 1904 the family moved out of Henrietta Evans's house and into a new home on 1910 Vermont

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[52] Marva Griffin Carter, *Swing Along: The Life of Will Marion Cook* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[53] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 25.
[54] Ibid., 26-27.
[55] Ibid., 26.
[56] "Seventh Division," *Evening Star,* 20 June 1904.

Avenue, N.W., in the heart of Black Washington. It was just blocks away from Anna and Daniel Murray, who continued to be enormously influential in Lillian's life, particularly Anna, whom she called "Aunt Sis."[57] This move also brought her nearer to her cousins Daniel "Dannie" Evans Murray, Henry (George Henry) Murray, Nathaniel "Nat" Allison Murray, Harold Baldwin Murray, and Paul Evans Murray. A decade older than Lillian, Dannie was an accomplished violinist who moved to New York and joined James Europe's Clef Club Symphony Orchestra in 1910.[58] The house on Vermont Avenue was extremely important to Evanti. Later in her life she wrote, "This house became my anchor through all my life…Each square foot has a vivid memory, each piece of furniture and picture a glorious past."[59] No matter where she traveled in the world, she always returned to the family home, which still stands. In fact, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1987.

1904 also saw the publication of John H. Adams Jr's article "A Study of the Features of the New Negro Woman," in the magazine *Voice of the Negro.* Maturing into womanhood, Evanti would have to negotiate her identity in terms of race, class, and gender. Adams's article offered seven idealized portraits of young women, presumably for the reader to use as models. Among these images was a sketch of a young lady who is "an admirer of Fine Art, a performer on the violin and the piano, a sweet singer, a writer - mostly given to essays, a lover of good books, and a home making girl."[60] The sketch and description bear a remarkable resemblance to a photo taken of Lillian around 1908.

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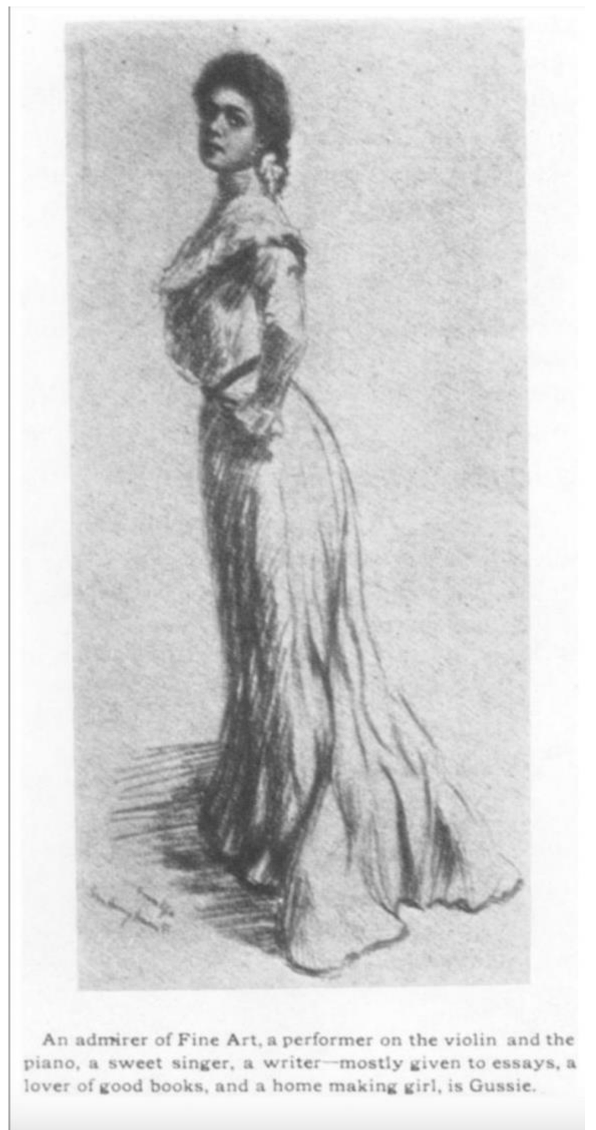
[57] Taylor, *The Original Black Elite,* 187.

[58] Ibid., 310.

[59] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 31-32.

[60] John H. Adams Jr. "Rough Sketches: A Study of the Features of the New Negro Woman," *Voice of the Negro* 1 no. 8 (1904), 326.



Left, Image 1.3: John H. Adams Jr. "A Study of the Features of the New Negro Woman," *Voice of the Negro* 1, no. 8 (1904), 326.
Right, Image 1.4: Photo by Scurlock Studios 1908, box 2, folder 28, E-T collection.

As noted, musical skill was a fitting attribute for the New Negro woman, and Evanti continued to develop her talent. While she was still a student, two of her performances received attention in Washington's *Evening Star* in the spring of 1905. The first was at Shiloh Baptist Church, which still an important church in the Black community in D.C. today. She either played

the piano or sang as a "curtain raiser" for a lecture on 16 March 1905.[61] The church, which provided support for the formation of the NAACP, comprised many prominent members, including the first Black president of Howard University, Dr. Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, who perhaps heard Evanti on this occasion. In 1943 Evanti would return to Shiloh as a seasoned professional and give a full recital of works by the African American composer Nathaniel Dett. In doing so, she gave back to an institution that had enabled one of her earliest performances opportunities and that would later host Leontyne Price (1983), and welcome President Barack Obama to its Easter service in 2011.[62]

The second event, hosted by Annie Brooks Evans in the family home on 14 April, was a benefit for social settlement work done by Sarah Collins Fernandis.[63] Fernandis was a pioneering Black social worker who focused on improving housing conditions in D.C. Although D.C. was home to middle and upper class Black families, most of the city's Black residents lived in overcrowded unsanitary alley dwellings.[64] The alleys were in close physical proximity to the more wealthy front streets but formed separate, segregated communities within the city. While the members of these alley communities often felt a strong sense of belonging, to outsiders the alleys were diseased urban spaces in need of physical and spiritual reform. Elites and progressive reformers, including the ladies of the Evans family, worked to see these spaces transformed. In addition to Evanti's offering, several others played music or gave speeches supporting the cause.

As Evanti's adolescence came to a close, her musical education continued. Besides taking

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[61] "Lecture At Shiloh Church," *Evening Star,* 17 March 1905.

[62] 150th Anniversary Committee, "Our History," Shiloh Baptist Church, 2013, https://shilohbaptist.org/about-us/our-history/.

[63] "Benefit Of Social Settlement," *Evening Star,* 17 April 1905.

[64] James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

piano lessons with a Miss Fagler (a white German teacher) she sang in the choir at school.[65] At Armstrong, Gerla Tyler was the choir director, and Mary Europe was the school accompanist.[66] Mary Europe, sister of bandleader James Reese Europe, was well respected as a musician. She gave solo piano recitals and was the accompanist for the Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Choral Society, and for thirty years she directed the choir at the Lincoln Temple Congregational Church.[67] Evanti graduated from Armstrong in June 1908, age seventeen.[68]

Black Clubwomen

Now an adult, Evanti became more active in the city's social life, networking and building her skills as a performer while attending the Myrtilla Miner Normal School (also known as Normal School No. 2). Its graduates, mostly the daughters of the African American elite, frequently took jobs in the D.C. public school system. In addition to her classes, she attended many social events and club meetings, as the social pages in the press confirm. These included the Alpha Charity Club, the Chrysalis Cultural Club, the YWCA, the Poinsettia Embroidery Circle, and the anti-prostitution Social Purity Club. The Black women who ran these clubs were interested in either self-improvement or community uplift, and music was a crucial part of their activities.

These Black clubwomen were more inclined to identify with the lower classes than white women. After all, they knew that as Black women would be judged together with lower-class

[65] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 26.
[66] "At The Nation's Capital," *The Advocate,* 14 October 1909.
[67] Doris E. McGinty, "Gifted Minds and Pure Hearts: Mary L. Europe and Estelle Pinckney Webster," *The Journal of Negro Education* 51, no 3 (1982): 269.
[68] "Colored Pupils Graduated," *Evening Star,* 13 June 1908.

Black women. Furthermore, many came from families not long out of slavery.[69] Unlike the previous generation of Black female civil and social leaders, many of whom had emerged from slavery and poverty, Evanti's generation came from elite social circles where charity work was necessary for their social standing.[70] Certainly her father's pedigree was impeccable. But her mother, who came from less illustrious circumstances, had benefitted from the African American community's social efforts, which had provided her a free high school education. Club work was an acceptable way for an intelligent young woman of Evanti's station to occupy her active mind and energies. It would also bring her social prestige. Evanti would have found purpose, racial pride, community, friendship, and social connections through club activities.

Women's club meetings were a mix of public and private and are difficult to label as either strictly amateur or professional performance spaces.[71] Many club meetings took place in homes and were attended mostly or entirely by women. However, in their attempts to reform society, clubs were obliged to take on work with a decidedly political cast. Additionally, many women gained practical and worldly experience in public speaking, organizing, and handling money through these institutions. Clubs, schools, and churches were often the only places they could get these experiences as, in addition to being excluded from business and politics due to gender, Black clubwomen also faced racial barriers. Certainly, Evanti would have been excluded as an audience member or as a performer from most of the concert halls in D.C., making these club meetings even more valuable as spaces of musical exchange.

Among Evanti's class, cultural education was essential for young women because of their future role as wives and mothers. One element from Victorian middle- and upper-classes adopted

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[69] Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 98.
[70] Moore, *Leading the Race*, 165.
[71] I thank Dr. Gayle Murchison for this insight.

and adapted by upper-class Black women was the Cult of True Womanhood.[72] This idea emphasized gender-divided spheres of public and private life, with virtuous women acting as "the light of the home." Black women were largely excluded from white conceptions of true womanhood either because of economic realities or racist doubts about Black women's purity. As even the Black elite often did not have significant financial means, they adapted this ideal to include working in certain fields deemed appropriate to women, such as teaching or social work, where a worker could use her inherent feminine characteristics to train children and guide the wayward.

Domestic musical performance was a part of a woman's duty as a moral custodian and was understood by club members to be elevating. The preferred types of music to reinforce family, purity, and refined correctness included parlor songs, hymns, and classical music as well as spirituals. The home, imagined as a place of refuge for the industrial age worker, could also serve as a bulwark against racism, with women using music as a tool for carving out a domestic sanctuary in a racist society. As noted, Evanti was active in the Alpha Charity Club; her mother also participated. It was led by Leila Amos Pendleton, an African American community activist who was deeply devoted to improving Black children's education. At a meeting in October 1908, Evanti entertained the guests by singing and playing the piano after which the ladies discussed their charity work.[73] Evanti also performed at two benefits for the YWCA. The first meeting was concerned with the living conditions of impoverished African Americans living in the district. The speaker at the gathering argued that it was the woman's job to act as society's moral compass:

> Although women do not go to the polls, they have a great influence over the men who

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[72] Roell, "The Piano in the American Home."
[73] "Among the Clubs," *Evening Star,* 4 October 1908.

> vote, and should use it for the things that stand for the uplift and moral righteousness of a community… .The moral woman who gives to the world the good, clean honorable man and child, is first, a boon to her race and an instrument of the highest good for society at large.[74]

This speaker linked racial uplift with progressive era social and political reform, which tackled problems such as prohibition, corruption, child labor, and women's suffrage. In addition to addressing women's social concerns, the speaker connects a woman's duty as a homemaker with her responsibilities to her race.

The second YWCA event was a musical recital at St. Luke's with six soloists and a choir.[75] Evanti sang "I Will Lift Up Mine Eyes," a setting of Psalm 121 by Edward Marzo (1852-1929). In November, Evanti continued to expand her involvement in social life when she joined the Poinsettia Embroidery Club, which provided financial support to families of the Briggs school, a Black public elementary school.[76] Her musical ambitions, her profession, and her social life all overlapped at a meeting of the Social Purity Club, which she attended with her mother. At one meeting focused on the role of school teachers in the social purity movement, she sang to the membership.[77]

In addition to women's clubs, Black churches were another important performance venue for Evanti. In May 1909, Evanti gave the first of many performances with the violinist Felix Weir at a benefit for the Berean Baptist Church.[78] Felix Weir (1884-1978), a professional African American violinist active in cities on the eastern seaboard, had trained at the music

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[74] "Woman's Power for Good," *Evening Star,* 6 March 1911.
[75] "The Week in Society," *Washington Bee,* 6 May 1911.
[76] "News from the Capital City," *New York Age,* 16 November 1911; "In the Schools," *Evening Star,* 24 Jan 1915.
[77] "Guest Night of fhe Social Purity Club," *Washington Bee,* 3 Feb 1912.
[78] "Song Service," *Washington Bee,* 15 May 1909.

conservatory in Leipzig.[79] As documented in a newspaper article, they performed “Angel’s Serenade” by Gaetano Braga (1829-1907), with Evanti singing in Italian and Weir playing the violin obbligato. Playing with a respected musician such as Wier signaled Evanti’s talent and growing success as a performer. 1909 also saw her first recorded participation in a dramatic production, as she sang and acted in *The Metamorphosis of Wulf* presented by the students at the Miner school.[80] In June 1910, she graduated from the two-year kindergarten instructors course, although she did not begin teaching right away.[81]

Alongside performing and teaching, Evanti fostered her personal connections. The possibilities offered by networking become more apparent by looking at the list of names of individuals attending an open house in honor of Mrs. Booker T. Washington held in September 1910.[82] The guest list is a who’s who of Washington’s Black elite, including, Roscoe Conkling Bruce (1879-1950), superintendent of the Black public schools in Washington; Robert H. Terrell (1857-1925), judge on the District of Columbia Municipal Court; Robert Pelham (1859-1943), journalist and activist; Austin M. Curtis (1868-1939), surgeon-in-chief at Freedman’s Hospital; Matthew W. Clair (1865-1943), Methodist Bishop; James A. Cobb (1876-1958), law professor and civil rights activist; and Addison N. Scurlock (1883-1964), photographer, among others. Several influential musicians also attended the event, including Felix Weir and Clarence Cameron White. Tellingly, the social column does not list Evanti with her parents; instead, her name appears immediately before the composer and violinist White and his wife, an early signal of her future career. From items in White’s papers at Howard University, it is clear that he knew

[79] “Weir, Felix Fowler,” in *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians,* Eileen Southern (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1982).
[80] “The Metamorphosis of Wulf,” *The New York Age,* 10 June 1909.
[81] “Student Days End,” *Evening Star,* 18 June 1910.
[82] Mary Curtis, “In Society’s Realm,” *The National Forum,* 17 September 1910.

the singer; perhaps their friendship began in D.C. In October, Evanti performed in another charity concert with Weir and the next month began working as a kindergarten assistant at Stevens School.[83]

Family Crisis

The Evans family was thrown into crisis in November 1912 when Bruce Evans was fired from his job as principal of Armstrong. The exact reasons for his firing are unclear. There were unsubstantiated claims made against his moral character, that he was addicted to drugs and alcohol, was insubordinate, and that he lied about students' enrollment in his school.[84] The superintendent of schools, Dr. William M. Davidson, weaponized this slander in an attempt to bully Evans into resigning, saying, "The board has enough on you to dismiss you."[85] When Evans refused to cave to the pressure, he was fired for running the school with "insufficient academic and pedagogic equipment."[86] The bogus charge of "insufficiency" had previously been leveled against Anna J. Cooper, the principal of M Street School in 1905. Cooper supported a classical education at M Street, a prestigious school that employed many Black teachers with degrees from top-tier universities. The mostly white school board wanted her to reduce the college preparatory curriculum and introduce more industrial classes. She refused and was fired.[87]

The real cause of Evans's dismissal may have had to do with his relationship with the

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[83] "Is Ready for Use: Formal Opening Exercises at St. Mary's Parish Hall," *Evening Star,* 8 October 1910; "Stuart is Reelected,"*Washington Post,* 8 December 1910.

[84] "Fights in Court for School Job," *Washington Herald,* 28 October 1915.

[85] Ibid.

[86] Smith, "Lillian Evanti," 31.

[87] Pielmeier, "Roscoe Conkling Bruce and the District of Columbia's Public Schools, 1906 to 1921," 29.

Assistant Superintendent, Roscoe Conkling Bruce. Bruce previously held a position at Tuskegee and was a protege of Booker T. Washington, who had helped Bruce secure the job in D.C. Bruce was frequently at odds with the local Black community and Black members of the school board over his support of industrial education. He was also criticized for favoritism in hiring and firing as he used choice positions in the district as bargaining chips, a not uncommon practice at this time. Although Bruce and Evans both favored industrial education, they were not always in agreement. The animosity between the two men may stem back to 1907 when Bruce was attacked in the press for his refusal to hire a socially prominent woman. Evans spoke in favor of the teacher that Bruce had chosen not to hire, which soured Bruce's already complicated relationship with elite Black families in the district. Evans also blocked Bruce's recommendations of teachers to the night school, which Evans also led for several years.[88] Dismissal had drastic effects on Evans' health. After a long and unsuccessful legal battle for reinstatement, he died in 1918.

Washington Conservatory

In the early 1910s, Evanti enrolled in the Washington Conservatory of Music. It was founded in 1903 by Harriet Gibbs Marshall, the first Black woman to graduate from the Oberlin Conservatory. Marshall was one of several African American female musicians who would guide Evanti's early career. A talented pianist and administrator, Marshall worked as the head of music for D.C.'s Black public schools before becoming frustrated with her lack of control over the curriculum, which eventually prompted her to start her own music academy. Most of the students in the conservatory were children taking music lessons, although the school also offered

[88] "Says School Records Are Grossly in Error," *Evening Star,* 23 December 1915.

a four-year post-high school degree. Evanti did not participate in that program but instead took voice lessons. The founding faculty included Clarence Cameron White and Emma Azalia Hackley, an African American soprano and an influential teacher for African Americans singers who gave lessons to Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson and R. Nathaniel Dett. Early in his career White received financial support from Hackley to study with Black English composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor.[89] Also on faculty was pianist J. Hilary Taylor, the founder of the *Negro Music Journal*, which provided Marshall with advertising space for the school and a platform for her ideas about music.[90]

Marshall was committed to racial uplift and believed her students could improve themselves through studying classical music.[91] In a 1903 article in the *Negro Music Journal,* she argued that, "everyone should study music to some extent just as everyone should study literature, not necessarily to make a musician or poet but to become familiar with some of the highest forms of human intelligence."[92] As well as inspiring students and encouraging them to reach the full extent of human potential, rigorous study of classical music "can arouse a passionate devotion to all that is most noble, lofty and spiritual."[93] Clearly, classical music was a form of moral education for Marshall. She closed her article by confirming the abilities of African American artists and the rights of all people to play classical music, urging them to "enjoy the spiritual awakening in the divine message conveyed by the beautiful flowers of

[89] Vernon H. Edwards and Michael L. Mark, "In Retrospect: Clarence Cameron White," *The Black Perspective in Music* 9, no. 1 (1981), 51.

[90] Doris E. McGinty, "The Washington Conservatory of Music and School of Expression," *The Black Perspective in Music* 7, no. 1 (1979), 65.

[91] Ibid.; Sarah Schmalenberger, "Shaping Uplift through Music," *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 2 (2008): 57-83.

[92] Harriet A. Gibbs Marshall, "Music as a Profession," *The Negro Music Journal* 2, no. 15 (1903), 57.

[93] Ibid.

Genius and with true race pride feel rich in the thought that the garden is your own."[94] Thus she conferred ownership of the masterworks of human civilization on African Americans.

She also advocated for traditional African American music, for her, a source of racial pride:

> All say that the Negro is a natural born musician, orator and actor. … Do we know the great refining influence of this art and feel the need of such influences for the advancement of the people? We must not overlook these points or depreciate the original melodies which tell not only native talents but volumes of national history.[95]

In other words, Marshall's students could preserve African culture and still achieve uplift. Indeed, they often performed spirituals or concert works based on traditional melodies. At the Conservatory's graduation ceremony in 1913 almost all of the music was composed by African Americans.[96] For example, Evanti performed a song written by the Washington Conservatory Choral director, Harry A. Williams. Her time at the conservatory deeply affected her views on music and race. Before her training with Marshall, she seems mostly to have performed sentimental songs and lighter classical works. However, after 1913 nearly all of her recitals contained spirituals.

The Spiritual

As noted, the spiritual was singled out by Black luminaries as a symbol of African American culture. The genre has a complicated history. It emerged in the early nineteenth century as a syncretic mixture of west African traditions, Anglo-American hymnody and camp

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[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid.

[96] "Graduates in Music Entertain Friends," *Evening Star,* 23 May 1913; "Washington Conservatory Exercises," *New York Age,* 29 May 1913.

songs, and earlier musical genres of enslaved people such as the shout and the ring dance.[97] Often drawing on the Old Testament, the songs were sung in worship, work, and sometimes in play. In this oral tradition, no two performances were alike. Music-making was participatory, with everyone singing regardless of skill. Musically, spirituals featured rhythmic complexity, gapped scales, an overlap of the leader and chorus, bodily movements, and repetition of short melodic phrases.[98] Performers would slide in and out of pitches and add embellishments, claps, and shouts.

A series of events in the latter half of the nineteenth century led to the legitimization and standardization of the spiritual, transforming the genre. Spirituals were popularized by groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, who, starting in the 1870s, championed concert arrangements of spirituals for choral singing that featured westernized harmony. The Fisk Jubilee Singers also performed the songs in standard English, eschewing dialogue. Moving the spiritual into the concert hall changed the participatory format and limited the bodily movement of the performers as the singers modified this traditional art to cater to the mostly white audience they were financially motivated to please. Whereas jubilee groups fought for the recognition of spirituals as a dignified part of African American heritage, the poor quality of many groups seeking to replicate the success of the Fisk Jubilee Singers did violence to the spirituals as did caricatures in minstrel shows and vaudeville.

In the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries three figures were particularly important in elevating the spiritual. H.T. Burleigh, Du Bois, and Alain Locke. Henry Thacker

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[97] Sandra Jean Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

[98] Dena J. Epstein, *Sinful Tunes and Spirituals: Black Folk Music to the Civil War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 217.

(Harry or H.T.) Burleigh was an important force in shaping the genre as his dignified and respectful arrangements helped establish spirituals as art objects. Born in 1866, Burleigh had a fine baritone voice and studied at the National Conservatory of Music in New York, where he met Antonín Dvořák and sang spirituals that he had learned from his grandfather for the Czech composer. These tunes inspired Dvořák's famous comment that "In the Negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music."[99] In addition to working as a soloist in New York City, Burleigh began composing art songs influenced by German Romanticism in the 1890s. His compositions ranged from light-classical ballads to more serious art songs and were performed by many professional singers nationally and internationally.[100] But today Burleigh is mostly associated with the spiritual.

Around 1910, he began arranging and publishing the spirituals that he was performing in concert. These arrangements, by a composer of serious art song, helped to professionalize the spiritual. These compositions were part of the metamorphosis of the spiritual from a group ensemble into solo singing. Burleigh mostly preserved the melodies of the spirituals, but he used common-practice harmonies. Although his arrangements did not reflect the stylistic aspects of spirituals as an oral tradition, they soon became the standard for concert spirituals. He insisted on the religious importance of the genre and did not include elements of jazz or ragtime, which he thought would debase the songs. Burleigh included Black dialect in his arrangements but warned the performer against "striving to make the peculiar inflections of the voice that are natural with the colored people," also stating that "the voice is not nearly so important as the spirit."[101] In

[99] Antonín Dvořák, "Real Value of Negro Melodies," *New York Herald,* 21 May 1893.
[100] Jean E. Snyder, *Harry T. Burleigh: From the Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 253.
[101] Harry T. Burleigh, *The Spirituals of Harry T. Burleigh* (Miami: Belwin Music, 1917, reprinted 1984), 4.

doing this Burleigh leaves it up to the singer to decide whether to use dialect, taking as criterion the possibility that it could either sound natural and contribute to the dignified tone of the song or suggest caricature. In 1916 Burleigh published an arrangement of "Deep River," which unexpectedly became the hit of the season.[102] The song's success was widely reported in the press, and G. Ricordi, Burleigh's publisher, advertised the work with long lists of professional singers who performed the song.[103] In 1917, singer and vocal coach Oscar Seagle included five of Burleigh's spirituals on his recital popularizing the practice of white singers performing spirituals in their concerts.[104]

In addition to performances by well-respected artists, intellectuals positioned spirituals as a way of navigating the dual identity of Black Americans emphasizing the beauty, dignity, and genius of African American creators. Du Bois linked the spiritual to his well-known theory of double consciousness, a state of psychological conflict experienced by African Americans who must exist as Black people and also as Americans where white supremacy is a defining characteristic of society.

> One ever feels his two-ness, — an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his

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[102] Tim Brooks and Richard K. Spottswood, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 479.

[103] Snyder, *Harry T. Burleigh,* 306.

[104] Ibid., 309.

face.[105]

For Du Bois, spirituals were a key part of resolving this internal conflict because they contain African and European elements united in a Black American creation. He grouped spirituals into developmental types:

> The first is African music, the second Afro-American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian.[106]

The act of combining African American spirituals with classical music would gain significant traction with the artists and writers of the 1890s and 1900s, setting the ground for developments in classical music during the Harlem Renaissance.

Also taking the spiritual into account was Alain Locke (1885-1954), a leader in the Harlem Renaissance. In 1925, he published *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (1925)*,* a landmark collection which gave name to the growing artistic and intellectual movement centered in Harlem. In this anthology, Locke and the other contributing writers challenged stereotypes about African Americans and used art to push for increased civil rights. Locke states that spirituals are "Unique spiritual products of American life…nationally as well as racially characteristic."[107] He positions spirituals as works of art that are both "Fundamentally and Everlastingly human" and universal while also reflecting the experiences of African Americans in the United States. At the end of the chapter, he claims that Black singers are naturally better at singing spirituals than people of other races and exhorts Black singers to develop the spiritual further:

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[105] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3.
[106] Ibid., 184.
[107] Alain Locke, ed., *The New Negro: An Interpretation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1925), 199.

> It is more than a question of musicianship, it is a question of feeling instinctively qualities put there by instinct. In the process of the art development of this material the Negro musician has not only a peculiar advantage but a particular function and duty. Maintaining spiritual kinship with the best traditions of this great folk art, he must make himself the recognized vehicle of both its transmission and its further development.[108]

Thus the spiritual is hardly a static or unchanging genre but rather has a context-specific performance style. Furthermore, spirituals have been performed to great acclaim by both Black and white singers. While Black singers undoubtedly have a deep connection to the music, this is experienced through culture and not innate or instinctive as Locke claimed. However, it was a prevalent idea that influenced how audiences listened to Evanti's performances of spirituals.

Howard University

Evanti's studies at the Conservatory were a good start, but she still needed more training to become a professional singer. There was only one real option for a child of D.C.'s Black elite: Howard University, which had offered music classes as early as the 1870s. Originally, the program was housed in the education department and intended to train music teachers. In 1905 music study at Howard was fundamentally changed through Lulu Vere Childers, hired that year.[109] Childers, a graduate of Oberlin University, was an excellent administrator, teacher, and musician and used all of her prodigious talents to raise the level of music performance at Howard. Moving music from the education department to the main university in 1905 was the first step toward offering a bachelor's degree in music. In 1913 Childers started Howard's music conservatory. For the first two years, it granted music diplomas only. By 1915, however, it was

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[108] Locke, *The New Negro,* 207.

[109] Rayford Whittingham Logan, *Howard University: The First Hundred Years, 1867-1967* (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 145.

awarding bachelor's degrees.[110] To have a full conservatory, Howard had to hire additional instructors. Among these was Roy W. Tibbs. A graduate of Fisk University, Tibbs traveled to Paris in June 1914 to work with organist Isidor Phillipe but had to cut short his studies due to the outbreak of World War I.[111] At Howard, Tibbs taught music theory and took charge of organ and piano students.[112]

As Evanti began her studies at Howard, she continued to teach, whether at Mott, Simmons, Banneker, or the Garnet Night School.[113] She may also have given private lessons. At Howard, Tibbs was her teacher in harmony analysis and piano, and she studied voice with Childers.[114] Evanti would undoubtedly have been a member of Howard's Vested Choir. Rayford Whittingham Logan writing a history of Howard tells of the popularity of this group:

> Next to football, especially the Howard-Lincoln Thanksgiving game, Sunday vespers in the Chapel under the direction of Miss Childers was the most popular event on campus. Many persons recall, as does the author, that the lovely young women in the vested choir attracted a large following as much as did their beautiful voices. (But Miss Childers had everything under control in Chapel!)[115]

Logan also recalls performances of Handel's *Messiah* and Haydn's *Seven Last Words of Christ*. The education at the conservatory focused on classical music from the Western canon. The majority of the students were voice or keyboard performers, although this changed as the conservatory expanded over the years.

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[110] Logan, *Howard University,* 168.

[111] Smith, "Lillian Evanti," 32.

[112] Logan, *Howard University,* 383.

[113] Given her graduate date of 1917, Evanti most likely started in 1913. However, she attended a dance and performed at a fraternity event at Howard in 1912 so she may have enrolled in that year. "The Week in Society" *The Washington Bee,* 6 January 1912; "In the Schools," *Evening Star,* 27 December 1914; "In the Schools," *Evening Star,* 31 January 1915; "Vocational School Wanted in Southeast," *Evening Star,* 4 Feb 1915.

[114] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 47.

[115] Logan, *Howard University*, 216.

1915 was a turning point in Evanti's career. By then twenty-five and technically still a student, she established herself as a singer of a professional caliber through several important performances. On 20 March, she sang at Howard Theater alongside all of the most prominent Black musicians in D.C. in their annual "Home Concert." Her cousin, Daniel Murray, performed on the violin. The two biggest names on the program were Will Marion Cook and Abbie Mitchell, Cook's wife (from 1899-1906), who had a diverse career in her own right as a singer. She sang both classical and popular music and had performed in the Black Patti Troubadours headed by another famous African American soprano, Sissieretta Jones (herself known as "the Black Patti" after the celebrated Adelina Patti.[116] Mitchell also performed the role of Marguerite in Gounod's *Faust* and would go on to create the role of Clara in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in 1935. The concert was advertised nationally with an announcement appearing in the *Indianapolis Freeman* which stated, "The affair will be one of the truly 'society' events of the season."[117] Sharing the stage with these important artists allowed Evanti to establish herself as a professional while also offering her networking opportunities that could lead to future collaborations and other performances.

She also participated in programs at Howard. Each year in May, Childers would hold a music festival with a dramatic vocal work as the event's crown jewel. She would invite prominent singers to play solo roles, with the students performing smaller parts and singing in the chorus. For the 1915 festival, Childers presented the oratorio, *The Children's Crusade* by Gabriel Pierne (1863-1937).[118] She invited Roland Hayes, a former Fisk Jubilee Singer and

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[116] Darryl Glenn Nettles, *African American Concert Singers Before 1950* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2003), 115.

[117] "Music," *Indianapolis Freeman,* 20 March 1915.

[118] "Colored Singers Give Oratorio," *Evening Star,* 7 May 1915.

emerging concert artist, to sing the leading role. The other prominent soloist was Estelle Pinkney Clough, who began her singing career in the 1880s and performed the role of Aida with Theodore Drury's opera company in New York in 1903.[119] These luminaries were joined by two students, baritone Jacob Jones and Evanti. It must have been tremendously exciting for her to sing as a soloist in a dramatic work with Hayes and Clough. Her contact with Hayes would also prove advantageous, as Hayes would guide her when she went to Paris in the 1920s. Mortimer M. Harris, a Black Washington D.C. lawyer and real estate dealer who occasionally arranged concerts, also sponsored the event. He would later help Evanti arrange a concert tour in 1926.

Evanti was now ready for her first solo recital. At New Bethel Church on 18 November 1915, she presented a recital supported by her former collaborator violinist Felix Weir and accompanist Beatrice Lewis. The concert was advertised in the *Washington Herald* as "a recital of negro songs."[120] Inspired by her time at the Washington Conservatory, she focused on African American composers, singing works by Coleridge-Taylor, Cook, Burleigh and J. Rosamond Johnson.[121] Her cousin, George Henry Murray, managed the concert and advertised nationally in the *Chicago Defender.*[122] The review in the *Defender* evaluates the performance in terms of racial uplift, saying the performance:

> Was a thorough demonstration of musical ability and progress of the race. The music, participants, audience and surroundings were cheerful, wholesome and beautiful. In singing Miss Evans bids fair for the first honors. Her singing is natural and pleasing; poise adds to her charms.[123]

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[119] Nettles, *African American Concert Singers,* 49. For more about the Drury opera company see Turner, "Class, Race, and Uplift in the Opera House."

[120] "The Town Crier," *Washington Herald,* 17 November 1915.

[121] "Miss Evans to Give Recital," *Evening Star,* 16 November 1915.

[122] "George Murray Made Good," *Chicago Defender,* 6 November 1915.

[123] "Miss Lillian Evans' Recital," *Chicago Defender,* 27 November 1915.

By noting the audience and the performer, the reviewer emphasizes music's supposed ability to instill character in listeners and further "the progress of the race."

Evanti appeared again in a performance with Hayes at a Howard event, this time a rendition of *Messiah* at the Rankin Chapel on the Howard campus 8 December 1915. Edgar Schofield, a white American bass-baritone who specialized in oratorio, was initially engaged according to an advertisement in the *Howard Journal* on 2 December.[124] However, according to the review, Schofield was replaced by another white singer, William Gustafson, who would go on to become a regular at the Met in the 1920s. A student, Marie C. James, was the contralto. She was not quite up to the task: as the reviewers note that she "placed herself at a disadvantage in her first solo by a noticeable inattention to what was going on, and as a result was unready when her time came to sing."[125] By contrast, Evanti more than held her own with the two professionals, with one reviewer calling her "one of Washington's foremost sopranos" and especially praising her execution of "I Know that My Redeemer Liveth" and "Come Unto Me."

As part of the graduation ceremonies of 1917, Lillian Evanti gave a vocal recital on 8 June, singing in German, French, Italian, and English.[126] She was twenty-six years old, and her soaring soprano voice had now fully matured. Besides singing in multiple European languages, she demonstrated her mastery of a complex art form. Elegant, highly-educated, and musically skilled, Evanti was the very picture of New Negro womanhood. Her poise and accomplishments challenged racist stereotypes of Black women and signaled a victory for proponents of racial uplift. In the first three decades of her life, she had cultivated deep connections with Washington

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[124] "University Choral Society Will Render Handel's Oratorio The Messiah," *Howard University Journal,* 3 December 1915.

[125] "The Messiah," *Howard University Journal,* 17 December 1915.

[126] "Receives Bachelor Degree," *Chicago Defender*, 9 June 1917; "Music," *New York Age,* 14 June 1917.

D.C.'s Black community. Although her career would soon take her far from home, she would always maintain close ties to the nation's capital.

Chapter 2: Journeyman Years

Jordan Hall, 14 February 1918

On 14 February 1918, Lillian Evanti stood backstage at the celebrated Jordan Hall at the New England Conservatory, readying herself to sing. Now twenty-seven, she had traveled to Boston specifically for this concert, where she was to appear with Clarence Cameron White and H.T. Burleigh. As a student at Howard, Evanti had sung publicly. But now she was acting as a true professional, performing in a venue frequented by artists the caliber of pianist Myra Hess and cellist Pablo Casals. Although reassured by the presence of her friend, White, Evanti was nervous about performing Burleigh's arrangements of spirituals with Burleigh at the piano. However, she was also proud that the songs she was about to present were all by Black composers. In short, she was ready to demonstrate to the people of Boston the musical capabilities of the New Negro.

At the Jordan Hall concert, Evanti and her colleagues made a powerful statement about Black America by their very presence. This statement was also reinforced by their programming: the concert was emblematic of the New Negro in that it showcased a variety of genres by both Black and white composers, thus establishing African American musicians as fine performers capable of all aspects of musical endeavor. Below I analyze the different facets of this performance. By exploring the venue itself, the repertory and genres performed, the composers, and the wide-ranging abilities of Evanti's collaborators, we gain insight into the impact of this portentous event on her burgeoning career.

In the years following Evanti's graduation from Howard, sweeping social changes had begun to alter the racial landscape of America. The Great Migration drove thousands of African Americans from the rural south to work higher-paying jobs in industrialized northern cities,

sparking racial tensions as the previously rural and agricultural Black population now entered into competition for housing and employment in crowded urban areas. At the same time, lynchings increased dramatically, and the Ku Klux Klan, largely dormant since Reconstruction, expanded, peaking at six-million members by the mid-1920s.[1] Yet, a tremendous surge of creativity and growth of African American culture accompanied these atrocious developments, particularly in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. Out of this milieu arose a community of artists and intellectuals who challenged prejudice by creating a modern Black culture — the New Negros — whose inherent dignity would shine through undeniably in the quality of their artistic products. This movement is known as the Harlem Renaissance. Yet because the social and artistic changes it precipitated resonated far beyond Harlem it is often called the New Negro Movement.

Slavery devoured culture and identity. Therefore, the Harlem Renaissance needed to generate a metaphysical substructure capable of supporting a modern Black America. In their self-conscious creation of explicitly African American art, New Negro artists resisted race-based restrictions on artistic styles. Instead, they synthesized different traditions to create artistic products that expressed their experiences as Black Americans. Writers such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, James Weldon Johnson and many others explored the lives of Black people outside of stereotype. Many different ideas about how best to express Black identity through music percolated. Jazz musicians such as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Bessie Smith, achieved enormous popularity through developing a uniquely American sound with roots in Southern

[1] Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017).

Black communities. Some composers, such as William Grant Still, White, and Burleigh, joined the rich history of the spiritual, discussed above, with genres from the Western European classical tradition.

Others discovered that there was more money to be made in popular genres. James Weldon Johnson and his brother J. Rosamond Johnson wrote an opera together, *Tolosa,* and traveled to New York City in 1899 to get it produced.[2] Their operatic dreams were soon dashed. But when they met composer Bob Cole, the three launched a lucrative partnership in musical theater, creating hits such as *The Shoo-fly Regiment* (1906) and *The Red Moon* (1908). However, the brothers' most enduring work is "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (1900), known as the Black national anthem. Eventually, James stepped back from music to build a career as a lawyer, writer, diplomat, and civil rights activist.

Like the Johnsons, Will Marion Cook found he could make more money pandering to the white imagination, an objective he fulfilled in the hit song from *Clorindy,* "Who Dat Say Chicken in Dis Crowd?" Upon hearing this stereotype-laden dialect song, Cook's mother uttered the stinging words, "Oh, Will! Will! I've sent you all over the world to study and become a great musician, and you return such a nigger!"[3] Accommodationist "coon" songs such as this one had roots in blackface minstrelsy, with its songs typically composed and performed by white people in mocking imitation of Black music. However, Black musicians, aware of this repertory's commercial promise, performed coon songs as well. In other words, although many aspects of minstrelsy originated in the imagination of white people, the music reverberated in the lives of

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[2] Paula Marie Seniors, *Beyond Lift Every Voice and Sing: The Culture of Uplift, Identity, and Politics in Black Musical Theater* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2009), 25.

[3] Marva Griffin Carter, "Removing the 'Minstrel Mask' in the Musicals of Will Marion Cook," *The Musical Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (2000), 207.

Black people in ways that vastly complicated questions about the racial identity of the music.

The New England Conservatory

The New England Conservatory, along with Oberlin, was among the few classical music conservatories open to Black students. Among its graduates were opera singer Sissieretta Jones, (as noted, the "Black Patti"), composers J. Rosamond Johnson and Florence Price, pianist and musicologist Maud Cuney Hare, and violinist and grandson of abolitionist Frederick Douglass, Joseph Douglass. Yet although African Americans were permitted to attend, the New England Conservatory hardly provided a friendly or comfortable experience for students of color. For example, in 1891, Maud Cuney Hare and her family received a letter from the Conservatory asking her to move out of their housing. The administration gave the following reason:

> We realize that we cannot save the colored ladies in the Home [the school dormitory], from the possibility of disagreeable experiences, and while all the educational advantages of the Institution are open to them, it seems advisable for their own comfort, for the stability and welfare of the Institution whose advantages they covet and enjoy, and for the advantage of all concerned, that they make their home with friends outside.[4]

Although Cuney Hare's exclusion from the dormitory was ostensibly for her protection, clearly the school wished to separate her from the other students. Indeed, the reference to "advantages [Black students] covet and enjoy" was quite possibly a rebuke for questioning the terms on which she was allowed to study there in the first place. Her father, Norris Wright Cuney, a notable Reconstruction-Era civil rights leader from Texas, encouraged his daughter to stay in the dormitories and fight against prejudice. She followed his advice, but at great personal cost. As Cuney Hare later recounted:

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[4] Maud Cuney Hare, *Norris Wright Cuney, a Tribune of the Black People* (New York City: Crisis Publishing Company, 1913), 132.

> I refused to leave the dormitory, and because of this, was subjected to many petty indignities. I insisted upon proper treatment. The attitude of myself and my parents was displeasing to the Conservatory management, but the instructors were just and the matter was finally adjusted by my remaining in the "Home."[5]

Wishing to avoid this experience for her daughter, in 1903, Florence Price's mother arranged for an apartment off campus with a maid. She also encouraged Price to tell people that she was Mexican American rather than Black.[6] Indeed, while some of the records from the Conservatory list Price's hometown as Little Rock, Arkansas, her recital program from her third and final year records Pueblo, Mexico, as her hometown.[7] Clearly both women handled their circumstances in different ways. We can only wonder about the strategies other Black female students (and their male counterparts) utilized in negotiating this environment.

Repertoire, Composers, and Genre

White opened the Jordan Hall concert, performing *Chaconne* by Tomaso Antonio Vitale (1663-1745). In contrast to White's programming of canonical composers, Evanti performed three songs by Coleridge-Taylor, "The Stars," "Candle Lightin' Time," and "Thou Art Risen My Beloved."[8] As noted, this English composer was of African descent. His father was from Sierra Leone, but he was raised by his mother in London.[9] He was inspired by life in the Americas, however, as indicated by his compositions, which include *Toussaint L'ouverture* (1901), and *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies* (1904). One of his most celebrated works is *The Song of Hiawatha*

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[5] Ibid., 134.

[6] Rae Linda Brown, *The Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), 54.

[7] A misspelling of Puebla, Mexico. Ibid., 55.

[8] Lester A. Walton, "Ignoring the Lyricist," *New York Age,* 23 February 1918.

[9] Jeffrey Green, "'The Foremost Musician of His Race': Samuel Coleridge-Taylor of England, 1875-1912," *Black Music Research Journal* 10, no. 2 (1990): 234.

(1900), a trilogy of cantatas. In it, he draws on Longfellow's poem *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), which romanticized Native American life through a fictional love story between Hiawatha and Minnehaha. Coleridge-Taylor's composition for chorus, orchestra, and tenor solo, was tremendously popular. Its hundreds of performances by choral societies in the United Kingdom and the United States even helping to spark a "Hiawathamania." His African American admirers in Washington D.C. founded the Samuel Coleridge-Taylor Choral Society in 1901, an all-Black group that brought the composer to the United States in 1904, when he performed for President Theodore Roosevelt; he returned in 1906.[10] He also conducted the Marine Band, further proof for Black classical musicians that they could overcome racial barriers and receive recognition as artists.[11]

The texts of the Coleridge-Taylor songs Evanti performed at Jordan Hall were all by marginalized people. All three songs were intended for trained voices and contain some influences of what was later called jazz. The lyrics of the first two, by Black poets Kathleen Easmon Simango and Paul Laurence Dunbar respectively, are in African American vernacular dialect.[12] As a result, the songs are marked racially. They are also gendered, each featuring mothers who explain the natural phenomena of the world to their children. "The Stars," from *Five Fairy Ballades* tells the story of two pairs of mother and baby, one pair Black and the other white. By adopting the same music for both stanzas, Coleridge-Taylor emphasizes the universality of the mother-child bond across different races. When the mothers speak, the tempo

[10] Doris Evans McGinty, ""That You Came So Far to See Us": Coleridge-Taylor in America," *Black Music Research Journal* 21, no. 2 (2001): 197-234.

[11] Geoffrey Self, *The Hiawatha Man: The Life and Work of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor* (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate Pub., 1995), 160, 162.

[12] Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, "The Stars," in *Five Fairy Ballads,* lyrics by Kathleen Easmon Simango (New York: Boosey & Co., 1909), 14-19; Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, *Candle Lightin' Time,"* lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar (New York: John Church Company, 1911).

slows and the meter switches from triple to a more dignified duple meter as the piano plays simple rolled chords, adding emotional weight to the mothers' words. "Candle Lightin' Time" uses the lyrics of Dunbar's poem "Lullaby" from his collection *Candle Lightin' Time* published in 1901. In contrast, the more formal language of the third poem describes the carnal wishes of the lover who "would have it night forever."[13] The poem is by Marguerite Radclyffe-Hall (1880-1943), a self-proclaimed "congenital invert," a contemporaneous term for homosexual. At no point do the lyrics state the gender of either the singer or the singer's lover. The text's three stanzas are set strophically and the piano accompaniment contains frequent seventh chords which, combined with chromatic inflections in the melody, hint at the blues.

The concert included more music by Coleridge-Taylor, with White playing his Ballade in C Minor on the violin with Burleigh accompanying on piano. The dark and brooding theme which opens the piece, brings to mind the work of Dvořák, one of Coleridge-Taylor's favorite composers.[14] However, the theme softens as it is developed through a series of episodes which flow into one another creating a rhapsodic form. Near the end, the violin muses dreamily over rolled chords in the piano, creating an ethereal sound which is brought back to earth with a rousing coda in C major. Although Coleridge-Taylor's American inspired works, such as *Hiawatha*, receive much attention, the Ballade in C minor demonstrates his mastery of Western European Romantic-era conventions, a skill much appreciated by New Negro artists.

Another section of the concert centered around African American song. Evanti led off with three spirituals, the genre to which Du Bois and Locke attached so much importance,

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[13] Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, "Thou Art Risen My Beloved," in *Songs of Sun and Shade,* lyrics by Marguerite Radclyffe-Hall (New York: Boosey & Co., 1911), 12-14.

[14] Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, *Ballade in C Minor, op. 73,* (London: Augener, 1909; Huntsville: Recital Publication 1998).

singing “I Want to Be Ready,” “By An’ By,” and “Swing Low Sweet Chariot.”[15] Evanti organized these spirituals for maximum emotional effect as all three tell with increasing fervor of the singer’s faith in a future spiritual reward. The jaunty syncopations of “I Want to Be Ready” anticipate joyfully walking in New Jerusalem. “By An’ By” takes the listener from joy to exhaustion as Burleigh’s arrangement asks the singer to slow down and decrescendo to pianissimo for the final repetition of the lyrics “lay down my heavy load,” signaling a desire to be rid of the weight of earthly life. The piano accompaniment thins in “Swing Low,” making room to focus on the beauty of the voice and a vision of heavenly angels with the power to bring even the most stone-hearted audience to tears. After the group of spirituals came Burleigh’s “Southland Sketches,” performed by White on the violin with the composer playing the piano part.[16] These short violin pieces include snatches of melodies that a contemporary reviewer identified as “Negro Melodies”; however, the most recognizable tune is Stephen Foster’s minstrel song “Swanee River/ Old Folks At Home,” that is, an imitation of a “negro melody” rather than an authentic utterance.[17]

Evanti also performed a song by the Johnson brothers, who, although more successful with popular songs meant for the stage, continued to write classical works including “The Awakening” (1913). The two stanzas are set strophically with an added coda and feature heavy rubato and meter changes between 3/4 and 4/4.[18] She did sing one song from musical theater, Will Marion Cook’s “Mammy,” which was the hit tune from his 1915 musical comedy

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[15] Harry T. Burleigh, *The Spirituals of Harry T. Burleigh* (Miami: Belwin Music, 1917, reprinted 1984), 10, 103, 195.

[16] Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, *Southland Sketches* (New York: G. Ricordi & Co., 1916).

[17] Snyder, *Harry T. Burleigh,* 293.

[18] J. Rosamond Johnson, *The Awakening,* lyrics byJames Weldon Johnson (New York: G. Ricordi & Co., 1913).

Darkydom.[19] Both *Darkydom* and "Mammy" reinforce racist stereotypes. Yet throughout, Black family relationships are portrayed as powerful and loving. Moreover, "Mammy" situates a Black woman as the ideal mother figure, in part through a sentimental, idealized portrait of motherhood and the home that aligns with other parlor songs of the era. "Mammy" also contains references to singing spirituals as the singer wishes to hear her "croon some sad slave tune 'bout chariots in the sky," thus clearly identifying both the home and the mother as Black.

After singing two more songs, "Just You" by Burleigh and "Life and Death" by Coleridge-Taylor, Evanti relinquished the stage to White to conclude the evening. He performed *Viennese Song* by Fritz Kreisler and *Cradle Song* and *Orientale* by the Russian nationalist composer Cesar Cui. Then, as if in response to Cui, known for taking folk songs as his inspiration, White closed the concert with "Negro Dance" from his own *Bandanna Sketches: Four Negro Spirituals*. Each of its movements takes a spiritual as inspiration. They include: I. Chant ("Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen"), II. Lament ("I'm Troubled in Mind"), III. Slave Song "(Many Thousand Gone"), and IV. Negro Dance ("Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child").[20] White had achieved considerable success with this suite and arranged it for organ, piano, military band, choir, and orchestra. Fritz Kreisler, to whom White paid homage that evening by performing *Viennese Song,* admired White's arrangement of "Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen." Not only did he include it in concerts but he also recorded it.[21]

All this gave critics food for thought. The most extended review was by Lester A.

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[19] Information about this song is taken from secondary sources. Carter, *Swing Along,* 86.

[20] Clarence Cameron White, *Bandanna Sketches: Four Negro Spirituals* (New York: Carl Fischer, 1918).

[21] White's own recording of II. Lament may be found in the recording accompanying Brooks, *Lost Sounds;* Clarence Cameron White, *Bandanna Sketches: Four Negro Spirits II. Lament,* Broome 52, ca. 1919, reissued Archeophone 1005, Two CDs, 2005.

Walton, who regularly wrote for the column "In the Realm of Music" in the Black paper, *The New York Age.* He had also written the lyrics for "Mammy," and, at least on this occasion, used the column to excoriate the practice of omitting lyricists' names from programs.[22] However, he gives valuable insight into the goals of the organizers, which he believed were lofty ones. Walton insisted that these kinds of concerts:

> develop among Negros race pride and awaken a much-needed trait — race consciousness. They further serve to raise us in higher esteem among well-thinking white people. Similar concerts, under the proper auspices, should be given throughout the United States. It would be the right move in the right direction from which incalculable benefits to the race would accrue sooner or later.[23]

Pragmatically, Walton notes that demonstrating accomplishments such as those so amply on display that evening at Jordan Hall, could both improve the standing of Black people in a white-dominated society but also inspire the Black community. Showcasing the capacity of Black people could only have positive effects on both groups. Jordan Hall was the perfect environment for this argument, as the audience was racially mixed. Apropos these comments on racial achievement, Walton lists the three starring performers, Burleigh, White, and Evanti. Their presence, he notes, "did much to give the entertainment tone and class."[24]

In sum, the Jordan Hall concert was but one facet of the eternally evolving project of constructing a Black musical identity. Although some popular genres were performed, there was no jazz, and the performers avoided music generally considered low class. They also selected music that spoke deeply to their experiences and reinforced their vision of who they wanted to be and what they wanted their community to look and sound like. All the musicians had personal

[22] Walton, "Ignoring the Lyricist."
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

and professional relationships with one another and with many of the composers as well, demonstrating the interconnected web of Black musicians who sustained and encouraged each other forming an alternative musical network. By rejecting the whitewashing of classical music and the notion that Black performers must un-race themselves to perform classical music, these artists thus realized their desires to create music that encompassed the full scope of their identities.

Discrimination and Evanti's Vocal Double Consciousness

Six months after this heady experience, on 10 September 1918, Evanti married Roy W. Tibbs, her teacher at Howard.[25] Almost immediately, however, the couple separated for a year so that Tibbs could return to Oberlin to pursue a master's degree. When they reunited in 1919, the couple lived with Evanti's mother at 1910 Vermont Avenue, an arrangement that would ultimately prove challenging. Evanti was now well on her way to a successful career, a reality fraught with complications that she, Tibbs, and her mother would struggle to negotiate.

Although Evanti had multiple professional performances under her belt, opera was still out of reach. For much of the twentieth century, discrimination made it nearly impossible for any Black person to perform with an opera company in the United States, a situation that was particularly acute in the 1920s. Marian Anderson's Metropolitan Opera Company debut aside, the full story is more complicated. The difficulties began with training; as discussed, African Americans were not accepted into programs for opera singers. When it came to casting, directors could also use the guise of realism to avoid hiring non-white singers, thus ensuring that operatic vocal styles continued to be associated with middle- and upper-class whiteness. A recent

[25] Smith, "Lillian Evanti," 32.

example of such type-casting is telling: as late as 1977, African American spintosoprano Leona Mitchell, who won a Grammy for her performance of Bess in the first complete recording of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and sang with the Metropolitan Opera for eighteen years, was rejected for a role in *Don Giovanni* because the presence of a Black woman in seventeenth-century Spain would "ruin the realism and social structure." Mitchell retorted: "They shouldn't say that somebody doesn't look the part when certain singers are 350 pounds fat. How are they gonna play a nice young Donna Anna?"[26]

Certainly during Evanti's lifetime and beyond, casting had more to do with the social structure of the audience than the setting of the opera. When she was trying to break into opera, miscegenation was illegal in many states, rendering it impossible to depict romantic or sexual relationships on stage between Black and white actors. This problem was especially pernicious in the careers of Black men as audiences might possibly tolerate a white man in a relationship with a Black woman, but a Black man with a white woman remained an inflammatory image for many. Again, a relatively recent example of this prejudice reveals much: Berlin-based African American tenor Michael Austin, who has performed in opera houses in the United States and Europe, recalled a production of *La Traviata* in the 1980s where he played Alfredo in Alabama. He was removed from the cast as the managers feared the financial repercussions of staging an interracial kiss. He explained the reality of U.S. Life that led to such prejudices:

> in the states, [opera] depends on wealthy donors, corporations, tax write-offs, someone on a board saying, 'I don't [want] to see *this* on the stage.' In German-speaking countries, opera's subsidized, not based on ticket sales.[27]

In addition to a visual expectation for white skin, sonic expectations for a white sound

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[26] Article in *Opera News,* quoted in Rosalyn M. Story, *And So I Sing*, 189.
[27] Alison Kinney, "I Am Singing About Myself" *Van Magazine,* 9 June 2016.

flourished. The sound of the human voice is so powerfully tied to the body that it calls into existence, if only an imagined, a tangible body with traits determined by the qualities of the voice.[28] As we have seen, Evanti utilized a cultivated classical voice with a stylized vocal timbre most often associated with white bodies. Her coloratura soprano voice would also suggest whiteness to listeners, many of whom imagined the Black female voice to be endowed with "dusky" or "sultry" timbres. In cultivating the opposite vocal quality, Evanti challenged essentialist, racist assumptions about the capabilities of Black voices. However, defying these stereotypes made her less palatable to many audiences. Thus she confronted the double consciousness described by Du Bois: her Blackness and profession as an opera singer were often thought incompatible.

Evanti and the Black Performance Circuit

Like so many other Black performers, Evanti found her most supportive audience through churches, schools, and other African American institutions collectively known as the "Black performance circuit."[29] Often these institutions were the only places where Black musicians could perform. Most of the traffic on the circuit were performers of popular genres such as vaudeville and the blues, but segregation was based on skin-color, not musical genre, and Black musicians of all styles and persuasions found their greatest support in Black-oriented venues.[30] Further, the physical spaces offered by the Black performance circuit hosted what

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[28] For more on this phenomenon see: Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound;* Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," 179-189; Rutherford, "Voices and Singers," 124.

[29] 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,* eds. Ralph P. Locke, and Cyrilla Barr (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 222.

[30] Preston Lauterbach, *The Chitlin' Circuit and the Road to Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: W.W.

André dubs the "shadow culture," a segregated world that operates parallel to mainstream opera.[31] As suggested above, however, the shadow culture did more than reproduce white concert culture in Black spaces. It also attended to representation by exploring the full richness of the Black experience without resorting to colorblindness or unthinking stereotype. Below we meet some of the people who cultivated these performances spaces and who would play a role in shaping Evanti's career.

Daisy Tapley (1882-1925), a prominent figure in the Black music world in New York City, was one of Evanti's first supporters outside of Washington, D.C. She was a child prodigy, taking a professional job as an organ player for Quinn Chapel in Chicago when she was just twelve.[32] However, she was primarily known as a singer and made a name for herself performing in vaudeville shows with her husband, Green Tapley, and her friend Minnie Brown. In 1910 she separated from her husband and moved to New York City, where she became an influential teacher, performer, and community leader as president of the New York chapter of the National Association of Negro Musicians in 1920.[33] In N.Y.C., she lived with Brown, her fellow musical performer now her same-sex partner. In 1925, Tapley died from ovarian cancer at age forty-three.

Tapley fought for Black artists to have equal access to performance spaces in New York City. When the 125th street Y.M.C.A. refused to allow an integrated audience for a concert she had arranged in the winter of 1917-1918, Tapley wrote a letter published in the *New York Age*

Norton, 2011); Lynn Abbott and Doug Seroff, *Ragged But Right: Black Traveling Shows, "Coon Songs," and the Dark Pathway to Blues and Jazz* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).

[31] André, *Black Opera,* 10.

[32] Tim Brooks, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 255.

[33] Ibid., 258.

accusing the Y.M.C.A. of making a mockery of Christian brotherhood and announcing that the concert was canceled for want of a venue. The Y.M.C.A. organizers defended themselves, claiming that they had changed their minds about allowing Tapley to use the space not due to racism but because of wartime fuel restrictions. Tapley called them out on their shallowly hidden racism, raging that "When you receive your first load of coal you build an altar and put upon it as a first sacrifice your race prejudice, thereby fitting yourself for a rightful follower of Him who came to earth to preach the Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of Man."[34]

Determined that Black concert artists would have a stage and an integrated audience, Tapley then founded a series of educational recitals in New York. The series featured well-known singers, including Florence Cole-Talbert, Roland Hayes, Clarence Cameron White, Harry T. Burleigh, Maude Cuney-Hare, and, as a lecturer, W.E.B. Du Bois.[35] Her educational target was multi-pronged. In staging these concerts she aimed to increase the Black citizenry's appreciation of Western art music while also evangelizing to the white residents of New York City on the capabilities of her colleagues.

In 1919 and 1920, Evanti participated in several of these concerts. The first, on 17 April 1919, took place at Rush Memorial Church with pianist Lydia Mason, with whom Evanti would later tour.[36] Although no reviews of the event have surfaced, the concerts must have gone well as Evanti was scheduled for three of Tapley's concerts the following year. Having completed his master's degree, Tibbs joined his wife for these three recitals in New York City, one of which

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[34] Brooks, *Lost Sounds,* 257; Lester A. Walton "Christianity," *New York Age,* 19 January 1918.

[35] Brooks, *Lost Sounds,* 257; Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 7 February 1920.

[36] "Fourth Educational Recital," *New York Age,* 12 March 1919; "4th Educational Recital," *New York Age,* 12 April 1919.

was held at Rush Memorial Church (20 January 1920), another at Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church (29 January 1920), and a third at the Carlton Avenue Y.M.C.A. (30 January).[37]

Evanti's repertory for these events included excerpts from operas by Verdi and Handel, "The Call of Râdha" by Harriet Ware (1877-1962), "The Sailors' Wife" by Burleigh, and several French songs. Lucien White, a Black critic now writing the column "In the Realm of Music" for the *New York Age,* reviewed the 30 January performance. He enjoyed Evanti's "pleasing stage appearance" and admired the fact that "her singing shows evidence of careful training and earnest application."[38] However, he criticized Evanti's diction, griping that her selections might as well have been "have been sung in the Hottentot language." Choosing to describe the enunciation of a Black singer with an offensive colonial term for an African ethnic group, which carries connotations of savagery and primitivism is unsettling to modern sensibilities. Evidently for a critic such as Lucien White, the people of the African continent, along with their customs and language, were hopelessly foreign and antithetical to Western classical music.

Family Life

The Daisy Tapley concerts were some of the last Evanti presented before the birth of her son Thurlow Evans Tibbs on 11 May 1921. She was genuinely pleased to be a mother, even if the family structure was beginning to show signs of strain. They all continued living on Vermont Street, with Annie Brooks Evans listed as the homeowner.[39] Although Bruce Evans had died, the

[37] "Educational Recitals," *New York Age,* 24 January 1920; Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 7 February 1920.

[38] Ibid.

[39] 1920 US Census, Washington, D.C., population schedule, enumeration district 195, sheet 6756/5B, dwelling 81, family 115.

family still retained a leadership position in the community and did what they could to help out their neighbors, as evidenced by the presence of a foster son, ten-year-old Cliffton Wynne, in the survey.

The family residence was a point of tension in Evanti's marriage. Tibbs eventually bought a property for them to live in as a couple. But Evanti refused to move there, preferring to stay with her mother at 1910 Vermont and advising her husband to sell the property he had acquired.[40] It is difficult to "read" Evanti at this point. Although she gave up performing for nearly a year after the birth of her son, she was ill-suited to the life of a housewife and still dreamed of a career on the operatic stage, despite all the obstacles she was sure to confront. Likely, she resisted establishing a residence with Tibbs because in her childhood home, her mother took on many of Evanti's household duties, raising the baby while her daughter was traveling, along with cooking and cleaning. These amenities did not, however, extend to her son-in-law. Even before Evanti left on her first trip abroad, Tibbs's mother-in-law apparently only prepared food for herself and her daughter declaring she would not "act as a servant for him" while Evanti refused to cook even for herself.[41]

Evanti remained on friendly enough terms with her husband to continue performing together in 1922-1923, when Tibbs was still teaching at Howard University and Evanti worked in both the public school system and also at the Miner Normal School. In December 1922, they interrupted their teaching duties for a short tour.[42] As usual, they followed the Black performance circuit, appearing mainly in Black churches and schools but occasionally in community

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[40] "Tibbs Divorce Suit Ready to go to Trial," *New Journal,* 19 November 1927.
[41] Ibid.
[42] See Appendix 2.

auditoriums.[43] During summer 1923, they presented a series of recitals at teacher training institutes for African Americans, mainly in North Carolina. Such institutes were offered self-help courses, intended to improve the quality of education in rural segregated schools. Presenting concerts to inspire and edify young educators reinforced the ongoing importance of classical music in racial uplift narratives.

A review from a performance at Fisk University offers a window into their repertoire and performance abilities. Overall, the reviewer found Evanti's voice to be "pleasing" and "brilliant," reserving special praise for her coloratura, as her "high notes especially were clear and ringing." Evanti sang Rachmaninoff's "To the Children," and Donizetti's "La Zingara" from the eponymous opera and for which a reviewer praised the trills as "remarkably good."[44] Evanti also included two parlor songs,"Mexican Folk Song" and "Song of the Open," both by Frank LaForge (1879-1953). As if all this were not enough, she also performed several selections identified only by their composers: Handel, Scarlatti, Spohr, and Henry Bishop. The audience called for multiple encores. Generously, the couple offered a spiritual by Burleigh and an entire group of songs by the white American woman composers Pearl Curran, Gena Branscombe, and Pearl Terry. Evanti's repertoire for the summer group of concerts was nearly identical.

Evanti on the Airwaves

Back home in Washington D.C., Evans and Tibbs performed on the radio.[45] Although the

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[43] "Roy Wilfred Tibbs at Auditorium Dec 11," *Lexington Herald-Leader,* 26 November 1922; William Frank Williams, "News and Views from the Gate City," *Savannah Tribune,* 7 December 1922; "Piano Recital Given by Fisk Graduate," *Nashville Tennessean,* 9 December 1922; Nora Douglas Holt, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender,* 23 December 1922.

[44] "Piano Recital Given by Fisk Graduate."

[45] "By Radio Today," *Evening Star,* 8 January 1923.

medium was steadily becoming more accessible in the 1920s, national networks for broadcasting were just emerging, with most stations were locally operated. Most stations were also short-lived; of the eleven stations licensed to broadcast in the D.C. region in 1921 and 1922, none survived past 1925.[46] It was common for community musicians to perform live on the radio alongside recordings by better-known groups. Evans and Tibbs performed on WPM, a white-owned station run by Thomas J. Williams, an electrical supplier who sold radios. The musical entertainments for WPM were often arranged by singer and radio announcer M. Francis Painter, also white.[47] The station also broadcast popular music and other radio staples such as dialect recitations, usually given by white performers mimicking — mocking — Black speech patterns.[48] Evans and Tibbs were featured alongside a Black tenor named G. Stanley Brooks, with whom they had previously performed.[49] Tibbs played the first movement of Brahms' Piano Sonata in F minor No. 3, "Ave Maria" by Schubert (transcribed for piano by Liszt), and Scherzo by Balakirev. He then accompanied his wife in "La Zingara," "Steal Away" arranged by Burleigh, "Daddy's Sweetheart" by Liza Lehmann, "Un Bel Di" from *Madama Butterfly* by Puccini, and three songs by Frank La Forge.[50]

On 29 April 1924, Evanti performed a fifteen-minute radio program with Helen Wheatland at the piano.[51] It was broadcast by the Washington, D.C. station, WRC, a much larger organization. Unlike WPM, which existed primarily to entice people to buy radios, the sole

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[46] Thomas H. White, "Washington, D.C. AM Station History," https://www.earlyradiohistory.us/hist-dc.htm

[47] "Two Announcers," *Evening Star,* 11 February 1923.

[48] "Will Give One-Man Concert by Radio," *Washington Herald,* 19 March 1922; *Evening Star,* 3 July 1922.

[49] Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 3 June 1922.

[50] "By Radio Today," *Evening Star,* 8 January 1923.

[51] "Radio Programs," *Washington Post,* 29 April 1924.

purpose of WRC was broadcasting. By July 1923, it was promoted to a Class B station giving the station permission to broadcast on a stronger frequency and was rebroadcast in states as far away as Maine.[52] Although both Evanti and Wheatland were mentioned by name in the Washington D.C. papers, papers in other cities did not mention their names, referring only to a "program of vocal and instrumental music."[53] Clearly they were successful: WRC invited them back to play two 15-minute selections at 8:15 and 8:45 on 19 May.[54] This time, the papers published their names, including in other cities where they were heard such as Boston; Allentown, Pennsylvania; Bridgewater, New Jersey; Burlington, Vermont; and as far away as St. Louis, Missouri.[55] Evidently their first performance had convinced radio executives that they were important enough to be named. Ralph Edmonds, the program manager of the radio station, wrote Evanti a letter praising her performance and noting that "we had a number of calls after your performance which were very complimentary."[56]

The advent of radio directly impacted the challenges of racial prejudice sketched out above. Its uncanny technology made it possible for a radio listener to hear a voice greatly removed from the singer's body. At least some classical music aficionados in Washington reading the names of the performers on these broadcasts could have known that the performers were Black. However, for listeners outside of the city or for performances where they were not named, the audience would rely solely on sonic cues to determine race; the absence of markers

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[52] "New Broadcasting Stations for Radio Fans of The Capital," *Evening Star,* 31 July 1923.

[53] "Radio Programs Today from Stations Near and Far," *News Journal* (Wilmington, Delaware), 29 April 1924.

[54] "Local Radio Entertainment," *Evening Star,* 29 May 1924.

[55] Lloyd C. Greene, "Radio Broadcasts," *Boston Globe,* 29 May 1924; "Radio Program," *The Morning Call* (Allentown, Pennsylvania), 29 May 1924; "Radio Program Today," *Courier-News* (Somerville, New Jersey), 29 May 1924; "Radio Programs for Thursday," *Burlington Free Press,* 29 May 1924; "Radio Programs for the Week," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* 24 May 1924.

[56] Maude Roberts George, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender,* 7 June 1924.

of Blackness could have protected Evanti from discrimination. The next chapters will explore how Evanti's audience reacted when her race was in full view. Now thirty-four years old, she was experiencing tremendous professional success. She had also been promoted from her job as a kindergarten teacher to the position of Director of Music at Miner Normal School, where she had once been a pupil. Thus she was ensured the financial stability that often eludes professional performers.[57] Still, Evanti chafed at the limitations she faced. She was performing mainly in Black venues, and she had hit a glass ceiling in her teaching profession. Most painful of all, her dream of performing opera could not be realized in the United States. Accordingly, she set her sights on Europe.

[57] Maude Roberts George, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender,* 10 May 1924.

Chapter 3: Madame Evanti, Europe 1924-1933

Looking back upon her teenage years in Washington, Evanti recalled in her autobiography an afternoon spent with her girlhood friends, Laura Wheeler Waring, the future painter, and Helen Wheatland who would become a pianist and French professor at Howard:

> I remember one Saturday afternoon when the three of us sat on our front porch, discussing our plans, of which we had not yet told anyone. It was early fall and delightfully warm. We sat there in our middy blouses and low-heeled shoes and talked about crossing the ocean and finding in some other land opportunities which the color barrier made impossible of realization here in the United States. The presence of colored singers and performers, save as caricatures, was only too well-known to us. We knew that if we were to get the best training and achieve the highest places, it would have to be in Europe where that prejudice was absent.[1]

Indeed, this childhood dream would become a reality for Evanti. Through the rest of the 1920s and into the early 1930s, she frequently traveled across the Atlantic, always returning home. In Europe, her career opportunities were vastly different from her path in the United States. To highlight these differences, I have divided the period from 1924-1933 into two chapters. I detail Evanti's career in Europe in chapter three and in chapter four, her activities in the United States.

To Europe

In the 1920s, training in Europe was essential to any serious classical music career. The large symphonies and opera houses of the U.S. were filled with Europeans who ran the institutions as though they were still in their home countries, often conducting rehearsals in their native tongue. For example, Giulio Gatti Casazza, the general manager of the Metropolitan Opera Company from 1908-1935, did not know a word of English when he was hired and made Italian the language of the Met. Additionally, while racial discrimination was common in

[1] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 38.

Europe, it wasn't codified into law as it was in the United States. Many Black people found Paris in particular, to be welcoming with some, such as Josephine Baker and Richard Wright, becoming ex-pats. In fact, Paris was fundamental to the New Negro Renaissance.[2] Many of its young stars, including Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, flocked there, finding that Paris provided distance from life at home, thus allowing them to see themselves and their position in American society more clearly. Additionally, they were taken seriously as creators and thinkers and enjoyed the company of a growing African diaspora.

Evanti was determined to join them but such a journey would be expensive and risky. She would have to leave the stability of her family and teaching position. In appropriately dramatic terms, Evanti described her desire for operatic success as "an all-consuming mistress":

> I recall with apprehension sometimes, how that need to go to Europe burned in me like the flame in a steel furnace, bright and fiery and harsh and terrible. It consumed me. And I never really let anything stand in my way. That's the way it has to be.[3]

Whatever her drive and ambition, Evanti faced barriers on all sides. In addition to race-based limitations, she encountered domestic pressure to remain close to home. In theory, Tibbs supported Evanti's career; in her memoirs, she claims that he "not only acquiesced but advised" her to go to Europe.[4] But as Evanti took steps to make her dream a reality, jealousy and resentment began to mount. Although he did not speak against her plans, he impeded her efforts in other ways:

> He had studied in Paris and I assumed that he would be glad to see me do like-wise. I was wrong, as it turned out. When Laura Wheeling Waring, the painter, and I discussed going

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[2] Theresa A. Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African-American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-34* (New Bruswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001).
[3] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 49.
[4] Smith, "Lillian Evanti," 32.

to Europe together in the presence of my husband, I felt that he was not in accord.

> In the ensuing months I made formal plans for my trip. I saved my money so I should be able to finance myself. I became so enthusiastic that I failed to even ask my husband to help me with the money. He had given me a Nash car, which I had sold. It was on the very eve of my trip that he demanded his share of the selling price. This cut into my budget, but I gave it to him. Not even that incident, unfortunate as it was, could stop me.[5]

Although Evanti funded the trip on her own, this endeavor would not have been possible without help from other African American artists. Before she left, Roland Hayes wrote a letter of introduction to Madame Madeline Salmon Tan-Harbe, who agreed to guide Evanti in Parisian musical society.[6] Hayes had met Salmon Tan-Harbe's husband, the French cellist Joseph Salmon, in London in 1921.[7] Salmon was deeply affected by Hayes's performance of spirituals and invited Hayes to perform in his home in Paris. Salmon and his wife effectively acted as Hayes's agents in Paris, organizing his concerts, making hotel arrangements, and corresponding with others in France and Germany to arrange performances.[8] With the logistics of her travels settled, Evanti gave a going-away recital at the Miner Normal School that was covered in Black newspapers as far away as Chicago.[9] Newspaper accounts summarizing her career on the eve of her European travels also mentioned her radio performances, reporting that she had sung for the radio station WRC three times.

Evanti left soon after the school year ended, sailing for Paris on the steamship *Homeric* on 21 June 1924.[10] On hand to share the burdens and triumphs of the journey were the same childhood friends which whom she had earlier shared her dreams, Laura Wheeler Waring and

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[5] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 49.

[6] Ibid., 51.

[7] Christopher Antonio Brooks, *Roland Hayes: The Legacy of an American Tenor* (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2015), 82.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Maude Roberts George, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender,* 10 May 1924.

[10] Maude Roberts George, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender,* 7 June 1924.

Helen Wheatland. Waring was returning to Paris for a second course of art study, since an earlier visit had been cut short by World War I. She acted as a guide for the Evanti and Wheatland, the latter an accomplished pianist and scholar which whom Evanti had performed previously. The three companions provided one another with artistic inspiration. Waring, who now switched from painting in soft pastels to a more vivid and bold approach, wrote in her diary in July 1924, "Painting at home. Helen in window. Lillian in heliotrope… Found no interest in models compared with the above."[11] Not only did Waring paint at least two portraits of Evanti when they were in France, but she doubtless motivated Evanti to collect African American art.[12] Waring's "Still Life" hung in Evanti's drawing room for many years.

Becoming Evanti

Paris was exhilarating. For the first time in their lives, the three friends felt that they could pursue their full potential without facing racial barriers. The foreign city was full of familiar faces, and they quickly settled into the community of Black American ex-pats. Jessie Redmon Fauset, who arrived in Paris in the fall of 1925, wrote a letter to Langston Hughes about her life in Paris. "I have 3 or 4 friends here - Miss Wheeler, and Miss Wheatland (they liked you so much) Mrs. Tibbs and a Mr. Jenkins…there is no question but that American Negros are the best there are don't you think?"[13] Evanti and her companions also socialized with violinist Louis Vaughn Jones, scholar Rayford Logan, and medical doctor A. Wilberforce Williams, all Black

[11] Theresa Leininger-Miller, "'A Constant Stimulus and Inspiration': Laura Wheeler Waring in Paris in the 1910s and 1920s," *Notes in the History of Art* 24, no. 4 (2005), 15 footnote 28.

[12] She started her collection in the 1920s, which her grandson continued, and later donated to the National Gallery of Art.

[13] Jessie Fauset to Langston Hughes, 8 October 1925, box 61, folders 1163-1167, Langston Hughes Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut, https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/16998765.

Americans living in Paris.

These friends were an essential part of Evanti's Parisian education. Fauset in particular contributed in no small way to Evanti's professional career. Evanti later recalled one occasion in particular:

> Jessie Fauset joined Laura, Helen and me at a party. I wanted my name changed to a more euphonious-sounding one as an artist. So with pencil in hand, I wrote down "Evans" my maiden name, and "Tibbs," my husband's name. I came up with Tivani. But Jessie Fauset, a master of words, crossed that out and wrote Evanti instead … "That's just it," I cried. So we uncorked a bottle of champagne, and I have been Evanti ever since.[14]

In addition to achieving the euphony Evanti sought, the name was also more Italianate. In combination with her light skin, it was one more way of blurring her racial origins, making it easier for her to obtain operatic roles.

Despite a supportive community, Evanti encountered some difficulties. Money was always tight. When she and her friends first arrived, they stayed at the Salmons' house rent free. But Wheatland, Wheeler, and Evanti eventually began living in cheap hotels, mostly in the Latin Quarter. Evanti faced financial difficulties with her limited budget, coyly stating, "one would have to conclude that I did not pay my rent, for I moved seven times."[15] The apartment into which she eventually settled had no heat. Evanti also had to labor over her musical studies. Salmon Tan-Harbe arranged for Evanti to sing for Gabrielle Ritter-Ciampi (1886-1974) who came from a musical family in France and made her debut in 1917 as Violetta in *La Traviata.* A fine role model for Evanti, Ritter-Ciampi later became well known for Mozartean roles, in particular the Countess in *Le nozze di Figaro*.

Upon first meeting Evanti, Ritter-Ciampi leveled a barrage of criticism:

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[14] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 55, 59.
[15] Ibid.

> You don't breathe deep enough. You don't know the principles and practice of acting. You do not combine properly your glance, your attitude and your gesture. Your walk and bearing do not make for stage "resonance." You do not know how to stand up and you do not know how to sit down. And when you sit you are ignorant of how to remain seated.[16]

It is worth pointing out that Ritter-Ciampi's criticism almost entirely concerns Evanti's acting ability and stage presence, not her singing. Although she had an excellent voice, she was inexperienced as an actress and needed to develop an opera diva persona. Despite these limitations, Ritter-Ciampi took her on as a student.

Evanti got to work right away. She accompanied her teacher to the spa town of Vichy, where Ritter-Ciampi sojourned in the summer, to avoid missing any lessons.[17] Lacking a dedicated studio space, Evanti practiced in music stores and stairwells. Although she had tried to prepare before arriving, Evanti found that her French was entirely inadequate. She took instruction in French diction from Paulette Chapoteau, an actress who performed at the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe in Paris and who was originally from Haiti (perhaps African descended).[18] Evanti and her friends enjoyed the Christmas holidays in Paris with the Salmons as 1924 marched in 1925.[19] In the spring, she followed Ritter-Ciampi once more, this time to Nice, where she continued her voice studies and took acting lessons with Gaston DuPuis, the registrar of the Nice Municipal Casino Theater.[20]

Evanti's Debut: "The Lakmé of whom Delibes dreamed"

After many months of working with Evanti, her instructors arranged for her to debut in

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[16] Edward H. Lawson, "Lillian Evanti in Opera," *Washington Post*, 31 March 1929.
[17] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 53.
[18] Ibid., 54.
[19] Ibid., 55.
[20] The name of the acting instructor is given in her memoir as DePuis, elsewhere he is called Gaston Du Pins. Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 59; Lemeiux.

the role of Lakmé at the Nice Municipal Casino Theater on 9 March 1925.[21] A successful performance could launch her opera career, as the theater was prepared to offer Evanti a contract for the next season if she sang well. *Lakmé*, with its spectacular "Bell Song" (Air des Clochettes), is a litmus test for many a coloratura. The story is well known. Set in British-occupied India, Délibes's opera is a tale of thwarted love and the "undoing of women," as Catherine Clément aptly put it.[22] Like *Carmen* and *Madama Butterfly,* a non-white woman falls in love with a white man and is called upon to martyr herself, self-annihilating so that her lover would avoid the tragic fate of mixed-race relationship. Here the protagonist, Lakmé, is the daughter of Nilakantha, an Indian priest. She falls in love with Gerald, a British officer who abandons her, leaving Lakmé to commit suicide. The story is also one of exoticization: of India and its perceived mysteriousness, and of its people, who are portrayed as either dangerous zealots (Nilakantha) or tragic and powerless (Lakmé). Although *Lakmé* stereotyped people of color, ironically it was one of the few operas for which directors would cast non-white singers in leading roles. Although thrilled to perform this important role, Evanti found that starring in *Lakmé* was not without its frustrations. Jean Marny, singing the role of Gerald, decided he did not need to attend rehearsals. Infuriated by his cavalier attitude, Evanti had a tantrum in the near-empty theater, flooding it with rage. A few individuals witnessed this scene, among them Felix

[21] Evanti is unclear on dates. In "The Negro in Grand Opera" she states that the audition took place with no audience in April, but newspapers report on her performing the role on March 9 so the April date for the audition can't be correct. She also states that she gave her debut for orchestra in the fall, but in the fall of 1925 she was in the United States. Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 59; "Casino Municipal," *Menton and Monte Carlo News,* 7 March 1925; *Cote d'Azur* quoted in "Mme. Lillian Tibbs Wins Success in Grand Opera," *Buffalo American,* 22 October 1925; "Mme. Lillian Evanti, Singer, to be Honored," *Washington Post,* 25 October 1925.

[22] Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women,* trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

Haas, the director. According to him, her eyes "spit forked fire, and that her stature grew to fill the whole theater."[23] But she also recalled how the experienced musicians with whom she sang felt about her physical appearance and musical abilities:

> "With your voice and type, you are the Lakme of whom Delibes dreamed" one claimed. I needed very little make-up, being swarthy like the daughter of the Brahmin priest… I gained more confidence when the Chef d'Orchestra, [sic] … told me, "I have no fear for you because you are a musician."[24]

For this unnamed cast member, Evanti's race was but one factor that made her a perfect fit for the role. However, despite her musicianship and light, flexible voice, she still struggled with anxiety. Aware that her many years of training had led up to this moment, she underwent a metamorphosis the night of the performance. As she later recalled.

> The time had come. When I stepped onto the stage I felt that I really was an Indian princess, wearing a pagoda-like jeweled crown, red slippers, my sequin-fringed trimmed gown. Backstage my dramatic teacher, M. DuPuis, waited. I had what the French call 'le trac,' that is, 'nerves.' On my second entrance DuPuis had to actually push me onto the stage.
>
> The stage was darkened, save for one brilliant spotlight whose bright rays fell on my face. I knew there were several discriminating gentlemen in the darkened auditorium whose decision would tell me whether or not I had succeeded in my ambition. I took a breath for equilibrium of mind and body… There was little to inspire me outside of my own inner pulsation, the magic alchemy of desire and ambition to succeed.
>
> I sang better than ever when I began. When I sang the Bell Song I was Lakme falling in love with the British soldier. After the staccato finish on high E, clear and sustained, I felt I had made it.[25]

Opera relies on the uncanny power of the singer to pull the audience into another time and place. Evanti's performance as Lakmé was captivating. Some reactions by French critics

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[23] Edward H. Lawson, "Lillian Evanti in Opera," *Washington Post*, 31 March 1929.
[24] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 59.
[25] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 60-61.

were printed and translated in U.S. newspapers such as the *Washington Post.* According to that paper, a critic for Nice's *Cote d'Azur* observed that:

> After the 'Bell' song, the audience gave her a most enthusiastic ovation. Mme. Evanti possesses all the qualities for an eminent career, being a musician, as well as possessing a remarkable voice of wide range, combining qualities of the lyric and true coloratura soprano.[26]

Evanti had triumphed. But at what cost? Given the racial elements of *Lakmé* it is safe to say that one of the reasons that the orchestra director Felix Haas was willing to take a chance on an unknown singer was the realism that her darker skin could bring to the role. However, Evanti was at risk of being type-cast. As one correspondent for the Washington post reported, Evanti "had been chosen for the dark-skinned characterization because her appearance as an unsophisticated Hindu maid seemed eminently befitting."[27] But the journalist also remarked on the limitations that confronted interpreters such as Evanti, observing that "writers of opera had provided few Oriental [ie. dark-skinned] roles to fit the coloratura voice of the American.[28]

Evanti's costar Marny "assured Evanti that an American, to be successful in opera, to taste the glory of achievement in France, must be somewhat, if not altogether mad." In spite of her racial and national foreignness, Evanti's outburst over Marny missing a rehearsal convinced him that Evanti possessed this particular madness and "time and time again he expressed his disappointment at not witnessing" Evanti's spectacular display.[29] Others were similarly impressed with her dramatic show of emotion and "when the story came to the ears of the high directors, [they] decided to launch Evanti in passionate role(s)." Evanti's acting, voice, and

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[26] "Mme. Lillian Evanti, Singer, to be Honored," *Washington Post,* 25 October 1925.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Edward H. Lawson, "Lillian Evanti in Opera," *Washington Post*, 31 March 1929.

determination convinced the directors that she had the necessary temperament to succeed in opera and they offered her a six-month contract for the following year.[30] Clearly Evanti had progressed from her first lessons with Ritter-Ciampi. She had learned to channel her emotions on and off the stage, molding herself into a true opera diva.

Image 3.1: Evanti as Lakmé, 1925, Nice, France, box 26, photo 59, E-T collection.

In addition to Evanti's success in opera, she continued to perform in concerts and on the radio, singing for example, in a broadcast with the pianist Madeline de Valmalette.[31] She also

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[30] Ibid.; "Mme. Lillian Evanti, Singer, to be Honored"; Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 62.

[31] "Invades Grand Opera in the French Capital," *New Journal,* 31 October 1925.

gave a recital at Salmon Tan-Harbe's salon, where she sang French country songs and spirituals alongside operatic works.[32] Among the other performers on that occasion was the violinist Yvonne Giraud, a Marquise, and therefore accepted in elite social circles in France. Of Evanti's performance, the newspaper *Le Figaro* observed that "Mme. Evanti possesses a fine soprano voice of rare quality," adding that "the select audience was charmed by the flexibility and artistic finish of her voice."[33]

Evanti found that the French were interested in race relations in the United States and in African American culture:

> I feel that Mme. Salmon… understands very thoroughly the race question in America. She has made a special study of it and is very much interested in the general progress of the Negro. She is a great lover of the spirituals and can tell the origin of a great many of the slave songs.[34]

In sum, Evanti found acceptance and a platform for her art in France. However, after fourteen months abroad, she was homesick. Evanti returned to the United States to visit family and gave some concerts in August 1925. But France and all its attractions continued to beckon and she returned in mid-November, remaining there until June 1926 (see Appendix 3). Although details on this stay, her second trip to France, are at present incomplete, we do know that she returned to the opera in Nice reprising her role as Lakmé. She also appeared in Toulon singing the role of Violetta in *La Traviata.* In December 1925, she performed twice with the Monte Carlo Casino

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[32] "Soirée Musicale chez M. et Mme Joseph Salmon," *Le Figaro,* 16 May 1925; "Les Salons," *Comoedia,* 18 May 1925; "Color Prejudice Unknown Abroad Claims Soloist," *Chicago Defender,* 26 September 1925; "Mme. Lillian Evanti, Singer," *Washington Post,* 25 October 1925.

[33] *Le Figaro,* 16 May 1925; translation in "Mme. Lillian Evanti, Singer," *Washington Post,* 25 October 1925.

[34] "Color Prejudice Unknown Abroad Claims Soloist," *Chicago Defender,* 26 September 1925.

orchestra.[35]

Success in the French Capital

After spending most of the summer and fall of 1926 in the United States, Evanti returned to France in December 1926. In addition to performances in Montpelier, Toulon, Menton, Nîmes, and Monte Carlo, she sang on two prestigious stages in Paris, for which she now felt ready, given her experience in regional opera houses.[36] She reprised her role as Lakmé in three sold-out shows at Le Trianon, the first on Christmas Eve and the next two on 18 and 28 January.[37] She performed alongside Max Marrio as Nilakantha and Paul Saverny as Gerald, with Albert Jacobs conducting.[38] Irving Schwerké of the *Chicago Tribune* called her a "well-modulated, colorful soprano," adding that "her phrasing is musicianly" and proclaiming her florid work "bright and graceful."[39] In short, *Lakmé* at the Trianon was the highlight of her season.

Evanti also gave an important concert at the Salle des Agriculteurs.[40] She performed

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[35] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 70; Photo, 19 December 1925, box 25, folder 64, E-T collection; *L'Eclaireur du Dimanche* (Nice, FR), 13 December 1925; "On the Riviera," *Paris Times,* 11 December 1925; "Amusements," *Menton and Monte Carlo News,* 19 December 1925; *L'Eclaireur du Dimanche*, 20 December 1925.

[36] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 64.

[37] *Le Gaulois,* 27 December 1926; "Music Notes," *New York Herald* (Paris edition), 19 January 1927; L.M. "Trianon-Lyrique: Mme Lillian Evanti dans 'Lakmé,'"*Comoedia,* 24 January 1927; Irving Schwerke, "Notes of the Music World," *Chicago Tribune* (European Edition), 26 January 1927; "Music Notes," *New York Herald* (Paris edition), 26 January 1927; A. Hemingburg, "Parisian Operagoers Acclaim Mme. Evanti," *Chicago Defender,* 5 February 1927; "Lillian Evanti Sings Grand Opera in Paris," *New York Age,* 5 March 1927; "Stars That Shine," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 12 March 1927.

[38] Irving Schwerke, "Notes of the Music World," *Chicago Tribune* (European Edition), 26 January 1927; *Chicago Defender,* 5 February 1927; *New York Age,* 5 March 1927; *Pittsburgh Courier,* 12 March 1927.

[39] Schwerke, "Notes."

[40] "Les Récitals de la semaine," *Comoedia,* 14 February 1927; Stan Golestan, "Seances

classical works and spirituals on this concert. Félix Delgrange, a former cellist turned promoter, arranged the show, and she was accompanied by pianist Maurice Faure, a specialist in French opera later employed by the Met. A review of this concert made it into the Paris section of the *South China Morning Post*:

> A particularly interesting vocal recital has been given by Lillian Evanti, an American *coloratura* soprano with an unusually good voice, the tone being exceptionally pure and crystalline. A feature of this young artist's singing is a fine breath-control, which enables her to phrase in that broad manner so welcome to all who appreciate the rapidly vanishing *bel canto,* while the certainty of her attack is another valuable asset … Flexible, too, is the singer's voice, while the notes above the upper "C" hold no difficulties for her.[41]

As quoted by the *Chicago Defender,* the *Paris Telegram* gave her a positive review saying:

> She sang faultlessly a melody by Handel, her high notes having a particular form. She possesses an excellent method of pronunciation. Her voice is well placed and she handles it with artistic and dramatic ability. Her diction was excellent in Italian and French and her English was the best I have heard for a long time.[42]

If occasionally Evanti's tone was less clear in the middle and lower registers, reviewers were quick to praise the sparkling acrobatics of her light and flexible voice. The exceptionally successful concert at the Salle des Agriculteurs showcased her tightly controlled execution of virtuosic florid passages which required agility and clarity of diction and attack. These were the qualities with which she was most associated, in addition to her dramatic temperament.

Musicales," *Le Figaro,* 18 February 1927; "American Singer Wins Paris Concert Acclaim," *New York Age,* 2 April 1927; "Mme. Evanti Hailed by Paris Audiences," *Chicago Defender,* 2 April 1927; George Cecil, "Parisiana," *South China Morning Post,* 3 June 1927.

[41] Cecil, "Parisiana."

[42] "Mme. Evanti Hailed," *Chicago Defender*, 2 April 1927.

"As Happy as a Big Sunflower": Securing a Sponsor

Having studied French opera in France, she now wanted to learn Italian music in Italy. Evanti found a teacher, Bottera (also spelled Botera) Alexandrina, and traveled to Milan in April 1927.[43] This project exacted some financial strain, however. Evanti compared her circumstances with those of other young voice students from the United States in Italy. As she observed, some white students had it easier:

> There are so many American white girls here that I know who have been sent by rich people or rich clubs from their city. And many take two lessons a day. I take three a week but work very hard alone as I can play [piano] for myself.[44]

Although she had funded the earlier portion of her European studies and career herself, she realized she needed a sponsor. To that end, she wrote Robert Russa Moton. A Black educational leader, Moton became the principal of the Tuskegee Institute after Washington's death in 1915. Prior to working at Tuskegee, Moton was an administrator at the Hampton Institute where Evanti's father taught classes in the summer. As a child, Evanti and her brother had performed for Moton when they visited their father.[45] Like Washington, Moton was an accommodationist. He believed that the solution to racial discrimination was for Black people to prove to white people that they were worthy of good treatment by demonstrating excellent conduct and achievement. Moton's beliefs emerge in a letter he wrote to Evanti in May 1927, in which he also offered to help her find a sponsor:

> The fine dignity with which you have carried yourself under trying circumstances, the heroic struggles you have made and the success which you have achieved make you truly

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[43] Lillian Evanti to W.E.B. Du Bois, 26 April 1927, W.E.B. Du Bois papers (MS 312) Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

[44] Lillian to Robert Moton 18 May 1927, box 2, folder 16, Moton Family Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., (henceforth MFP).

[45] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 27-28.

> deserving of the backing of someone who, I am sure, will be glad to do it if the matter is properly presented.[46]

In this same letter, Moton suggested that the white Chicago businessman Samuel Insull might be willing to support her. Insull, a utilities magnate, was also a generous philanthropist who frequently donated to African American charities in Chicago. He was also a major supporter of Chicago's Civic Opera and thus a logical target for such a request. Financial help could not come too soon as her European career was in jeopardy. By May of 1927, Evanti could no longer afford to stay in Italy and she returned to New York City on 3 July, where she stayed with friends.[47] Back in the United States, Evanti petitioned Moton to write Insull or perhaps the investment banker and Met opera patron, Otto Kahn. She took a supplicating tone, confessing that she was "praying" that he would write on her behalf.[48] In November, Evanti wrote Moton again, now to inform him that she would be giving a concert in Chicago, and to request that Moton arrange a meeting with Insull.[49] Hesitant and cautious, and perhaps a bit fed up with Evanti's frequent requests, Moton did not respond. Since Evanti was neither patient nor timid, she boldly organized the meeting herself.

Evanti met with Insull on 18 November 1927. There, as she later reported to Moton, she informed him about her career and future intentions using all of her powers of charms and self-promotion.[50] During the meeting, Evanti uncovered that Moton had never written Insull. Although she must have been seething, she revealed nothing of her rage either to Insull or Moton, judging that Moton's status and connections were critically important to securing a

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Lillian to Robert Moton 18 May 1927, box 2, folder 16, MFP; "Mme. Evanti Sails," *Chicago Defender,* 9 July 1927.

[48] Lillian Evanti to Robert Moton 11 July 1927, box 2, folder 16, MFP.

[49] Evanti to Robert Moton 14 November 1927, box 2 Folder 16, MFP.

[50] Lillian Evanti to Robert Moton, 22 November 1927, box 2, folder 16, MFP.

patron. Evanti made sure that Insull understood that she was well connected and mentioned Moton frequently in their conversation. Evanti went on to admit that she lied about her age to Insull, pretending she was only twenty-seven instead of thirty-seven on the premise that a younger artist would be likelier to receive a scholarship. Her youthful appearance made such prevarication entirely plausible. Undeterred by such behavior, Insull offered to give her connections in Europe on the spot. But when she asked for financial support, he said he needed to check her references. Moton eventually informed Evanti that he actually "had not dealt directly with Mr. Insull but a person very close to him," nor had he met with Insull on Evanti's behalf when he was last in Chicago because Insull had a cold.[51] Moton's deference and caution in dealing with powerful white men was the direct opposite of Evanti's aggressive tactics. Evanti's persistence was rewarded. With Insull reaching out to Moton directly, Moton did not need to be cautious and gave Evanti a glowing recommendation. In December, Insull agreed to provide Evanti a monthly allowance for at least one year on the condition that she not reveal his name.[52] With her return to Italy guaranteed, Evanti proclaimed herself "as happy as a big sunflower."[53]

Interlude: The Price of Success

This happiness did not infiltrate Evanti's domestic life. The repeated trips overseas were destroying her marriage. Upon returning to Washington in August 1927, Evanti discovered that Tibbs had moved out of the family home on Vermont Avenue and established a bachelor apartment. When Tibbs moved out of the house, he abandoned they son Thurlow, now five years

[51] Robert Moton to Lillian Evanti, 26 November 1927, box 2, folder 16, MFP.
[52] Lillian Evanti to Robert Moton, 17 December 1927, box 2, folder 16, MFP.
[53] Ibid.

old, to live with Evanti's mother.[54] Evanti evidently still believed that there was hope for their marriage. Yet, when Evanti went to see her husband, Tibbs refused her entry to his apartment. On 5 August she returned there, now with Thurlow in tow, and forced her way inside, still determined to live under the same roof as her husband. However, Tibbs was equally adamant that their relationship had ended. Unwilling to resort to violence to remove Evanti and his son, he decided to go stay with a friend. One day, when Evanti had to go out, she asked her mother to stay with her son at Tibbs's apartment. Unfortunately, Tibbs returned during Evanti's absence. Prepared for a confrontation, he ejected his son and mother-in-law, thus reclaiming his home.

Not surprisingly, the couple's marriage came to a messy end over the next several months. Any number of personal details were subject to the glare of publicity: as their divorce case wound its way through the courts, the Black press lavished attention on the couple's circumstances, their coverage perhaps confirming Evanti's celebrity. For example, she took to the courts to retrieve wedding gifts and her share of their marital property, demanding items that ranged from valuable furnishings down to pillows and a trash basket. The *Pittsburgh Courier* voyeuristically recorded all these details.[55] Evanti also filed for alimony and was granted $100 a month.[56] Both spouses claimed that the other abandoned them. Tibbs also filed for custody of Thurlow, a performative act as he had deserted the child from the moment he moved out of the Vermont Avenue home.[57] Indeed, Thurlow was caught in the middle. Both parents desired custody of him even though it was quite clear that neither of them truly wished to have

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[54] "Howard University Music Head Sued by Wife," *The New York Age,* August 27 1927; Louis R. Lautier, "Abandoned Me Because of My Success as Concert Singer," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 20 August 1927; "Mrs. Lillian Evans Tibbs, Operatic Singer, Files Suit for Separate Maintenance," *New Journal and Guide,* 20 August 1927.

[55] "Evanti Asks for Return of Her Wedding Gifts," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 12 November 1927.

[56] "$100 a Month Alimony to Mme. Lillian Evanti," *New York Age,* 24 September 1927.

[57] "Had to Get Own Meals," *Philadelphia Tribune,* 24 November 1927.

responsibility for the day-to-day care of a young child. Ultimately, both were happy to leave him living with his grandmother while they continued their separate careers.

In her memoirs, Evanti claimed that she had wanted to take Thurlow with her to Europe but was prevented from doing so by Tibbs until Thurlow was ten. Her letters from the period do show that she missed him greatly, though it would have been impractical to study and work on her limited budget while also caring for a young child. As detailed below, she did take him abroad when he was twelve and placed him in boarding schools while she toured and performed. In the end, Evanti and Tibbs reached a divorce agreement out of the courts, and Evanti sailed for Paris in January 1928 as a single woman.[58]

Evanti's Success in Italian Opera

Evanti moved to Europe, spending only sixteen months in the United States between 1928 and the fateful year of 1933. The difference in the two worlds she inhabited was marked: at home she was Mrs. Tibbs, a Black divorceé with a child and limited career options whereas in Europe, she was the opera diva Madame Evanti, welcomed in elite artistic and social circles. Now armed with an allowance from Insull, Evanti resumed her studies in Italy. In addition to her lessons with Bottera Alexandrina, she worked with Rosina Storchio, who had starred in world premieres by Leoncavallo, Mascagni, Giordano, and Puccini, creating the role of Madama Butterfly. Evanti studied five characters with Storchio: Rosina (*Il barbiere di Siviglia*), Gilda (*Rigoletto*), Amina (*La Sonnambula*), Lucia (*Lucia di Lammermoor*), and Violetta (*La Traviata*).[59] Although Evanti had sung the role of Violetta in Toulon, she fell in love anew with

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[58] "Tibbs Marital Troubles Settled," *New York Amsterdam News,* 25 January 1928.
[59] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 78.

Verdi's tragic courtesan one day when Storchio sang portions of the role during a lesson. Evanti described the moment:

> I had heard the best Traviata in France and Italy, but no one had the power to be so convincing. When [Storchio] taught me to sing, tears streamed down my cheeks. Her very soul seemed to pour out its anguish. I learned so much from her of pure sincere artistry. Tears, she reminded me, are developed with a gradual crescendo. The audience must be allowed to weep with one gradually until they feel satisfied with one's despair.[60]

Thus Evanti truly came into her own as an actress in Italy, where she learned to generate intimate connections with her audience. Storchio thought highly of her pupil. Of her, she observed the following, as Evanti recounts:

> Storchio had said, "Lilliana, when you sing I see my soul mirrored." In her last letter she wrote, "I think with your intelligence, voice and artistry you should have created an enviable position in the United States."
>
> Alas, she knew nothing about the trials of a woman of color. The fact is I was ahead of my time, and America was not ready for a Negro in Grand Opera.[61]

The United States may not have been ready, but Italy certainly was. Evanti had her greatest career success in Italy and consistently won leading roles in regional opera houses. On her first tour in Italy, she sang in Verona, Genoa, Pegli, Turin, Milan, and Bergamo, performing leading roles in *Lakmé, Manon, La Traviata, Thaïs*, *ll barbiere di Siviglia, Roméo et Juliette* and, of course, *La Traviata.*[62]

At last Evanti was living her dream. She wished to share her success with her family and invited her mother to visit her. After spending the winter holiday of 1929-1930 in the United

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[60] Ibid, 87.

[61] Ibid., 89.

[62] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 72; "Musical Activities Nearby," *Pittsburgh Press,* 25 December 1927; "Music Notes," *New York Age*, 3 May 1929; "Verdi," *Corriere della Sera,* 5 July 1929.

States, Evanti and her mother traveled to Europe. Annie Evans kept a diary detailing the journey.[63] They stayed mainly in Italy but also visited other countries including Germany, probably in the summer of 1930, and England in 1931, where Evanti had several engagements.[64] This travel schedule meant that Mrs. Evans was on hand to witness many of Evanti's performances in the spring and summer of 1930. Exact dates and locations for many of these performances are unavailable at present; however, we know she appeared in Albano Sant'Alessandro, Castelmassa, Chiari, Palermo, Reggio Emilio, Turin, and Verona.[65] She mostly portrayed Violetta and Lucia but also sang Gilda and Rosina, and Inés from *L'Africaine.*[66] These small venues prepared her for the more prestigious Teatro Lirico in Milan, where she sang Violetta in *La Traviata* on 26 May 1930.[67] Reviews from this event are not preserved in Evanti's papers. But when Evanti reprised the role at the Lirico on 26 November she won critical praise:

> It is necessary to point out above all the soprano Liliana Evanti who lent all her sensitivity as an interpreter and her well-controlled vocal apparatus to the dramatic passion of the protagonist.[68]

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[63] Annie Evans travel diary, 1930-1931, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection.

[64] "Mme. Lillian Evanti Returns to Europe," *New York Amsterdam,* 12 February 1930.

[65] Associated Negro Press, "Evanti Wins Plaudits of Italians," *Philadelphia Tribune,* 29 May 1930; Promotional poster, *La Traviata* at Teatro Comunale in Chiari, IT, 3- 4 May 1930, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection; Promotional poster, *Lucia di Lammermoor* at Teatro Cotogni in Castelmassa, Italy, 17 May 1930, Chiari, 3- 4 May 1930, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection; Promotional Poster, *Lucia di Lammermoor,* 1 July 1930, boxed with scrapbooks, E-T collection; "Musigraphs," *Evening Star,* 27 July 1930. See Appendix 3.

[66] Annie Evans travel diary, 1930-1931, box 32, folder 20, E-T collection; Concert program, 16 April 1930, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection; Photo of Evanti in costume by Emilio Sommariva, box 1, Folder 6, E-T collection. There are two copies of this photo in Evanti's archives, one is labeled ""L'Africaine" Palermo, Sicily as Inez" the other is labeled "Gilda, Rigoletto, Milan." It is possible she wore the same costume for both roles.

[67] Promotional poster, *La Traviata* at Teatro Lirico in Milan, IT, 26 May 1930, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection; Associated Negro Press, "Acclaimed at Naples," *Pittsburgh Press,* 5 July 1930.

[68] "La "Traviata" al Lirico," *Corriere della Sera,* 27 November 1930. "Doveroso segnalare soprattutto la soprano Liliana Evanti che alla drammatica passione della protagonista prestó tutta

This review from the *Corriere della Sera* matches what other critics said about Evanti's voice. By now her artistic abilities and preferences are apparent. She had a coloratura soprano voice, light and flexible, but still strong enough to sing demanding roles such as Violetta. She preferred nineteenth-century works by Italian composers such as Verdi, Donizetti, Bellini, and Rossini. Evanti performed some French literature but had yet to study any German opera. In recitals, she mostly avoided German Lieder in favor of Italian arias and songs. A typical Evanti program would begin with Handel's "Care Selve" and end with a big coloratura aria, such as "È strano / Ah, fors'è lui / Sempre libera" from *Traviata* (her particular favorite) or "Caro Nome" from *Rigoletto* or "Qui La voce" from *I Puritani.* In Italy Evanti performed spirituals only infrequently; however, they were a significant component of her repertoire on recitals in other countries.

Blurred Origins: Evanti and Race in Italy and England

In Italy, Evanti's race was not a notable obstacle to her operatic career. Although she had made her debut in France in a non-white role, in Italy, she played roles commonly sung by white singers. One example is Evanti's appearance as Inés in *L'Africaine*. The opera dramatizes the life of explorer Vasco da Gama. Giacomo Meyrerbeer and his librettist Eugéne Scribe took great liberties with the facts of da Gama's life, concocting a love plot with an invented African princess Selika, who is captured and enslaved. The character Inés, a white woman, forms the third corner of the inevitable love triangle, resolved by Selika's suicide when the African Princess — the "Africaine" of the title — realizes that Inés is Da Gama's true love. In this production of *L'Africaine,* the casting directors chose to abandon visual realism and featured a

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la sua sensibilità d'interprete e i suoi ben dominati mezzi vocali."

white Selika (played by an Italian soprano, whose name is unknown) and an Inés with African heritage, that is, Evanti. In fact, the unnamed Italian soprano who played Selika "was said to be an offspring of the notorious de Medici" who "actually had the large bulging eyes characteristic of the noble family."[69] Despite her fair skin, Evanti didn't make a convincing blonde in *L'Africaine*, a fact on which she comments in her autobiography:

> I was dressed in a violet satin dress and wore a blonde wig and it was becoming since I was by nature a dark-eyed swarthy brunette… After the performance the artists gathered in the Green Room and it was there that the great artist Riccordo [sic] Stracciari met me and said before all those present that he had enjoyed the acting and singing of Evanti whom he regarded as the finest artist in the cast. I wondered how he knew me, as he had only seen me on the stage in a blonde wig. That was in the Garibaldi Theater in Palermo, Sicily. But he knew me nevertheless.[70]

For Evanti, the transformation produced by the blond wig erased her true identity to the point that she marveled at another's ability to recognize her. The blond wig was far from realistic, however, as the coloring did not match Evanti's skin and the thick braids looked more like rope than hair. Nonetheless, the wig had symbolic and psychological power and effectively signaled Evanti/Inés's whiteness within the context of the opera.[71]

From *Lakmé,* Evanti had learned the trope of the non-white female martyr who has the misfortune to fall in love with a white man. Now she played the opposite role as da Gama's true love, the Portuguese Inés, who was a more racially acceptable match for da Gama than the

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[69] Ibid., 82.

[70] Ibid., 130.

[71] This was not the only time that Evanti wore a light-colored wig for opera productions in Italy. In photographs of Evanti by painter and photographer Emilio Sommariva taken between 1929-1931 when she was living in Italy she appears costumed as Violetta from *La Traviata*, Gilda from *Rigoletto*, and Lucia from *Lucia di Lammermoor.* Violetta is the only role for which she did not wear a blonde wig. These photos are both in her archives in the Anacostia Community Museum and in the photographer's (Emilio Sommariva) archives at Bibliotheca Nazionale Braidense in Milan.

African Selika. Ironically, having fled to Europe to avoid the fear and hatred of racial mixing in her own country, Evanti was now transformed onstage, via Inés, from a victim of racial discrimination into a position of racial dominance.

Image 3.2: Evanti in costume, photograph by Emilio Sommariva. Two copies of this photo are found in Evanti's archive. One is labeled "*L'Africaine,* Palermo, Sicily as Inéz"; the other is labeled "Gilda, *Rigoletto,* Milan." It is possible she wore the same costume for both roles. box 1, folder 5, Evans-Tibbs collection.

What did the audience understand about all of this? Perhaps nothing. In Southern Italy, a woman with Evanti's coloration likely did not stand out. Although reviewers from elsewhere in Europe frequently commented on Evanti's race, the Italian press was silent on that matter. To be sure, at no time in Europe did Evanti attempt to pass as white. But neither did she correct fan's

assumptions about her origins when it benefitted her. For example, when Evanti was having a dress made by a Russian woman in Nice, the dressmaker remarked "confidentially that it would have cost me double had I been an American. For some reason she took me for a Russian, and I let it go at that."[72] This was far from the only time Evanti slipped through European identity filters. Singer William Warfield detailed this ambiguity:

> The Europeans were very confused [about Evanti]. They didn't know what she was. Was she white? Was she black? You know! She was one of those people who was very fair, straight hair with curls and all that sort of thing. And what with the barrier being an opera star, and nobody being black in opera, they were totally in the dark in Europe as to what she was, but Madame Evanti was something.[73]

Indeed, in England, she was received as an Italian soprano. In 1931 she performed in a dramatic vocal work, *Love Triumphant,* written by Countess Marie Vanden Heuvel (professionally known as Madame Marie Mely), a British aristocrat who was also a singer, music teacher, and composer of some small success.[74] She composed in several languages, including English, Germany, and Italian. The Italian Ambassador to England and his wife sponsored the event, which likely contributed to the reviewer for the *London Times* identifying Evanti as Italian.[75] The same reviewer also enthused over her singing:

> As soon as Mme. Evanti came onto the stage one realized that she had personality and a compelling presence, combined with that grace of movement without which an operatic voice, however fine, is little good… .Miss Evanti made full use of every change which this miniature opera offered her. Her voice is truly magnificent, crystal clear and amazingly effortless… .The applause which greeted Miss Evanti's performance was quite continental in its enthusiasm. As she accepted bouquets members of the audience stood

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[72] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 71.

[73] Nettles, *African American Concert Singers Before 1900*, 65.

[74] Heuvel's catalog consists of songs and small-scale dramatic works, often for women's voices and in several languages including English, German, and Italian. Aaron I. Cohen, *International Encyclopedia of Women Composers* (New York: Bowker, 1981); "Heuvel, Marie Vanden," OCLC WorldCat identities, https://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-no2011079657/.

[75] "News of the Music World," *Evening Star,* 7 June 1931.

> up to applaud — ladies waved handkerchiefs and the prima donna waved hers in acknowledgment. It could be said of Lillian Evanti, 'Venit, Cantavit, Vicit (she came, she saw [she sang], she conquered) without making any apology or altering the phrase of someone else who came from Italy.[76]

Nor did Evanti shun her Black contacts. She maintained robust correspondence with African American artists, including Clarence Cameron White, whom she likely visited on her way from London back to Milan in June 1931.[77]

Educating Thurlow

Between July 1931 and May 1932, Evanti was back in the United States, now having moved to New York, where she opened a teaching studio at 200 West 57th Street.[78] In October 1931, she attempted to enroll Thurlow in the Choir School of the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine, the seat of the Episcopal Diocese of New York.[79] Thurlow was turned away from the school because of his race, however. Evanti decided things would also be better for him in Europe. They sailed together on the SS *Leviathan,* which arrived in Plymouth, England, on 23 May 1932.[80] Travel documents from when she entered the United Kingdom give her age as thirty-two, ten years younger than her actual age. On 7 June, she gave a concert at Wigmore Hall

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[76] Evanti evidently mistranslated the Latin in her autobiography. *London Times,* quoted in Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 97.

[77] Clarence Cameron White and Wayne D. Shirley, "Letters of Clarence Cameron White in the Collections of the Music Division of the Library of Congress," *The Black Perspective in Music* 10, no. 2 (1982): 192.

[78] Capitola, "Washington Society," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 25 July 1931; CNS, "Madame Lillian Evanti to Remain in America," *New York Age,* 17 October 1931. Address from stationary, box 32, folder 14, E-T collection.

[79] The original letter of rejection from 1931 is lost, but she evidently sent the 1931 letter back to the church in 1953 and received a letter of apology from Reverend Pike. Lillian Evanti to Reverend James A. Pike, 17 June 1958, box 32, folder 1, E-T collection.

[80] "Goes Abroad," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 4 June 1932; Inwards passenger lists, Board of Trade: Commercial and Statistical Department and Successors, Class: BT26, Piece 996, Item 142, The National Archives of the UK, Kew, Surrey, England.

with Erich Reide as her accompanist; the review in *The Musical Times* was mixed. The reviewer, H.J.K., praised her "excellent tone and style in the Andante to Bellini's 'Qui la voce,'" but criticized her phrase endings.[81] The review in the *London Times* was more positive, especially praising her performance of Rachmaninoff's "Vocalise."[82] Excerpts from reviews in *The Evening Standard* and *The Morning Post of London* were published by *The Chicago Defender,* a sign of continued interest in Evanti's fortunes on the part of her Black compatriots.[83] Sometime in the spring Evanti and her son left London for the Netherlands, France, and then Germany before traveling to Austria.[84] Thurlow took full advantage of his surroundings. He attended a summer camp run by a Dr. Ehman in the mountains near Großherrischwand (southern Germany) while Evanti visited music festivals in Germany and Austria.[85] In the fall, he was enrolled in an international boys boarding school in Geneva, the Institute Gabriel Rauch in French Switzerland.[86] Roy Tibbs paid for his tuition while Evanti continued to tour around Europe.

Into the Lion's Den: Evanti in Germany and Austria

While her son was in Switzerland, Evanti settled in Germany. She first stayed in Berlin before establishing a home base in Munich by January of 1933. Having studied French and Italian opera in their respective countries, she now took on German, the last of opera's three major languages. However, the timing of her trip was unfortunate. In January 1933, Hitler

[81] HJK, "Singers of the Month," *Musical Times,* 1 July 1932.

[82] "Concerts," *London Times,* 11 June 1932.

[83] *Evening Standard* and *Morning Post of London* quoted in Maude Roberts George, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender,* 6 August 1932.

[84] Xenia, "Star Dust," *New Journal,* 22 October 1932; Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 101.

[85] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 101.

[86] Ibid.

assumed the chancellorship, bringing with him the Nazi party's poisonous racial ideology. Part of his popularity rested on the promises he made to the German people: civil order, repealing the Treaty of Versailles, and reducing the supposedly overwhelming influence of Jewish financiers. Initially, there seemed still to be hope for German democracy as Hitler had not yet eliminated all political resistance. In July 1933, however, any hope was dashed, when he consolidated control of Germany, outlawing opposing political parties. He would rise to total dictatorship with the death of President Hindenburg in August 1934.[87]

However successfully Evanti overcame racial barriers in France and Italy, race was an insurmountable obstacle in Germany. Evanti never appeared in a German opera, although she did give recitals in Berlin, Cologne, Munich, Stuttgart, and Nuremberg.[88] Racial and national identities were collapsed, thus German-ness was synonymous with whiteness. Many believed there was a special connection between classical music and German national and racial identity, particularly the singing of Lieder and other works in German composed by German composers. Black singers' sensitive performances of Lieder challenged this ideology.[89] As the Nazi party gradually tightened its hold on various aspects of daily life, they began to silence musicians who did not conform to Nazi ideology, through banning their works of art, firing them from their jobs, forcing the artists into self-imposed exile through intimidation and violence, or through internment in prison camps, which was frequently a death sentence. These tactics spilled over into the neighboring country of Austria, even before 1938, when Germany absorbed the country with the Anschluss. African American baritone Aubrey Pankey's May 1932 concert at the

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[87] Benjamin Carter Hett, *The Death of Democracy: Hitler's Rise to Power and the Downfall of the Weimar Republic* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018).

[88] See Appendix 3

[89] Thurman, *Singing Like Germans.*

Mozarteum foundation in Salzburg was besieged by Nazi rioters and the singer required a police escort to leave the building. Reviews in the papers the next day attacked Pankey, condemning his performance of Lieder as a form of racial contamination.[90]

If Evanti knew anything about Pankey's experiences she likely dismissed the event as an irregularity. After all, she had won over France and Italy. Likely, she believed Germany would be no different. In Munich, Evanti studied the role of Sofie from *Der Rosenkavalier* with Emmy Krüger, a soprano who frequently performed at the Bayreuther Festspiele in the 1920s and 1930s. The lessons went well: Evanti recalled Krüger's remark that she "had never known a foreigner to grasp the role with such understanding."[91] Evanti's foreignness in this context was racial as well as national, making Krüger's comment even more striking. Evanti also became acquainted with the composers Clemens von Franckenstein and Hans Pfitzner, also a conductor.[92] Franckenstein, the director of the Bayerischer Staatsoper in Munich, attempted to use his connections to help Evanti find a position at a German opera house.[93] Evanti's archives contain a score of Franckenstein's opera *Le Tai Pe,* an orientalist fantasy on the life of the Chinese poet Le Tai Pe (more commonly known as Li Bai) performed in German.[94] The score was inscribed by the composer in March 1933, with extensive annotations on the part for Yang Gui Fe indicating that she studied this role.[95] Perhaps most perplexing is the fact that Evanti met and charmed a future SS officer, Falk Zipperer. A poet who was better known as a legal scholar,

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[90] Ibid., 163.
[91] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 99.
[92] Ibid., 97-98.
[93] Ibid.
[94] John Mucci, "Clemens Erwien Heinrich Karl Bonaventura Freiherr von Franckenstein," Opera Glass, 8 December 2003, http://opera.stanford.edu/Franckenstein/main.html.
[95] Clemens von Franckenstein, *Le Tai Pe* (Munich: Drei Masken Verlag, 1920), box 7, E-T collection.

Zipperer was life-long friends with the architect of the Holocaust, Heinrich Himmler.[96] According to Evanti, he wrote forty sonnets for her. Their contents — an SS officer waxing poetic to a Black woman — must remain a mystery, however, as the poems are lost.[97]

Almost a year after Pankey's ill-fated concert, Evanti gave a concert in Salzburg in April in the Wiener Saal, the smaller of two venues owned by the Mozarteum Foundation. The concert was advertised in the *Salzburger Volksblatt,* which, perhaps wishing to avoid a scene, introduced her as a South American.[98] "I have just had last night a tremendous success here in Salzburg," she wrote to her mother the following day. "The public fairly shouted in their enthusiasm."[99] One reviewer (who signed as D. K-z.) labeled her an "amerikanische Kreolin" (American Creole), bluring her African ancestry:

> Lillian Evanti… is a young American creole with a beautiful captivating appearance full of Spanish grace. Even her countenance sings, with a calm graceful posture and a tasteful distinctive figure. [100]

This review was thoroughly complimentary:

> Her voice is very capable, in the dramatic as well as the energetic, the voice is large (the low range broad with sonorous timbre and the high coloratura full) the emotional expression is diverse and vivid …Naturally, Verdi or Rachmaninov are better suited to the romantic than Brahms, for whom there were also linguistic obstacles. But Mozart, for whom all languages are expressive (for example Constanza's aria from the *Entführung* "Ach, ich liebte") already shows an important standard of noble musical culture.
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> There is a great, sweeping nobility in the artist's accomplishments and a beautifully

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[96] Peter Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler: A Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 27.

[97] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 96.

[98] "Theater, Kunst und Musik," *Salzburger Volksblatt*, 1 April 1933.

[99] Lillian Evanti to Annie Evans, 3 April 1933, box 32, folder 18, E-T collection.

[100] D. K-z. "Theater, Kunst und Musik," *Salzburger Volksblatt*, 3 April 1933. "Lillian Evanti, die am Sonntag im Wiener Sall des Mozarteums einen Lieder und Arienabend gab, ist eine junge amerikanische Kreolin, eine Schöne bestechende Erscheinung voll spanischer Grazie. Schon ihr Äußeres nimmt Gesang, die ruhige anmutige Haltung beim Singen und die geschmackvolle aparte Figur."

trained theatrical instinct shows in the arias. How the voice performs in opera houses would first have to be determined, especially whether it is strong enough, and whether it does not become somewhat monotonous in timbre in a large hall. On the small scale of the Wiener Saal, the evening was a performance that was almost perfect in its dimensions. The audience was captivated. [101]

Thus, Evanti was able to avoid the problems faced by Pankey largely due to advertising. It is also important to note that her repertoire was different. As Thurman observes, Pankey's reviewers were particularly incensed that he was performing Schubert Lieder. The reviewer chastised the city, squalling that they "should not allow a Negro to sing, let along [to sing] German Lieder, and Schubert Lieder at that."[102] The closest Evanti came to this repertory in her Salzburg concert was in two selections. One was a song by Brahms. It was the only work that D. K-z. criticized, complaining that she was less than expressive in it due to "linguistic obstacles." The other, as noted above, was the aria "Ach, ich liebte," from Mozart's *Die Enführung aus dem Serail,* in which Evanti showed "noble musical culture," high praise indeed in that culture-obsessed environment.[103]

Evanti's difficulty securing performances in Germany resulted in financial instability.

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[101] Ibid. "Die Stimme ist sehr verwendungsfähig, im Dramatischen sowohl wie im Energischen, die Stimmensang groß (die Tiefenlage voll sonorer Klangfarbe, die höhe in der Koloratur füllig), der seelische Ausdruck vielfältig und plastisch — eine Sängerin alto mit einer ausgezeichneten künstlerischen Kinderstube, aus der sie sich wirksam weiter entwickelt hat. Dem romantischen Naturell liegen Naturgemäß Verdi oder Rachmaninow besser wie Brahms, bei dem es auch sprachlich Hindernisse gab. Aber bei Mozart mit seiner in allen Zungen redenden Empfindungsprache (Z.B.die Arie der Constanze aus der aus der Entführung, 'Ach, ich liebte') zeigt sich schon ein bedeutendes Standart an vornehmer musikalische Kultur.

In den Leistungen der Künstlerin liegt eine große, schwungvolle Noblesse und ein schön gebändigtes Theaterblut spricht auf den Arien. Wie sich die Stimme in Opernhäusern macht, wäre erst festzustellen, vor allem ob sie stark genug ist, und ob sie in großen Verhältnissen in Timbre nicht etwas einförmig wirst. Im kleinen Rahmen des Wiener Saals war der Abend eine Darbietung, die in ihren Ausmaßen fast vollkommen war. Das Publikum war hingerissen."

[102] "Die Demonstration," *Salzburger Volksblatt,* 11 May 1932, quoted in Thurman, *Singing Like Germans,* 166.

[103] An announcement stated she was singing works by Verdi, Rachmaninov, Rimsky-Korsakov, Mozart, and Brahms. *Salzburg Volksblatt,* 29 March 1933.

She relied on her family, including alimony from her ex-husband, which occasionally had to be extracted from Tibbs by Evanti's brother Joe.[104] While in Germany, Evanti regularly wrote to Du Bois. She offers insight into African Americans' support networks, which traded information on locations that would be hostile or welcoming for Black people. Her letters alternate between an almost willful disbelief in the seriousness of the political situation in Germany and an awareness of the growing threat. Looking back through the lens of history, Evanti seems hopelessly naive. However, in early 1933 it was by no means a foregone conclusion that Germany would descend into racial terror.

For example, in May 1933, Du Bois wrote Evanti on behalf of a young Black pianist seeking to study in Germany. He asked her if a Black student would face discrimination in Germany to which Evanti replied that she was unsure which was more poisonous, American or German racism. She begins her letter with an apology:

> Excuse my delay in not answering your letter but I was awaiting a reply from the Kultursminister here Herr. Schemm. I thought it would be interesting to you to know the feeling from a government official. As yet he has not answered so I judge diplomacy is the cause of his silence.[105]

Eventually Schemm issued a formal response stating there was no injunction against a Black person studying at a Bavarian University. Yet that is hardly the same thing as ensuring that a Black student would not face racism during her studies. Evanti then says something surprising to Du Bois:

> Personally I don't feel that the young lady in question would have any trouble. I have not

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[104] Lillian Evanti to Annie Evans, 3 April 1933, box 32, folder 18, E-T collection.

[105] Lillian Evanti to W.E.B. Du Bois, 28 June 1933, MS 312, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries, Amherst, Massachusetts, https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/collection/mums312 (from here forward, W.E.B. Du Bois papers).

> heard anything against or for colored Americans — especially when they are not taking too much money out of Germany. The greatest war against the Jews is that they for a while were holding the highest and most official position and had as in N.Y. and other places a corner on making money. And when one [Jew] is in power he brings in a whole colony.[106]

Although herself a minority in a foreign land, Evanti was swayed by the anti-Semitic propaganda then swirling around her. She regurgitates foul stereotypes justifying and downplaying Germany's treatment of the Jewish population. In another letter to Du Bois she wrote:

> I have been living in Germany for the past 9 mons. And have seen nothing of those exaggerated stories about persecution of the Jews. Before America holds mass meetings to criticize other nations we should put our own house in order and make it a safe place to live as regardless of sex, race or creed.[107]

Evanti viewed America's understanding of the treatment of Germany's Jewish population, limited as it might have been, as a hypocritical distraction from the treatment of American Blacks. Like many African Americans, she insisted there was less racism in Europe, perhaps hoping to shame the United States into better behavior through a fanciful model of an enlightened Europe and an aberrant uncivilized New World.[108] It is also possible that Evanti assumed racial difficulties would always exist on some level and that a European musical education was worth a certain amount of discomfort. Tracing the racism that Evanti faced in her life is difficult because discrimination was so prevalent she only mentions when it was absent.

She did, however, mention one Anti-Hitler statement to Du Bois:

> There are sayings that go from mouth to mouth — you perhaps will be amused with this one.
>
> > "Komm lieber Adolph
> > Sei unser gast.

[106] Ibid.
[107] Lillian Evanti to W. E. B. Du Bois, April 19, 1933, MS 312, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.
[108] Thurman, *Singing Like Germans,* 167.

Und halte was du uns versprochen hast!"[109]
Translated into English, it reads: "come dear Adolph, be our guest and give us what you have promised." It is a mocking re-write of a traditional table blessing "Komm Herr Jesu, sei unser gast, und segne diese Gaben, die Du uns bescheret hast."[110] In other words, the rhyme mocks the idea that Hitler would be able to fulfill his promises in a comparably jovial and light-hearted manner. Quite likely, Evanti doubted he would emerge victorious from the political chaos that reigned in Berlin in early 1933.

The last lines of Evanti's letter contain one final red flag. Although she had advised Du Bois that the young Black pianist would be safe in Germany, she was at the same time making arrangements for her own exit. Confiding to Du Bois that she would leave in September, Evanti asked him to help plan a concert for her stateside.[111] Over the summer, as the political situation in Germany deteriorated, Evanti accelerated her timeline, fleeing Germany on 18 August instead of waiting until September.[112] Unlike previous trips, by oceanliner, she and her son traveled on a mailboat, a reflection of their reduced financial circumstances.[113] Evanti had intended to return to Italy, as she still had trunks with some of her belongings in Milan from her time in Italy. On the journey back to the U.S., however, she sent for the bags, signaling that her days in Europe were now over. She would not return until after World War II.

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[109] Lillian Evanti to W.E.B. Du Bois, 28 June 1933, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

[110] Thank you to Carol Hess for bring this mealtime blessing to my attention.

[111] Lillian Evanti to W.E.B. Du Bois, 28 June 1933, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

[112] Records of the U.S. Customs Service, manifest of the SS *City of Hamburg,* departed Hamburg, 18 August 1933 arrived in Baltimore, 30 August 1933, National Archives and Records Adminstration (NARA), Ancestry.com.

[113] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 104.

Chapter 4: Life in America, 1925-1933

Image 4.1: Lillian Evanti aboard ship. Box 26, folder 26, E-T collection. This image was reproduced in "Returns Home After Opera Successes," *Chicago Defender,* 19 June 1926.[1]

Even amid the bustle of New York City, the arrival of the passenger ship *Aquitania* was a noteworthy event. One of the fastest, largest, and most luxurious ships sailing the Atlantic, the magnificent four-funneled express liner was nicknamed "the ship beautiful."[2] The only thing more intriguing than the ship was its passengers. Who were these glamorous and important travelers from distant shores? Journalists competed for space on the gangway, eager to report on

[1] The newspaper article states that the ship is the *Aquitania* arriving in New York City but the archival photo does not name the ship. Considering that the Evanti arrived in June and she is wearing a jacket in the photo, she may not be aboard the *Aquitania* in this photo.

[2] Richard MacMichael, "My Favorite Things: RMS Aquitania," Nova Scotia Museum, 6 November 2020, https://museum.novascotia.ca/blog/.

the coming and going of the wealthy and famous. As Evanti recalled apropos one of her return trips from Europe, "There were possibly thirty-five press photographers at the dock, all of whom 'shot' me in various poses."[3] However, after surveying the papers the next day, Evanti discovered not a single photo of herself in the white press.[4] Whatever successes she had in Europe did not change her status as a second-class citizen in the United States.

Having explored Evanti's career in Europe, I now turn to the United States. In this chapter, I will examine Evanti's American career from 1925-1933 to understand how race shaped her path at home, tracing her tactics for resistance and the beginnings of her journey into activism. I will start with a chronological overview of Evanti's American career before examining different threads that surfaced across the years of her American performances, specifically evaluating institutions, business decisions, and racial expectations for Black singers.

Evanti in America: Back Home and Back to Reality

As noted, Evanti spent most of 1925, 1926, and 1927 in Europe. But each fall she returned home to perform in the United States. [5] Appearing mostly at African American educational, religious, or social organizations, she sang programs that mixed classical works and spirituals. In contrast to Europe, the limitations of concertizing in America were starkly clear. Evanti could only sing in venues that were friendly to Black people, and opera stages would remain off-limits.

In October and November of 1925, Evanti gave a small number of concerts. Europe had

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[3] Orrin C. Evans, "Madame Lillian Evanti, Nice Grand Opera Artist, Grants Tribune Reporter Interview," *Philadelphia Tribune,* 7 August 1926.

[4] Ibid.

[5] See Appendix 2 for tour dates and locations.

professionalized her repertoire and voice. Now in her mid-thirties, she had reached full vocal maturity and power. In concert, she sang almost exclusively opera excerpts along with some English-language numbers and spirituals arranged by Burleigh.[6] Gone, however, were the parlor songs such as La Forge's "Song of the Open." In October of 1925, Lucien White, who had reviewed her 1920 educational concert organized by Daisy Tapley for the *New York Age*, now praised a performance she gave in New York City in the auditorium of the International House. As he noted, Evanti's European experience had more than paid off:

> [Her] singing on this occasion was a revelation with regard to the improvement that can be made in the human voice. Before going to France she was a pleasing vocalist, with an organ that seemed better fitted for drawing room singing than for the concert stage. And although she was always charming and beautiful, with a delightful personality, there was an amateurish aura always in evidence….
>
> [She] has developed an opulence of tone, with ample color and quality, and there is a definite assurance and authority in her phrasing and breath control. She sang in French, with a perfection of diction and accent that comes as a result of the intensive study she has done of recent years. And she sang in English with a clarity of enunciation rarely heard.[7]

In addition to bettering her voice, her opera training increased her sense of the dramatic. She performed the first selection from behind a curtain. Then, to create a truly stunning grand finale she sang two scenes from *Lakmé,* "Blanche Dourga, pâle Siva" (Lakmé's prayer in the first scene), and the Bell Song. To add an aura of mystery to Lakmé's prayer, she again sang the number from behind a curtain. The second "Bell Song" she performed in an elegant costume. Audiences responded enthusiastically. When she performed at the Lincoln Theater in Washington, D.C. (in late November 1925), on the eve of another trip to France in late November 1925, the hall was packed with over 2,000 guests who had come to hear a hometown

[6] Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 31 October 1925.
[7] Ibid.

girl made good.[8]

Evanti's U.S. tours in the fall of both 1926 and 1927 were significantly more extensive. For nine weeks, she averaged a performance about every three to four days, appearing at Black institutions, which formed the backbone of the Black performance circuit.[9] Despite performing in smaller venues — quite a contrast to some of her European appearances — the tours of 1926 and 1927 proved profitable. In the winter of 1929-1930, however, Evanti did not perform in her native country. In fact it would be nearly four years before she sang in the United States again.

As noted, a new chapter in her American career began in July 1931, when she moved to New York City. Effectively, this move signaled a rebellion against the treatment she received as a Black woman in the United States. It is also significant that she broke away from the Black community that had nourished her in Washington, which she missed profoundly. With the cachet of a European opera diva, Evanti was well positioned to assay more prestigious stages in the United States and expand her touring network beyond Black institutions. In 1932 she was partially successful, giving some high-profile concerts, discussed below, and receiving critical praise.[10] Yet, as we will see, Evanti was evidently unable to fill her performance schedule with

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[8] "Mrs. Roy Tibbs Sails," *Cleveland Gazette,* 7 November 1925.

[9] See Appendix 2 for dates and locations.

[10] "Colored Soprano to be Welcomed," *Evening Star,* 4 March 1932; "Gala Welcome Set for Capital Singer," *Washington Post,* 6 March 1932; "Mme. Evanti to Appear Here at the Belasco," *Washington Tribune,* 11 March 1932; "Honor Lillian Evanti Tibbs," *Atlanta World,* 15 March 1932; "Home-Coming of Madame Evanti,"*Washington Tribune,* 18 March 1932; "Evanti Concert Today," *Evening Star,* 20 March 1932; Elena de Sayn Melcher, "Music and Musicians," *Evening Star,* 21 March 1932; Edward H. Lawson, "Mme. Evanti Wins Acclaim pof Capital," *Washington Post,* 21 March 1932; "Mme. Evanti Wins Acclaim Here on Notable Recital," *Washington Tribune,* 25 March 1932; "Calendar of Concerts," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* 3 April 1932; F.D.P. "Lillian Evanti Gives Recital," *New York Herald Tribune,* 4 April 1932; Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 9 April 1932; W.B.C. "Lillian Evanti Sings," *New York Times,* 4 April 1932; Carl Diton, "Music News," *New York Amsterdam News,* 6 April 1932; Associated Negro Press, "Large Town Hall Filled to Witness Evanti Debut," *California Eagle,* 22 April 1932; W. E. B. Du Bois to Lillian Evanti, 22 March 1932, W. E. B. Du Bois

mainstream venues. She did not preserve rejection letters which makes it difficult to state with certainty that she was turned away from white venues. Still, the lack of concerts in 1932 compared with other years is a telling gap. She remained in New York, less than satisfied until returning to Europe in May 1932. After 1933, however, Evanti returned to performing mostly at Black institutions in her native country. The constant struggle for mainstream recognition, even at the height of her vocal prowess, deeply wounded and frustrated her. Over the coming years, she would turn to activism.

Evanti and Black Institutions

Several of Evanti's experiences during this period reveal the ways Black businesses and institutions developed in parallel to the exclusionary white concert world. These included the Black-run Stellar Concert Company and Poro College, a non-traditional college in St. Louis, Missouri. The former, a booking agency based in Kansas City sought to provide the city's citizens with high-quality entertainment. Roy Wilkins, an editor for the Black newspaper the *Kansas City Call,* was the driving force behind the concert series.[11] As discussed in chapter one, Black newspapers frequently acted as social organizers for Black communities. Wilkins's priorities aligned with the goals of many other socially progressive Black newspapermen who sought to strengthen and uplift Black culture. Not only did the Stellar Concert Company support Black artists but it avoided popular music, instead presenting classical works, with a focus on pieces by African American composers and spirituals. From 1926-28 the company brought

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Papers.

[11] Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York: Viking Press, 1982), 71; Rhona Justice-Malloy ed., *Theatre History Studies* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2010), 80.

luminaries such as Paul Robeson, J. Rosamond Johnson, J. Harold Brown, and Joseph Douglass to Kansas City. All performed at Grand Avenue Temple, an impressive Methodist church. Clearly Evanti would be in good company.

Her performance, which took place on 1 November 1926, seems to have been this organization's inaugural concert. Thus, she played a fundamental role in its mission to establish Black people as capable classical musicians. Indeed, the reviewer immediately introduced her as a "negro coloratura soprano," and stated that she performed "music of the standard coloratura [sic] repertoire."[12] The reviewer praised her singing saying "her voice is warmer than most coloraturas," and that "her musicianship is generally faultless." Evanti also performed a spiritual, Burleigh's "Were You There," which "so moved the audience that it was some seconds before it remembered to applaud." Evanti helped the organization get off the ground, which allowed it to book a star of even greater renown, Paul Robeson, in January of 1927.[13] Although the company couldn't pay his usual fee of $1,000, he agreed to sing for $750 because the company was Black-run and did not segregate the audience, all in accordance with his progressive principals.[14] Integration caused some financial difficulties, however. As Wilkins wrote:

> Our seating plans shocked white Kansas City. Since we were selling pews, not numbered seats, and since we were not in the Jim Crow business, we simply set up rows at $3 and $2.75 in the balcony — and threw them open on a first-come, first-served basis. It wasn't long before we got anxious calls asking if we were going to reserve a section for white people. Our answer was a very firm no, and advance ticket sales went poorly.[15]

Thus the company confronted a painful choice familiar to Black performing artists: sell your

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[12] "Music and Reviews," *Kansas City Times,* 2 November 1926.

[13] "Music and Reviews," *Kansas City Times,* 26 January 1927.

[14] For more on Robeson see Martin B. Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988).

[15] Wilkins, *Standing Fast*, 71.

dignity or suffer financially.

On 2 November, the day after launching the Stellar Concert Company, Evanti went to St. Louis to perform at Poro College. It was founded by Annie Turnbo Malone, a Black businesswoman who developed and sold haircare products for Black people. Malone recruited and trained other women to sell her products, including Sarah Breedlove, who changed her name to Madame C. J. Walker and would become Malone's rival in the Black beauty industry. Although Malone opened Poro College in 1917 as a cosmetology school, it also served as a center for the Black community in St. Louis with business offices, a chapel, bakery, gymnasium, dormitory, dining and meeting rooms, sewing shop, and infirmary. In addition to cosmetology, the school also taught deportment and gave Black women connections and skills to advance financially and socially in the world, exemplifying the "shadow culture" as a community within a community.

Robert P. Watts, a socially prominent Black teacher and secretary of the St. Louis branch of NAACP, reviewed Evanti's 1926 concert at Poro college.[16] Although he had no special musical training, Watts occasionally covered social events in St. Louis for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Evanti sang lighter songs on this program than she had in Kansas City, but still included classical works such as "Alleluia" by Mozart, "Spring is Coming" from Handel's *Ottone,* and "Ah fors'é lui" from Verdi's *Traviata.* She also sang a group of spirituals which consisted of "Lambs a Crying," "De Ol' Ark's a Moverin'," and "Were You There" as well as a group of English-language songs: "The Trees Have Grown So" by Burleigh, and "Me Company Along" by Richard Hageman. Watts particularly enjoyed her "poignantly plaintive" performance of

[16] Robert P. Watts, "St. Louis, Mo.," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 13 November 1926; Robert P. Watts, "A Force for Racial Understanding," *St Louis Post-Dispatch,* 31 May 1934; "Robert P. Watts Dies, Teacher Here 33 Years," *St Louis Globe-Democrat,* 16 July 1954.

"Home, Sweet Home," in which she accompanied herself on the piano, a novel detail for most voice recitals and one which surely added to her audience appeal.[17]

Evanti occasionally worked with white allies to expand her access to performance spaces. Two of the concerts in which Evanti participated in during the 1927 tour were organized by interracial associations. In Wichita, her performance was arranged by the Committee on Interracial Goodwill of the Council of Churches.[18] Formed in 1923, the Committee held that "the best results could be obtained by finding things which the two races might do together."[19] Thus the Committee coordinated interracial worship and arranged for Black and white congregations to exchange ministers. The Committee also partnered with a local Black-run music school, the Coleridge-Taylor Conservatory of Music, to plan concerts such as Evanti's, as well as an earlier performance by Roland Hayes in March 1926.[20] The Conservatory was led by the African American pianist, educator, and composer Dorothy L. Sims Winston.[21] The school taught violin, voice, piano, harmony, and composition and claimed to be the largest school of music in the state.[22]

A similarly oriented event took place in Chicago, as the city was celebrating "Negro in Art Week," held 16-23 November 1927 and sponsored by the interracial committee of the Chicago Woman's Club.[23] It featured exhibits of African American art, complemented by

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[17] Robert P. Watts, "Madame Evanti Captivates Appreciative St. Louis Audience at Poro College Auditorium," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 13 November 1926.

[18] "Lillian Evanti in Concert," *Wichita Eagle,* 13 November 1927; "Noted Soprano Sings Tonight," *Wichita Eagle,* 14 November 1927.

[19] W.L. Hutcherson, "Interracial Co-operation in Wichita," *Southern Workman* (1925): 376.

[20] "Roland Hayes Concert at Wichita High Auditorium,"*University Life,* 1 March 1926.

[21] "Colored Composer in Recital Today," *Wichita Eagle,* 22 January 1931.

[22] "Say It with Music," *The Negro Star,* 19 March 1926.

[23] Edward Moore, "New Harpist Makes His Debut with Symphony," *Chicago Tribune,* 19 November 1927; "Negro Art Week in Chicago, Nov. 16-23," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 19 November 1927; Maude Roberts George, "Music," *Chicago Defender,* 29 October 1927; Lucien H. White,

lectures, radio broadcasts, poetry readings, and musical performances. Evanti performed in concert with her former colleague Clarence Cameron White; pianist Hazel Harrison; and the celebrated Fisk Jubilee Singers in Chicago's prestigious Orchestra Hall on 18 November. It was her first appearance with Harrison or the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Evanti received glowing reviews in the press.[24] Lucien White, ever her admirer, quoted Glen Dillard Gunn of the *Herald Examiner,* who enthused that her "technic [technique] scintillates and the range is phenomenal" and praised her "fidelity to the pitch in the famous Bell Song from *Lakmé* which some of her colleagues might envy."[25] While in Chicago, she was a guest of honor with other luminaries who participated in "Negro in Art Week." She was feted at a reception alongside Hazel Harrison, James Weldon Johnson, and Alain Locke, whom she likely knew from D.C. society. Neither the Committee on Interracial Goodwill of the Council of Churches or the interracial committee of the Chicago Woman's Club openly demanded civil rights. Yet they pushed back against racist ideologies by sponsoring integrated events and honoring accomplished African Americans.

Even as many venues blocked African American performers, some prestigious venues with liberal policies embraced them. Among these was Town Hall in New York City, where Evanti sang on 3 April 1932.[26] From its very beginnings, Town Hall was a democratic institution.[27] It was funded by suffragists from the League for Political Education and was

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"In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 3 December 1927.

[24] Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 3 December 1927.

[25] Quoted in White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 3 December 1927.

[26] "Calendar of Concerts," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* April 3, 1932; Francis D. Perkins, "Lillian Evanti Gives Recital," *New York Herald Tribune,* 4 April 1932; Harold A. Strickland, "Music," *Brooklyn Times Union,* 4 April 1932; Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 9 April 1932; W.B.C. "Lillian Evanti Sings," *New York Times,* 4 April 1932; Carl Diton, "Music News," *New York Amsterdam News,* 6 April 1932; Associated Negro Press, "Large Town Hall Filled to Witness Evanti Debut," *California Eagle, 22* April 1932; W. E. B. Du Bois to Lillian Evanti, 22 March 1932,W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

[27] "At the Crossroads of History and Culture," The Town Hall,

conceived as a space where all people could go to be educated about current events. Accordingly, the hall was built with no box seats and hosted controversial speakers such as birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, who was arrested on stage the same year the hall opened, in 1921. Marian Anderson had sung in a rather disappointing concert there in 1924 before returning triumphant after successes in Europe in 1935, three years after Evanti's concert there.[28]

Evanti opened with "Care Selve" by Handel followed by "Qual farfalletta amante," by Domenico Scarlatti. Then she sang two favorites, "Qui la voce" from Bellini's *I Puritani* and "Das Veilchen" by Mozart, which was the first of a German-language set including Jensen's "Murmelndes Lueftchen" by Adolf Jensen, "Meine Liebe is grün," by Brahms, "Für Musik" by Robert Franz, and "Als mir dein Lied Erklang" by Richard Strauss. She then ventured back into more familiar territory with "Berecuse" from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Sadko* and "Salut à toi" from *Le Coq d'Or* by the same composer, before wrapping up this Russian group with "Vocalise" by Rachmaninoff. For the final set, she switched to English, including a spiritual, "Lord I Want to Be a Christian," "Tell Me Oh Blue, Blue Sky" by Vittorio Gianni, and "The Day's Begun" by Clara Edwards, before switching into Spanish for "O, Otras Playas" by José Anglada Ochoa. This was followed by several encores, including,"Were I A Star," by Burleigh, "Moon Marketing," by Powell Weaver, and then an unidentified cradle song performed by her accompanist, Erich Riede before Evanti sang her last number, which the reviews only identify as a "Fan Song."[29]

Although she had a large audience, the reception of this concert was not as warm as on

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https://thetownhall.org/history.

[28] Marian Anderson, *My Lord, What a Morning: An Autobiography* (New York: Viking Press, 1956).

[29] Francis D. Perkins, "Lillian Evanti Gives Recital," *New York Herald Tribune,* 4 April 1932.

previous occasions. Francis D. Perkins a critic from the New York Herald Tribune, complained that she sang "with varying effectiveness in her German group" and that while "her tone production was usually fluent and the quality was often clear…a ripple in the tonal surface was, not infrequently, to be noticed."[30] Harold A. Strickland from the Brooklyn Times Union reported rather vaguely that she needed "more experience in the matter of style."[31] Even Lucien H. White of the New York Age also noticed a "hesitancy in attack." White also had some words of criticism for her accompanist:

> Incidentally, there was some speculation on part of members of the race in the audience as to why Evanti did not use one of our qualified race pianists as her accompanist. She has done so on other occasions and the result was most satisfying."[32]

Unlike the interracial organizations described above, some critics such as White were evidently unwilling to encourage integrated performances. Juggling all these complexities alone — booking the hall, engaging a pianist, negotiating payment, advertising and selling tickets — was a daunting proposition. Evanti decided she needed a manager.

No Business Like Show Business

Evanti never had a steady manager who worked with her over the long term to build her career. At the beginning of her career she had worked with some representation, but as she gained experience, confidence, and connections, she relied on managers only for specific tours or for illustrious venues where a go-between was expected. One of these individuals was Mortimer Harris, a Black Washington D.C. businessman, who, back in 1915, had helped organize one of

[30] Francis D. Perkins, "Lillian Evanti Gives Recital."
[31] Strickland, "Music."
[32] White, "In the Realm of Music," 9 April 1932.

Evanti's concerts. In the 1925-1926 season he became her personal manager.[33] In 1926, he drew-up a contract between Evanti and a company operating out of Raleigh, North Carolina, which focused on bookings in Black schools, churches, and concert halls.[34] However, Harris's connections proved inadequate. For a concert in Washington's Belasco Theater, Evanti had to secure a second manager, T. Arthur Smith, a white man who worked with opera singers in Washington and Baltimore.[35] Although managers had connections that Evanti did not, they were an added expense, and Evanti could not always trust representatives, especially white ones, to advocate for her as strongly as she did for herself.

Harris's tenure was short-lived. After the 1926 tour, Evanti stopped working with him and began securing performances for herself. In July 1927, Evanti wrote to the Tuskegee Institute requesting $500 to give a concert there; the institution countered with $300. Unsatisfied, she wrote directly to its president, Richard Moton who had helped connect her with Samuel Insull:

> I am writing you personally to ask if Tuskegee will not agree to my terms of $500. Traveling with an accompanist with all the entailed expenses is a very expensive proposition and I know only too well from my small net returns last season. Daniel Meyer [Mayer] the New York manager told me you paid one of his artist (a pianist) $500 last year and those were special terms to you as his price is $1,000.[36]

Evanti indulged in some subterfuge here. In fact, her 1926 tour was profitable, yielding far more than "small net returns." She also requested that Moton use his influence on other Black leaders to help her schedule more concerts. Here, she mentioned Captain Washington, a non-military

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[33] Walter J. Singleton, "Mme. Evanti Gives Farewell Recital on October 27th," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 24 October 1925.

[34] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 71.

[35] "Lillian Evanti Next Week," *Evening Star,* 14 November 1926; "T. Arthur Smith Dies," *New York Times,* 5 August 1931.

[36] Lillian Evanti to Robert Moton, 11 July 1927, box 2, folder 16, MFP.

title for Allen Washington, who was the commandant of the Cadets at Hampton Institute.[37] She appealed to Moton:

> In the mean time will you write Capt. Washington. I wrote him from Italy but as yet have not had a reply and if he turns that letter over to his assistant I may not get the engagement. He will have to demand the engagement for me.[38]

It is unclear if Moton agreed to her price, but Evanti gave a concert at Tuskegee on 21 October 1927.[39] She did not, however, sing at the Hampton Institute.

In 1927 Evanti worked with Richard Copley to arrange a concert at the Bijou Theater in New York.[40] Copley's most famous client was the pianist Josef Hoffmann, but he also organized tours for singers, orchestras, and the Metropolitan Opera Company.[41] Copley, who was white, was more welcoming to African Americans than many other impresarios. For example, he worked with J. Rosamund Johnson, Roland Hayes, and the Hampton Institute Choir.[42] However, when managing the Hampton Institute Choir, he instructed their leader, Nathaniel Dett, not to seek parity with white choirs by performing classical music. Rather, Dett should stick to spirituals. [43]

When Evanti switched her homebase from Washington D.C. to New York City she began

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[37] "Tuskegee Principal Inaugural Address," *Colorado Statesman,* 3 June 1916.

[38] Lillian Evanti to Robert Moton, 11 July 1927, box 2, folder 16, MFP.

[39] "Mme. Evanti in Recital at Tuskegee Institute," *New York Age,* 22 Oct 1927; "Mme. Evanti at Tuskegee," *Chicago Defender,* 22 October 1927.

[40] "Mme. Lillian Evanti in New York Recital," *New York Age,* 26 November 1927; Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 3 December 1927; "Programs of the Week," *New York Herald,* 4 December 1927; "Singer Charms in Negro Spirituals," *New York Times,* 5 December 1927; "Music," *New York Amsterdam News,* 7 December 1927; Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 10 December 1927.

[41] "Richard Copley, Concert Aide, Dies," *New York Times,* 1 March 1939.

[42] "Music Notes," *Crisis,* 1 March 1926; Christopher Antonio Brooks, *Roland Hayes: The Legacy of an American Tenor* (Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 2015), 229; Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music,* 134;

[43] Schenbeck, *Racial Uplift and American Music,* 134.

working with Copley again.[44] This time, she allowed him considerable latitude in guiding her career, with the *Evening Star* disclosing that he "has taken Lillian Evanti under his managerial wing and that he is launching her on an American tour this season."[45] Perhaps because she was working with a respected white manager, Evanti's appearances in 1932 were in larger, more prestigious auditoriums. However, Copley ultimately did very little for Evanti's career. Rather than the "Elaborate Concert Tour," that the *Pittsburgh Courier* had forecasted, Copley arranged only three concerts in the 1932 season, one with the Detroit Symphony, another at the Grand Avenue Temple in Kansas City, and the Town Hall concert described above.[46]

Another concert, on 20 March at Washington's Belasco Theater, was arranged not by Copley, but by an informal unnamed committee of Black citizens.[47] The list of concert supporters is a who's-who of Washington's Black elite of the 1930s. Its chairman was Carter G. Woodson (Dean of Howard University, known as the Father of Black History). Other members included Oscar DePriest, the African American congressman from Ilinois; G. David Houston, a graduate of Cambridge and Harvard who taught at Howard University; Garnet C. Wilkinson, a

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[44] Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 17 October 1931; Maude Roberts George, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender,* 31 October 1931.

[45] "Evanti Plans Concert Tour," *Philadelphia Tribune,* 29 October 1931; Elena de Sayn Melcher, "News of the Music World," *Evening Star,* 25 October 1931; "Elaborate Concert Tour Announced for Mme. Evanti," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 31 October 1931; "Lovely Diva to Go on Tour," *Chicago Defender,* 31 October 1931.

[46] "Elaborate Concert Tour Announced for Mme. Evanti," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 31 October 1931; See Appendix 2 for concert dates.

[47] "Colored Soprano to Be Welcomed," *Evening Star,* 4 March 1932; "Gala Welcome Set for Capital Singer," *Washington Post,* 6 March 1932; "Mme. Evanti to Appear Here at the Belasco," *Washington Tribune,* 11 March 1932; "Honor Lillian Evanti Tibbs," *Atlanta World,* 15 March 1932; "Home-Coming of Madame Evanti,"*Washington Tribune,* 18 March 1932; "Evanti Concert Today," *Evening Star,* 20 March 1932; Elena de Sayn Melcher, "Music and Musicians," *Evening Star,* 21 March 1932; Edward H. Lawson, "Mme. Evanti Wins Acclaim of Capital," *Washington Post,* 21 March 1932; "Mme. Evanti Wins Acclaim Here in Notable Recital," *Washington Tribune,* 25 March 1932.

leader in Black public education in Washington; Amanda V. Hillyer, a music teacher, also in Washington; Martha A. McAdoo, a concert, jubilee, and vaudeville singer who toured internationally; Carrie W. Clifford, a writer and activist; Charles H. Wesley, the President of Wilberforce University; Sara Brown, a healthcare pioneer; and Julia West Hamilton, a clubwoman and activist.[48] Tickets were sold by Reid's department store, the YWCA, and T. Arthur Smith.

The event was well covered in several of the city's newspapers, but especially by the *Washington Tribune,* an African American newspaper that framed supporting Evanti as a civic duty. Indeed, one of its reporters opined that

> many citizens of Washington feel that we can not do too much to encourage this rising star who has reflected great honor on her native city. Not to pay her proper tribute, then, would reflect discredit on the District of Columbia. To show our appreciation as we should will stimulate her to further achievement.[49]

As for the musical dimensions of Evanti's performance, the *Washington Post* was quite flattering.[50] As always, her conduct was impeccable, "Most striking, of course… was the dramaturgic excellence and poise of the stage presence of the former Washington schoolmarm." A second review by Elena de Sayn Melcher of the *Evening Star* was also very complimentary, reading, "Miss Evanti sang infinitely better than many of the year's most publicized recitalists."[51] Several days after the Belasco concert she returned to New York City.

Clearly, Evanti could not rely on managers. After 1932, Evanti did not work with Copley

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[48] Also on the committee: Eula Ross Grey, Col. W.A. Hamilton, Morris Lewis, Virginia H. McGuire, William L. Board, Milson A. Francis, C. S. Wormley, H. R. Burwell, "Gala Welcome Set For Capital Singer," *Washington Post,* 6 March 1932

[49] "Mme. Evanti to Appear Here at the Belasco."

[50] "Mme. Evanti Wants Acclaim of Capital," *Washington Post,* 21 March 1932.

[51] Elena de Sayn Melcher, "Music and Musicians," *Evening Star,* 21 March 1932.

again. However, if she arranged her own concerts she risked appearing unprofessional and unimportant. Ever resourceful, she solved this problem several years later. In 1939, she invented a management company for herself which also published some of her compositions. Variously called the Columbian Music Company, the Columbia Musical Bureau, or the Columbia Musical Syndicate, it appears to be a smokescreen to boost her status, as the address for the organization was the same as Evanti's home, 1910 Vermont Avenue.[52] Nor did it ever engage other artists. With this clever fiction, she circumvented gatekeepers and cut out the middleman, increasing her take-home profits. It was a strategy typical of her enterprising personality.

Evanti and Expectations for Black Singers

In the United States, Evanti's race was well known. Newspapers frequently mentioned her heritage, and she had strong connections with the Black community. However, in terms of style and genre, Evanti's publicity materials position her as an opera singer in the European, specifically Italian tradition. One advertisement went as far as to state that in the opinion of the Italian public, "she is regarded as a typical Italian soprano."[53] Another review states the matter directly:

> Although American and a native of Washington, Miss Evanti has become identified as an Italian singer. She was principal guest artist last year at a gala concert in Bath in honor of the Italian ambassador.[54]

Herman Wise of the *Detroit Free Press* compared Evanti to the Italian coloratura soprano

[52] "Begins Season," *Chicago Bee,* 8 October 1944; Concert Program, 29 June 1939, box 32, folder "Foreign Programs," E-T collection; Lillian Evanti "Tomorrow's World" (Washington, D.C.: Columbian Music Company, 1948); Lillian Evanti, "I'm Yours For Tonight" (Washington, D.C.: Columbian Music Company, nd).

[53] "Symphony in Novelty," *Detroit Free Press,* 3 January 1932

[54] "Kochanski Makes Plea for More New Violin Music," *Kansas City Star,* 10 January 1932.

Amelita Galli-Curci.[55] Indeed, reviewers frequently praised her Italian diction. They also emphasized the skill of her coloratura technique, as noted, not typically associated with Black singers. For example, following a concert in Chicago in 1927, Glen Dillard Gunn of the *Herald Examiner* called her, "one of the freshest, loveliest and most expertly trained coloratura voices of the present."[56] Responding to the same concert, Herman Devries of the *Chicago American* believed her "coloratura facility is uncommonly good" calling her performance of "Care Selve" by Handel "well nigh impeccable" executed with "classic serenity, excellent technique and softly modulated tone."[57]

Nonetheless many people urged Evanti to sing African American spirituals. Sometimes this pressure came from within the Black community. One Black reviewer, Robert P. Watts, praised her ability to portray deep emotion as well as her excellent technique, describing her style as "so alternately romantic as well as scientific, that the audience well nigh broke into the pauses with salvos of applause."[58] He went on to state that her attitude was "more than a professional pose" rather, that "it shows that her soul was in her work."[59] However, Watts reserved special praise for the spirituals, writing, "I think that when [Evanti's] technique has been longer in the crucible of experience soul and mind will fuse and make the Negro spirituals the most important part of her repertoire."[60] Curiously, he seemed to sense a divide within her. While acknowledging that Evanti sang with soul, he suspected that her "scientific" opera selections were ultimately lacking. Could this bifurcation potentially be resolved by fusing mind

[55] Herman Wise, "Music," *Detroit Free Press,* 11 January 1932.
[56] Quoted in Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 3 December 1927.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Robert P. Watts, "St. Louis, Mo.," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 13 November 1926.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.

and soul in the spiritual? Perhaps the separation he felt was his own cognitive dissonance at hearing sounds he associated with whiteness sung by a Black woman.

Other listeners also felt strongly about Evanti's voice type, style, and repertoire. As a coloratura soprano, her vocal category contradicted stereotypes about Black voices. Although many Black singers are proud of having an identifiably Black sound, Evanti's career shows that such stereotypes could also be limiting. Describing the expected range for a Black singer, Australian conductor Richard Bonynge stated that "some [Black singers] have managed to become high sopranos, but that seems to be the exception," noting that "it seems as if the high voice is constructed more from intelligence than from a natural inclination."[61] Bonynge does qualify this statement by noting that not all Black singers have a typical Black sound but ultimately he roots his ideas about the Black vocal range in frequently regurgitated characterizations of African Americans as untutored primitives, whose strengths lie in their natural instincts.[62] Furthermore, many people believe that, even in the higher vocal types, Black singers have a richer, deeper sound in the lower portions of their range, contributing to a stereotypical timbre often described as smoky, dusky, or husky.[63]

In a blatantly racist column, white reviewer Minna Kennedy Powell of the *Kansas City Times* was offended that a Black singer would even attempt an Italian aria.[64] She evidently believed that Black singers should confine themselves to the "natural," ignoring Evanti's cultivation of her upper register, diction, and clarity over which so many other critics had

[61] Quoted in Story, *And So I Sing,* 186. Story does not indicate the source of her information on Richard Bonynge.

[62] Black singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield was also described as a natural singer despite her education and training, Chybowski, "Becoming the "Black Swan" in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America," 146.

[63] Story, *And So I Sing,* 186.

[64] Minna Kennedy Powell, "Music," *Kansas City Times,* 12 January 1932.

enthused:

> Her voice is… great in volume and full of warmth and color in the middle and lower registers. It was a pleasure to hear her in songs direct and simple in style. But Miss Evanti chooses to dazzle her listeners with strained coloratura arias and art songs, rather than to please them with the kind of things she can do extremely well.

Powell's comments on Evanti's voice are the exact opposite of what other critics have stated about Evanti's vocal type and range. Instead of evaluating the singer in front of her, Powell listened with preconceived ideas of a stereotypical Black voice complaining that her performance of "Das Veilchen" by Mozart "disclosed little of the racial quality that is her natural inheritance."[65] Clearly, Powell expected to be able to hear Evanti's race in her voice. Not surprisingly, she was most pleased with Evanti's performance of spirituals:

> In the Negro spiritual, "Lord, I Want to Be Like Jesus," a good deal of this quality was revealed and Miss Evanti gave the audience a real message. It is a lovely quality, singularly soft and mellow and the Negro singer who sacrifices it to any kind of artificial effects loses more than he gains.
>
> Paul Robeson knows this, and he has used his fine intelligence to search out ways of keeping his heritage and at the same time thrilling the world with his art. Once he stopped studying when he felt the quality was going. He since has found ways to progress without the sacrifice, and so may Miss Evanti, who looks like a beautiful Latin and possesses a vocal gift unusual in kind and extent.[66]

Powell commended Robeson for avoiding professional training evidently believing that Black people pursuing classical training and singing art song was artificial and wrong.

Other critics had a very different reaction to Evanti's performances of African American spirituals. Sylvester Russell, a well respected Black music critic for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, reviewed one of Evanti's Chicago concerts in 1926.[67] According to Eileen Southern, Russell's

[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Sylvester Russell, "Madam Evanti Captures Windy City Audience," *Pittsburgh Courier,*

columns “bristled with genuine critical commentary, which earned him many enemies.” She also describes the risks he took: “more than once he was physically assaulted because of his criticism, but he stoutly defended his position and refused to join the ranks of those who praised black artists no matter how poor their production.” As a result, “his contemporaries called him the ‘old master’ and ‘dean of dramatic critics.’”[68] Unlike some Black critics who only reported on classical music, Russell reviewed popular entertainers in blues and in vaudeville, such as the blues singer Ada Brown, famous for her rendering of “Evil Mama Blues.”[69]

When it came to Evanti, Russell’s account was largely positive. He was especially impressed with her technical abilities:

> [Domenico] Scarlatti’s “Qual Farfalletta Amante” was a message on the staff in dynamic impartments in phrasing, trills and vocal shading and her third number of the first group, “Allelujah,” by Mozart, was angelically commanding. “Celebrated Theme with Variations,” [“Deh! torna mio bene” by Heinrich Proch] her second total number, was rare for execution and embellishments. Her third of three classics were the most beautiful and most difficult of all, which included “O Cease Thy Singing Maiden Fair,” by Rachmaninoff, a tuneful composer, and in her treatment was highly executed in staccato and liberally exaggerated in trills which showed art supreme and pronounced correctness in articulated syllable and her humming finish was colorful.[70]

He continued his effusive praise, calling her the “foremost of any singer her race has yet produced.”

Russell also addressed Evanti’s performance of spirituals, a genre to which he felt she was ill-suited. “As a scattering race of American people, all its members are not endowed with the peculiar accent of Southern birth, created by the sting of slavery and the ardent reminiscence

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27 November 1926.

[68] Southern, *Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians,* 328.

[69] Phillip McGuire, “Black Music Critics and the Classic Blues Singers,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 14, no. 2 (1986): 111, 114.

[70] Russell, “Madam Evanti Captures Windy City Audience.”

of religious moaning which followed." Accordingly, he suggested that "Madam Evanti need not be called upon to sing Spirituals but could substitute "Swanee River" in the plaintive element." He believed that "two Spirituals by Harry Burleigh were not adopted to her higher calling in art and yet her molding would be essentially sweet in certain sections like 'Bye and Bye,' since that number offers resonance directly in her station."[71]

Russell's objections are twofold: he reacts to Evanti's style of singing spirituals and her social class (i.e. "her station"). As noted above, spirituals were often performed in dialect associated with the lower-classes. Evanti, who lacked a Southern accent, spoke standard English. As for Evanti's "station," given Evanti's distance from the experience of slavery, her performance of spirituals struck Russell as inauthentic. Thanks to her training in opera, Russell believed, her vocal style was inconsistent with the spiritual. By referencing Evanti's "higher calling in art," he made a genre distinction between the highbrow opera compositions and the more folk-like spirituals.

Russell's dismissal of Evanti's spirituals was not snobbish pretension, especially since he also took popular music seriously. Unlike other critics, who believed all African Americans had an "instinctive" connection to spirituals, Russell acknowledged the wide range of backgrounds and experiences within the Black community.[72] Evanti did not take Russell's criticisms to heart, however, and continued to perform concert-style spirituals, mixing her own heritage with her training in opera.

Opera Out Of Reach

[71] Ibid.
[72] Locke, *The New Negro,* 207.

Still determined to pursue an operatic career in her home country, on 11 February 1932 at 4:45 p.m., Evanti auditioned for Giulio Gatti-Casazza, the manager of the Metropolitan Opera House.[73] This was the opportunity she had been waiting for, one that could launch her onto the highest levels of opera. Notably, it was not her manager Copley who arranged this audition for her but the Italian conductor Tullio Serafin, formerly the music director at La Scala and who also conducted at the Met. Serafin had a good ear for singers: for example, he gave Maria Callas the recommendation that led to her Italian debut. Through her connection with Serafin, she secured a private audition with Gatti Casazza a few days before the regular auditions. Evanti brought with her to the audition two well-known singers: the Italian dramatic coloratura soprano Luisa Tetrazzini, whom Evanti had met in Rome and Milan in 1930, had sung at the Met in the 1911-12 season in roles familiar to Evanti (Gilda, Lucia, and Violetta).[74] Frida Hemple, a German star, who had frequently sung at the Met in the 1920s, also lent moral support.

At her audition, Evanti sang "Qui la voce" and an aria from *La Sonnambula.* In a letter to her mother she betrayed some nervousness, asking Mrs. Evans to pray for her and to keep the audition a secret, even from her brother Joe. The next day she reported the following to her mother:

> The audition at the Met went very well. M. Gatti told me he was pleased. And Mr. Serafin called me up this a.m. to tell me that I made a grand impression.[75]

Despite this encouragement, she failed to obtain a contract. It was a bitter disappointment, for which Evanti blamed racism, confiding to her memoirs, "I was a few years too soon."[76]

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[73] Lillian Evanti to Mrs. Evans 10 February 1932, box 32, folder 18, E-T collection.

[74] Signed photo of Louisa Tetrazzini, 29 December 1930, box 19, folder 34, E-T collection; Photo of Tetrazzini and Evanti, box 4, photo 209, E-T collection; Lillian Evanti to Mrs. Evans 10 February 1932, box 32, folder 18, E-T collection; Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 122.

[75] Lillian Evanti to Mrs. Evans, 12 February 1932, box 32, folder 18, E-T collection.

[76] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 122.

Black music critic William Duncan Allen concurred. He declared that:

> were it not for American racial prejudice, no doubt tenor Roland Hayes and basso Paul Robeson might also have sung at the Metropolitan in the prime, as well as several other less well-known but capable talented artists including sopranos Abbie Mitchell and Lillian Evanti, whom the writer accompanied in concerts in the 1930s.[77]

Evanti persisted, auditioning in 1932, 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, and 1946, as revealed by her audition card.[78] The comments on the card are both positive and negative, with the notes for the first audition reading, "pleasing voice, good schooling, immature, must study."[79] The judges also considered factors beyond vocal quality. For example, Tulio Serafin's name was written on the card and her race, "Negro," was recorded in parenthesis after Evanti's name.

Between the disappointments of her management under Copley and the unsuccessful auditions for the Met, Evanti was disenchanted with life in New York City. In the spring of 1932, realizing that her talents were not appreciated in the United States and hoping to receive the succor she did in 1928 when she fled to Europe after her divorce, she gathered her son retreated to her former refuge — just in time to bear witness to Germany's descent into fascism. Perhaps it was all these experiences that prompted her to begin directly engaging in artistic and political advocacy to expand the opportunities available to Black singers. These activities are discussed in the next chapter.

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[77] William Allen Duncan, "Musings of a Music Columnist," *The Black Perspective in Music* 1, no. 2 (1973), 108.

[78] Audition Card for Lillian Evanti, Metropolitan Opera Archives, New York City, New York.

[79] Ibid.

Chapter 5: Entering New Territory, Evanti as an Advocate

On Mother's Day, 1934, a diverse group huddled outside the White House in Washington, D.C. The crowd included Black civil rights leaders Mary Church Terrell and Julia West Hamilton, seven uniformed Black soldiers, representatives from the International Labor Defense, the journalist John P. Davis, the wealthy white socialite Mary Craik Speed, and the singer Lillian Evanti.[1] But first among those gathered were the mothers, four Black women from Alabama united by indifferent chance and a malignant justice system.[2] Two years earlier, in 1931, their sons were among the nine Black boys falsely accused of raping two white women.[3] After narrowly escaping lynching at a jail in Scottsboro, Alabama, the first set of trials returned death sentences for eight of the nine boys. In the following years, the multiple trials and retrials twice bounced all the way up to the Supreme Court, leading to landmark decisions in the American justice system concerning fairness in jury selection. The trials gripped the nation, and many protested the treatment of the Scottsboro Nine.[4] On this Sunday afternoon, the four mothers and one of the alleged victims, Ruby Bates, who had recanted her story, attempted to speak with the President but were turned away. Instead they made their comments to the assembled media. On this occasion, Evanti clarified her position as an artist and a person, saying

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[1] "Scottsboro Boys' Mothers Appeal," *Evening Star,* 14 May 1934; "President Refuses to Hear Plea of Scottsboro Mothers," *Harlem Liberator,* 19 May 1934; "5 Scottsboro Mothers Can't See President," *Baltimore Afro-American,* 19 May 1934.

[2] Some of the newspapers accounts say four mothers and others say five. A more detailed article states that five of the mothers traveled to Washington, D.C., but only four attended this particular event. Marguerite Young, "Class War Mother's Day," *Labor Defender,* June 1934.

[3] James R. Acker, *Scottsboro and Its Legacy* (Westport: Praeger, 2008).

[4] Some noteworthy musical protests include Elie Siegmeister's "The Scottsboro Boys Shall Not Die" and Aaron Copland's unfinished "The Ballad of Ozzie Powell." Hess, *Aaron Copland in Latin America*, 19; Carol J. Oja, "Composer With a Conscience: Elie Siegmeister in Profile," *American Music* 6, no. 2 (1988): 167-168; Beth E. Levy, "From Orient to Occident: Aaron Copland and the Sagas of the Prairie," in *Aaron Copland and his World,* ed. Carol J. Oja and Judith Tick, 307-350 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

to the newspapers, "I'm interested in life and justice as well as singing."[5]

Evanti's career entered a new phase in the mid-1930s as she began to impact the world beyond the opera stage. Musical performance continued to be her primary mode of expression, but she became more overtly political, writing letters to the President and speaking before various governmental committees, even composing music for causes she cared about. Her interest in advocacy unfolded gradually. For many years, Evanti condemned American racism by essentially defecting to Europe. However, she did not forget her roots and carried African American culture to Europe by performing spirituals on her concerts there.

Tragically, throughout the 1930s, life for artists in Europe became increasingly difficult as fascist governments began to take hold of the continent. Now that Evanti was back in the United States she became directly involved in the fight for civil rights. In addition to her domestic activities, changing political alliances encouraged American musicians to travel to Latin America. Thus, Evanti continued to act as an ambassador for Black culture in the Western hemisphere. From the mid-1930s onward, she would remain devoted to the idealistic creation of a free, equal, and peaceful global community through international musical exchange.

Activism in the Nation's Capital

In her quest for civil rights, Evanti engaged with a twentieth-century political power couple, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt. On 9 February 1934, Evanti sang at a White House lunch at the request of Eleanor Roosevelt.[6] Roosevelt was a politically

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[5] "President Refuses to Hear Plea," *Harlem Liberator*.

[6] Associated Press, "Negress to Sing," *Daily Mail* (Hagerstown, Maryland), 6 February 1934; Associated Press, "Colored Soprano to Sing," *Evening Star,* 6 February 1934; "Mme. Evanti to Sing at the White House," *New York Age,* 10 February 1934; "Mrs. Roosevelt Hostess," *New York Times,* 10 Feb 1934; "Growth of Goodwill," *Courier-News* (Somerville, New Jersey)*,* 12

active first lady known for championing African Americans, women, and World War II refugees. Her stance on civil rights occasionally clashed with that of her husband: instead of making a strong stand against racism, the president often felt forced to placate Southern politicians on whose support her relied for enacting sweeping government reforms that would alleviate the ravages of the Great Depression.[7] Eleanor Roosevelt invited many African Americans to the White House and insisted that the staff treat them like any other visitor.

The February lunch was a prime example of Roosevelt using her platform to elevate causes she cared about while strengthening her husband's political interests. Its purpose was to promote women in legislature. Mary Dewson, the head of the women's division of the National Democratic Committee, was the guest of honor. The other guests were also politically influential women, including Frances Perkins, secretary of labor and the first woman to serve in a presidential cabinet; Nellie Taylor Ross, the first woman to serve as a state governor; Mary Harriman Rumsey, chair of the Consumer Advisory Board of the National Recovery Administration; and congresswomen Isabella Greenway, Mary Norton, Virginia Jenckes, and Effiegene Wingo. By inviting Evanti to sing for these women, Roosevelt presented her guests with high-quality entertainment fitting for an event of state while also promoting African American women to a group of leaders who could replicate the spirit of this event in their respective spheres of influence.

While most of Evanti's labors for African Americans involved her musical talents, she also took direct action by writing letters, speaking to government leaders, and taking part in

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February 1934; "Mrs. Roosevelt is Pleased with Evanti Recital," *Washington Tribune,* 15 February 1934; "Here and There in Society," *Kansas City Star,* 18 February 1934.

[7] Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013).

public demonstrations. One factor that spurred her to communicate outside of song was the judicial and extrajudicial killing of Black people falsely accused of crimes. Between 1882 and 1930, over 3,000 African Americans were killed by lynch mobs, primarily in the deep south.[8] While such killings were illegal, the government tacitly condoned the act by refusing to intervene. Anti-lynching legislation designed to persecute not only the members of the mob but also officials who failed to act was introduced in 1901, 1921, 1922, and 1934 but did not pass into law.[9] Even when Black people were saved from mob violence, they were not guaranteed justice in the courtroom, as the case of the Scottsboro Boys demonstrated.

While in Germany, Evanti wrote to President Roosevelt, congratulating him on his election but also asking him to take action against lynching. Although her words to Roosevelt do not survive, she later copied parts of the letter to Du Bois:

> America is facing a shrinkage of moral values and you I pray will find a moment to weigh them and with one stroke of the pen wipe out forever kidnapping and lynching the two greatest curses any civilized nation can face. Guilty parties must face death and all associated (be it 1,000) must face life imprisonment.[10]

In her letter to Roosevelt, she strategically obscured her racial identity and her celebrity. She explained this approach to Du Bois, saying:

> I wrote to the President <u>as an American Citizen</u> as it would have more weight: rather than saying I was colored: and signed my name <u>not</u> as Evanti.[11]

By underlining the words "<u>American Citizen</u>," she articulated her unwavering belief in democratic equality before the law; she should not receive special favor due to her celebrity, nor

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[8] Jacqueline Goldsby, *A Spectacular Secret: Lynching in American Life and Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 15.

[9] Ibid, 18.

[10] Lillian Evanti to W. E. B. Du Bois, 19 April 1933, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

[11] Ibid.

should her petition be ignored because of her race.

In the same letter, she calls upon her theatrical training apropos plans for a massive protest march for an upcoming demonstration in support of the Scottsboro Boys:

> I read yesterday in the Paris edition of the NY Herald that the colored people were going to march on Washington 50,000 strong. The time is certainly ripe when some definite action should be taken…
>
> I am sorry I am not in America to join the 50,000 — I wrote my mother that I hoped she would ~~go~~ march! I also suggested that it would be an unforgettable occasion if the 50,000 could be trained to sing two spirituals of faith in God. And then a rousing song written for this occasion expressing our hope and the issue at stake. Saying — shame on America in this day of civilization.
>
> This could be done on the Capitol Steps and then march to the Lincoln Memorial and White House — completely surrounding the mansion and singing. Of course one of our leaders must present a petition personally to the Pres. [President] it should be done very dramatically but with order and sincerity. The entire occasion should make one of the greatest days in history.[12]

Evanti's vision of a "rousing song" is compelling. But what would such a song sound like? Would it rely on the model of the spiritual, emphasizing dignified seriousness and the sanctity of human life? Maybe an accompanying brass band could galvanize listeners into action? Or perhaps lyrics by a Harlem Renaissance writer would be best to carry the message? As an opera singer, Evanti had a highly developed sense of the dramatic. She understood the power of music to convince and motivate. Later she would answer her own call and write political songs for various cases she supported. The letter to Roosevelt reveals much not only about Evanti's musical sense in relation to social justice but also about her personality and values. It also demonstrates her outspoken nature: she speaks unflinchingly to influential leaders such as Du Bois and Roosevelt and tells them exactly what actions they should take.

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[12] Ibid.

"Passing" at Robin Hood Dell

Yet right in the midst of her most involved period as an activist for African Americans, Evanti saw fit to complicate — and even contradict — much of this advocacy: she concealed her African American identity to pass as white. In the spring of 1934, conductor Alexander Smallens invited her to audition for the leading role in the Philadelphia Orchestra's summer production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Robin Hood Dell.[13] Having conducted the February premiere of Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts,* a groundbreaking avant-garde opera that featured an all-Black cast, Smallens was bent on challenging the musical establishment.[14] *Four Saints* persuaded Smallens of the "Negro's innate talent for music and his broad, flexible emotional range."[15] In 1935, he directed the premiere of *Porgy and Bess* and eventually conducted over 2,800 performances of Gershwin's opera.[16]

By 1934, Evanti had faced rejection from the Met four times. She was surely discouraged, especially given that racism played a role in thwarting her ambition to appear at the premier opera house in her native land. When she arrived in Philadelphia for her audition, she adopted a stage name, Muriel Mimrel,[17] derived from her great-grandmother's name, Juliette Memorell. At first glance, this seems like a strange strategy: Smallens had reached out to her directly and likely saw through this subterfuge. However, Evanti was worried about the policies

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[13] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 93

[14] "Alexander Smallens Dies; Symphony Conductor, 83," *New York Times,* 25 November 1972; Steven Watson, *Prepare For Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (New York: Random House, 1998), 236.

[15] Carroll Arimond, "'Porgy and Bess' Takes Status As Opera Classic, Says Conductor Smallens," *Salt Lake Tribune,* 4 January 1943.

[16] Bob Thomas, "Conductor Sees 'Porgy and Bess' 3,000 Times," *Corpus Christi Times,* 6 August 1954.

[17] Evanti uses the spelling "Mimrel" in her autobiography; newspaper reviews spelled the name "Mumrel."

of the venue. Robin Hood Dell is a large outdoor amphitheater and the summer home of the Philadelphia Orchestra. Although unsure if the Dell had segregationist policies, Evanti knew greater Philadelphia still had segregated schools.[18] (In fact Robin Hood Dell would not host an integrated performance until Benny Goodman's Orchestra visited in 1941.[19]) As it turned out, Evanti's performance at the audition intimidated the other candidates, with one confessing to her, "after I heard you sing that audition, I knew I didn't have a chance."[20] Evanti — or rather Mimrel — got the part. Revealing herself at this stage would have been disastrous however, since all the other roles were filled by white singers, including the male lead and Lucia's love interest Edgardo, played by American tenor Myron Duncan.

Often used as a survival strategy, passing can be condemned as an act of cowardice or celebrated as an act of sabotage. What did it mean for Evanti? Her autobiography describes the experience:

> Unfortunately…I used a nom de plume…I say unfortunately because I was afraid of taking the chance of losing this opportunity. I am sure the reader will see my hesitancy. I had been mistaken at times for an Italian or even a Russian and that old color line was strong in America in the thirties.[21]

In other words, Evanti asks the reader to understand the restrictions of her era and empathize accordingly. We cannot know how much the decision to pass actually cost her. Ultimately, however, there were some lines she never crossed. For example, she never denied her race or claimed to be white. In this case, however, "saying nothing about my race" as "seemingly a nom

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[18] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 94.

[19] Jack McCarthy, "From the Vault: Benny Goodman at the Robin Hood Dell," theMann, 19 February 2020, https://manncenter.org/vault-goodman.

[20] Evanti, "Negro in Grand Opera," 94.

[21] Ibid.

de plume rendered the question unnecessary."[22]

She gave two performances on 16 and 17 July 1934. Critical responses were mixed. Edwin B. Schloss of the *Philadelphia Record* found that Evanti stood out among the rest of the cast. After describing the difficulties of the role, he proclaimed that she "acquitted herself in the test with great elan," praising her rendition of the mad scene as one of "fine distinction."[23] However, Linton Martin of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* brutally panned Evanti's performance, denigrating it as a "definite disappointment" with her voice "unsuitable for the coloratura…dry, thin, and uncertain in the upper register."[24] Probably nervous about having her race discovered, Evanti evidently over-applied her makeup. As the *Inquirer* recorded, "color, indeed, was less apparent in her singing than in her appearance, being, in this instance, less a matter of music than of makeup."[25] It is entirely possible that Evanti's identity was an open secret. Smallens probably knew who she was, as other singers may have. Still, the stage name with which she had made her career was at no point revealed in the press. Ultimately, this experience vindicated Evanti's own understanding of how racism limited her career. As she wrote in her autobiography, "the reader will see from [the Dell performance] one major illustration of my frequent statement in this book that I came up before my time."[26] Perhaps dismayed by the whole experience — however compellingly she may have performed the mad scene, in which an unintentional betrayal explodes into one of the most memorable coloratura passages in opera — she never again used the name Mimrel or attempted to mask her racial origins.

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Quoted in Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 94.
[24] Linton Martin, "'Lucia at Dell is Heard by 5000," *Philadelphia Inquirer,* 17 July 1934.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

“Available To Every Citizen”: Evanti Lobbies for a National Arts Building

In December 1934, Evanti drew up plans to build a “National Temple of Music” in Washington. In her typically grand fashion she envisioned a building with a large stage for opera and a small recital hall and indicated that the complex should also include art galleries, a patio, a garden, a grand staircase, and a promenade salon.[27] This extravagant plan would be very expensive to realize; she estimated that her plans would cost $5,000,000, that is, over $111,000,000 in today’s dollars. She found many prominent organizations to support the initiative, including leaders of the National Capital Park and Planning Commission, the American Federation of Arts, the National Park Service, the American Institute of Architects, the Smithsonian Institute, the National Gallery of Art, and the Commission of Fine Arts. Mrs. Roosevelt was interested enough in the project to pass the letter to Edward Bruce, head of the Treasury Department of Painting and Sculpture, who responded encouragingly.[28]

Evanti emphasized the center’s importance in advancing American culture and argued that such an institution would:

> Stimulate a national pride for the musical arts, [and] would have vast cultural value and be a source of spiritual inspiration. It would serve the highest national ideals because it would promote character and happiness.[29]

In June 1935, Evanti attended a Congressional hearing debating the formation of a Department

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[27] U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on Patents, Department of Science, Art and Literature, *Hearings Before the Committee on Patents House of Representatives,* 74th Cong., 1st sess., 20 June 1935, 40, E-T collection.

[28] “Opera Singer Urges Music Temple Here,” *Evening Star*, 5 February 1935; “Urges Music Temple Here,” *Washington Tribune,* 9 February 1935.

[29] Ibid.

of Science, Art, and Literature.[30] At the hearing, Evanti brought up her plans for a national center for the arts arguing that America needed to stand on equal footing with other nations. She contrasted the low level of state support for the arts in America with various European countries and optimistically greeted the hearing as a sign that the government was interested in remedying this situation. "Now we shall have the respect of the world, for an individual, a city, a nation is judged by its appreciation and participation in the fine arts," she declared.[31]

This project was important to Evanti on multiple levels. As a professional musician, she believed that music is essential to society and wished to see greater government investment in the arts. She was undoubtedly inspired by the state support for the arts she had witnessed in Europe and by various New Deal projects such as the Public Works of Art Project, which hired unemployed artists to decorate public buildings. However, she was also hopeful that a government-owned venue would be compelled to host Black singers and integrated audiences.

Many of the performance spaces in Washington, D.C., were discriminatory.[32] They would not permit Black entertainers to perform or would require segregated audiences. Sometimes the theater managers would promise a musician integrated seating and then go back on their word after the contract was signed, forcing the artist into a difficult position. The most infamous example of this type of discrimination took place in 1939, when Howard University attempted to host a performance by Marian Anderson at Constitution Hall in Washington, D.C.[33] The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) owned the hall and refused to rent it to an

[30] *Hearings,* 25.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Carol J. Oja, "Before the Lincoln Memorial: Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and the Infrastructure of Jim Crow in Washington, D.C.'s Concert Halls," (paper presented at the American Musicological Society Conference, Online, 12 November 2021).

[33] Allan Keiler, *Marian Anderson: A Singer's Journey* (New York: Scribner, 2000).

African American artist. In response, Eleanor Roosevelt not only resigned her membership to the DAR, but wrote about her decision in her newspaper column and worked with the NAACP, Anderson's manager, Sol Hurok, and Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior to arrange a substitute concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday, 9 April 1939. The concert was a watershed moment for civil rights, with around 75,000 gathering to hear Anderson sing. While a triumph for Anderson, it did not immediately open doors for other Black artists.

Although Evanti was likely barred multiple times from various venues during her decades-long career, we have direct evidence of only one such incident. In May 1940, Evanti attempted to find a large public auditorium for a concert but held the event in a Black church, Asbury United Methodist Church, instead.[34] Music critic Glenn Dillard Gunn, now writing for the *Washington Post,* published a column on her struggle to find a suitable venue:

> Though [Lillian Evanti] has sung in Paris, Nice and Salzburg opera, and, like Marian Anderson, has enjoyed a most successful career in concert here and abroad, there is no auditorium open to her in this the city of her birth.[35]

Besides equating Evanti's experience with Anderson's, Gunn lamented the lack of a concert hall in the nation's capital "uncontrolled by private agencies, available to every citizen," and rebuked the capricious and unjust administration of public performances spaces in Washington:

> In due time, we got the Marian Anderson scandal; and now Lillian Evanti must sing in a church. Constitution Hall and all school auditoriums are closed to her because she is a colored artist. There is irony in this situation, since her father was, in every spiritual sense, the founder of the Armstrong School and its first principal. Howard University students sang there last week, and Roland Hayes also was heard there, but since the

[34] Ray C. B. Brown, "Postlude," *Washington Post,* 28 May 1940.
[35] Unlabeled newspaper clipping, 26 May 1940, Scrapbook, E-T collection.

Anderson incident the Board of Education is doubly cautious — or so it seems.[36] Evanti and Gunn were both outraged by the situation and Gunn supported Evanti's efforts to establish an integrated performance hall. Although their vision was not realized, Evanti would carry her work as an activist for African Americans and the arts onto the international stage as a cultural diplomat.

Good Neighbor Cultural Diplomacy

At the hearing in June of 1935 (whenEvanti proposed a national music center) she also referenced a project that did receive government funding, the Pan-American Union. The Union was formed in the 1890s to improve cultural and commercial ties in the western hemisphere, and by 1910 it was housed in an elegant building in Washington D.C. Evanti noted that the government was willing to spend money on music in service of international relations. She also noted the limitations of this effort:

> One purpose of the Pan American Union is to develop closer cultural relations. America gave five of her choicest acres and an American, Mr. Andrew Carnegie, gave the larger portion of money for the construction of a most beautiful building. Yet, from the point of view of music, it offers opportunity only to the Latin-American composer and artist.[37]

Indeed, the global situation was quickly changing. Soon the Pan American Union would extend opportunities for U.S. artists to partake of cultural diplomacy. With European fascism looming large on the horizon, the Roosevelt administration developed the Good Neighbor Policy to strengthen relationships among the different countries of the Americas. The policy was characterized by non-intervention, a welcome change from previous administrations, which had

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[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., 27.

sought to control the domestic politics of Latin American countries. Between 1898 and 1920, the United States armed forces had entered the territory of Caribbean nations at least twenty times.[38] In contrast, the Roosevelt administration signed a pledge of non-intervention in 1933, marking a turning pointing U.S.-Latin American relations.[39] Additionally, the Good Neighbor Policy also involved cultural diplomacy to strengthen these new alliances.

Previously in private hands, cultural diplomacy received little attention from the government before 1938. That year, however, the State Department established the Division of Cultural Relations.[40] In July 1938, Ben Cherrington, the chief of the newly established Division, stated he had:

> No intention of encroaching upon activities which pertain logically to private initiative…The responsibility for the formulation of policies of interchange, for the direction and control of those policies and programs, should be vested in private citizens and private agencies.[41]

The reasons for the government's reliance on the private sector were explained in an address by the assistant secretary of state, Adolf A. Berle:

> [The Department of State] has set up a division of cultural relations. The name is a dangerous one because in other parts of the world it [state run cultural relations have] become a symbol of propaganda. Here, it should be understood that nothing is further from our purpose. It is the object of this Division to place at the service of groups like your own the facilities of this Government here, and to obtain the facilities of other governments elsewhere.[42]

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[38] Bryce Wood, *The Making of the Good Neighbor Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 5.

[39] Ibid., 118.

[40] Campbell, "Creating Something out of Nothing: The Office of Inter-American Affairs Music Committee (1940-1941) and the Inception of a Policy for Musical Diplomacy," 29.

[41] Quoted in Frank A. Ninkovich, *The Diplomacy of Ideas: U.S. Foreign Policy and Cultural Relations, 1938-1950*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 32.

[42] Department of State, Division of Cultural Relations, *Conference on Inter-American Relations in the Field of Music, Digest of Proceedings Oct 18-19, 1939,* Washington D.C.: 1940,

The government would rely on private-public relationships to avoid the appearance of state control of art. Through the 1930s and 1940s, private and state-sponsored cultural diplomacy were deeply intertwined, making it challenging to differentiate among government initiatives, commercial interests, and organizations that genuinely believed in creating a peaceful global community through the arts.

Private entities could gain prestige and financial advantages from working with the government. The radio broadcasting company NBC (National Broadcasting Company), which, despite the word "national," is not a government-run station, sent Toscanini and the NBC Symphony on a goodwill tour.[43] Although the U.S. government did not pay the company for its efforts on behalf of the nation, the Symphony still supported the good neighbor policy as an unofficial ambassador. The concerts received positive reviews in the South American press. Perhaps more important, the tour also succeeded in its political mission, with the *New York Times* proclaiming the trip to be "one of the most elaborate good-will gestures made toward South American countries in recent years."[44]

The war made international relations a matter of national security, and a new entity was founded under the council of National Defense in 1940 called the office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA).[45] Led by Nelson A. Rockefeller, the OIAA boasted some fifty-nine committees, including a music committee. Chaired by the musicologist Carleton Sprague Smith, the

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appendix 11.

[43] Donald C. Meyer, "Toscanini and the Good Neighbor Policy: The NBC Symphony Orchestra's 1940 South American Tour," *American Music* 18, no. 3 (2000): 249.

[44] "Last Phase Begun in Toscanini Tour," *New York Times,* 6 July 1940, quoted in Meyer, "Toscanini and the Good Neighbor Policy," 238.

[45] This department was first called the Office of Coordination of Commercial and Cultural Relations between American Republics (OCCCRBAR) but was later renamed the Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA). Campbell, "Creating Something," 31.

committee took on several tasks. One was coordinating musical exchange, that is, acting as a clearing house for interested musicians or musical organizations (some private). Another was determining guidelines for cultural diplomacy in music.[46] The committee identified two main criteria for U.S. music to be exported to Latin America: it needed to be high quality and recognizably American. "High quality" generally excluded popular and commercial music. Instead they promoted accessible art music and selected folk songs that promoted a Western-Hemisphere identity.[47]

In general, white musicians, often backed by elite institutions, were more likely to get their proposals approved. The committee considered several orchestras before deciding that the best option was the Boson Symphony Orchestra, led by Koussevitzky, a close friend and coworker of Copland, also a committee member.[48] In 1941 they supported three groups; the Yale Glee Club, the League of Composers Wind Quintet, and the American Ballet Caravan. The Yale Glee Club was directed by a member of the committee, Marshall Bartholomew, and the American Ballet Caravan's repertoire list included two ballets by Copland.[49] While the committee did consider Black artists Dorothy Mayor, Marian Anderson, Paul Robeson, Roland Hayes, and William Grant Still for Latin American tours, none of these were ultimately selected.[50]

African Americans and Cultural Diplomacy

In October 1939, the Division of Cultural Relations assembled a conference on Inter-

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[46] Ibid., 32.
[47] Hess, *Representing the Good Neighbor,* 114.
[48] Campbell, "Creating Something out of Nothing," 32.
[49] Ibid., 35.
[50] Hess, *Aaron Copland in Latin America,* 43.

American Relations in the Field of Music. Three notable Black Americans, Evanti, Nathaniel Dett, and William L. Dawson, attended.[51] Dett and Dawson were both inspired by the spiritual. Dett compiled and arranged spirituals and both Dett and Dawson incorporated them in their classical compositions. Evanti didn't speak extensively at the meeting: according to minutes, she reflected on the costs associated with international tours and encouraged the government to assist artists traveling to Latin America.[52] Dawson advocated for arranging simple piano and vocal versions of American songs, perhaps in tablature, to aid in disseminating American music.[53] Dett, however, was more outspoken. He addressed the importance of including African Americans in good neighbor cultural diplomacy, insisting that "if American culture is to be carried to the other Americas the historical contributions of Negro music should be acknowledged."[54] Speaking to the assembly of U.S. experts in music, he declared, "Americans do not know the Negro folk songs," going further to accuse fellow committee members of ignorance of their own heritage. "You do not know our music," he asserted, "our music, which has been the basis of your music."

Beyond the dangers of misrepresenting U.S. musical history, Dett pointed out that ignoring Black culture could also endanger the diplomatic mission. "When you go to Latin American countries," he recommended

> carry along all of the advancements which have contributed to the advancement of American culture. The small republics are interested to know what the minority is doing and how the minority fares. They are themselves minorities and the minority question is

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[51] Division of Cultural Relations, *Conference on Inter-American Relations in the Field of Music,* cited in Hess, *Aaron Copland in Latin America,* 119.

[52] Division of Cultural Relations, *Conference on Inter-American Relations in the Field of Music*, 13.

[53] Ibid., 24

[54] Division of Cultural Relations, *Conference on Inter-American Relations in the Field of Music,* cited in Hess, *Aaron Copland in Latin America,* 119.

one of the world's great questions today.[55]

Here, Dett was reinforcing the NAACP, which argued that the poor treatment of non-whites in the United States could deter Latin American countries from making alliances with the U.S.[56] In a press release in 1942, the NAACP stated, "the U.S. Government had better wake up to the face that its 'good neighbor policy' is in danger in South American countries unless the U.S. integrates Negroes more fully into the national picture."[57] Its president, Walter White, also wrote to Rockefeller, encouraging him to arrange Latin American tours for Black opera singers and also Duke Ellington's orchestra.[58] While these efforts were admirable, this strategy was based on the idea that there was less racism in Latin America and assumptions that Latin American leaders would object to U.S. American racism.

This was wishful thinking: although many Latin Americans found U.S. racial policies abhorrent, the "minority question" was just as hotly contested in Latin America as it was in the United States. To be sure, racial categorization is more fluid in many Latin American nations than in the United States. In Brazil for example, where Evanti eventually sang, instead of segregation, the government actively pursued a policy of miscegenation to whiten the population gradually.[59] This racist policy, called branqueamento, created a sliding scale of skin color according to which lighter people received better treatment than "pure" Africans.[60] This was very

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[55] Ibid.

[56] Neil Foley, *Quest for Equality: The Failed Promise of Black-Brown Solidarity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[57] "Axis Tells Brazilians, 'U.S. Negros Still in Slavery,'" press release, 13 March 1942 part 14, reel 7, NAACP Papers, quoted in Foley, *Quest For Equality*, 24.

[58] Memorandum from Walter White to Nelson Rockefeller, 22 April 1941, part 14, reel 7, NAACP Papers, quoted in Foley, *Quest For Equality*, 26.

[59] Thomas E. Skidmore, *Black into White: Race and Nationality in Brazilian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 77; Edward E. Telles, *Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 4.

[60] For a Brazilian perspective see: Gilberto Freyre, *The Masters and the Slaves: (Casa-Grande & Senzala) A Study in the Development of Brazilian Civilization*, trans. Samuel Putnam

different from in the United States where mixed race individuals were legally categorized as Black following the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896.[61] The American elites directing the Good Neighbor Program wanted to connect the white populations of North and South America while avoiding references to people of color.

Yet, African Americans insisted on being part of Good Neighbor cultural diplomacy. Evanti's reasons were multi-faceted. As a cosmopolitan world traveler with friends all over the globe united through musical experience, she was significantly affected by the outbreak of war. While she wished fervently for peace, she viewed American entry into the contest as inevitable and likely saw her Latin American tours as something she could do to help her country. When interviewed about possible American involvement in the conflict in September 1939, shortly after the war began, she opined, "I would like to regard the world as one big family. For international reasons, I believe we must give help if that help is a contribution to lasting peace."[62]

Touring Latin America to support her country and promote international cooperation would therefore give Evanti a sense of accomplishment and purpose. It was also an opportunity to promote Black culture. As Dett complained, Black music, although overlooked by many U.S. Americans, was an essential part of American life. The spiritual was an ideal genre for cultural diplomacy. Dignified yet moving, these songs had great popular appeal. As we shall see, by singing spirituals on tour, Evanti would serve as an ambassador for her race as well as her nation.

In addition to these high-minded sentiments, Evanti had her finances to consider. The rise

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(New York: Knopf, 1933, 1956); Sarah Hamilton-Tyrell, "Mário de Andrade, Mentor: Modernism and Musical Aesthetics in Brazil, 1920–1945," *Musical Quarterly* 88, no. 1 (2005): 7-34.

[61] Davis, "Race, Identity, and the Law," 51.

[62] Marvel Cooke, "Madame Evanti Back Safely and Thankful," *New York Amsterdam News,* 23 September 1939.

of fascism in Europe made a return to the continent unwise, and racism in the United States persistently limited her opportunities. As a light-skinned Black woman, Evanti likely believed that she would face fewer racial barriers in Latin America. Additionally, there was the prospect of government assistance. Even if any actual funding she received remains undocumented she still benefitted from logistical and psychological support, the latter especially from Smith, the chair of the OIAA committee. Touring Latin American enabled her to fulfill her lofty goals while simultaneously advancing her career.

Evanti in Latin America: The First Tour (1939)

In December 1938, Evanti announced a comeback on the international stage. Besides Nashville, Jacksonville, Daytona Beach, and Miami, her tour would include several Latin American countries, specifically, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Curaçao, Venezuela, Trinidad, and Haiti.[63] Although this tour was not an officially sponsored act of state, Evanti behaved like a cultural diplomat. Her choice of repertoire aligned with OIAA guidelines, and she was fêted by politicians and cultural elites. She arrived in Cuba in early February. In Cuba, she socialized in privileged circles that included the painter Ramón Loy and writer and politician Carlos Manuel de Céspedes y Quesada, who had served as president of Cuba for less than a month in 1933.[64]

Several days later, she performed a concert in Havana with the Orquesta Sinfónica de la Habana, sponsored by the Havana tourism department. This outdoor event was one of the high points of her career and attracted 5,000, her largest audience to date.[65] Dominated by flashy and

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[63] "To Make Extended Tour," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 31 December 1938.

[64] "Lillian Evanti Welcomed to Havana," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 11 February 1939.

[65] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 110; Cooke, "Madame Evanti Back Safely and Thankful."

dramatic works, the program promoted the musical culture of Cuba and the United States. Classical chestnuts, such as Weber's overture to *Der Freischütz* and "Ah fors' è lei," Evanti's signature aria from *Traviata,* were interspersed with pieces depicting life in Latin America. These included an aria from David Félicien's *La perle du Brésil* and Carlos Anckermann's *Cuba,* a fantasia for military band arranged for orchestra by the Sinfónica's director, Gonzalo Roig, who was also a composer. Evanti performed two of his songs, "Página de Álbum" and "Quiéreme Mucho," which was rapidly growing into a Latin music standard. To represent the United States, Roig orchestrated two of Evanti's favorite spirituals, "Lord I Want to Be a Christian" and "City Called Heaven," arranged by Burleigh and Nickerson.[66]

Evanti remained in Cuba for at least part of May before departing to the island of Hispaniola, where leaders competed for her attention. In Haiti, she met with eminent people, including diplomat Dantés Bellegrade and politician and physician Camille Lhérssion. Haitian President Sténio Vincent attended her concert at the Rex Theater, where she was awarded the honor *Chevalier de L'Honneur et Mérite.*[67] On the other side of the island, the dictator Rafael Trujillo (1891-1961) controlled the Dominican Republic. Having risen to power in 1930, he ruled through a cult of personality until his assassination in 1961. Trujillo cultivated a supremacist Dominican national identity, which he imagined as closely derived from Falangist Spain and thus superior to African-influenced Haiti.[68] In October 1937, Dominican troops, encouraged by Trujillo, had killed approximately 12,000 Haitians, committing ethnic genocide. American leaders nonetheless continued to work with Trujillo as they were more concerned with

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[66] Concert program, 16 February 1939, scrapbook, E-T collection.

[67] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 112; Award letter, box 32, folder 24, E-T Collection.

[68] Eric Roorda, *The Dictator Next Door: The Good Neighbor Policy and the Trujillo Regime in the Dominican Republic, 1930-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).

the regimes in Europe and Asia and did not wish to endanger the good neighbor policy. Evanti quickly adapted to the political reality of life in the Dominican Republic and dedicated her concert to Trujillo, later attending a party on his private yacht.[69] Despite Evanti's advocacy for racial justice, a combination of Trujillo's personal charm and realpolitik motivated Evanti to support his regime.

She was also the guest of the American ambassador R. Henry Norweb at the embassy and the governor of Santiago province invited her to his ranch to see his horses.[70] Between these diplomatic and social activities, she gave at least one concert in Santo Domingo on 29 June. She performed opera arias and spirituals and added two Spanish language songs by Cubans, Ernesto Lecuona and Joaquín Nin, having coached with the latter composer in Cuba.[71]

She continued her travels visiting Puerto Rico and Curaçao in July.[72] She likely toured other locations in the Caribbean before landing in South America, giving concerts in Caracas, Venezuela. Evanti was in Trinidad en route to Rio de Janeiro when Hitler invaded Poland and World War II began.[73] The outbreak of war brought an immediate end to a tour scheduled to continue until after Christmas: because ocean travel was now threatened by submarines, Evanti was stranded in Trinidad. Always one to make the best of a challenging situation, she quickly connected with a Black lawyer, Hudson Phillips. He introduced her to the former mayor of Port-of-Spain, Garnet McCarthy, who treated her like an honored representative of a foreign nation,

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[69] Cooke, "Madame Evanti Back Safely and Thankful."

[70] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 112, 113.

[71] Concert program, 29 June 1939, box 32, folder "Foreign Programs," E-T collection.

[72] Passenger Lists of Vessels Departing from San Juan, Puerto Rico, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service 1787-2004, Record Group Number 85, Series Number A4106, Roll Number 46, NARA, Ancestry.com.

[73] Cooke, "Madame Evanti Back Safely and Thankful."

lending Evanti a car and chauffeur.[74] She also managed to add two concerts during this delay.[75] After two weeks, she found a neutral American ship to take her home.

Evanti in Latin America: The 1940 Tour

Buoyed by her success in 1939, Evanti returned to Latin America the following year, visiting Brazil and Argentina. Newspaper announcements stated that she was representing the Division of Cultural Relations of the State Department, although she does not seem to have had any financial support from the Division. She was, however, in contact with the Division, and they provided her with introductions and recommendations to help her make travel and performance arrangements.

During her trip, Evanti frequently crossed paths with Carleton Sprague Smith, whom the Division had sent to Latin America to gather information about musical life there. They met several times in Brazil, a country ruled by the authoritarian president Getúlio Vargas. His Estado Novo (New State), promulgated a nationalist, anticommunist ideology, and some elements of it were was sympathetic to Nazism.[76] Vargas's leanings, coupled with the large population of German immigrants in Brazil, made U.S. leaders anxious to become involved in Brazilian cultural life to persuade Vargas to side with the Allies. Smith, traveling on a grant from the American Council of Learned Societies and with a travel discount from Pan-American Airways, later wrote a nearly 300-page report on his experience.[77]

Evanti did not produce such a substantial treatise on her Latin American experience.

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[74] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 113.
[75] Cooke, "Madame Evanti Back Safely and Thankful."
[76] Hess, *Aaron Copland in Latin America,* 93.
[77] Carlton Sprague Smith, "Musical Tour Through South America: June-October, 1940," unpublished report, Sterling Memorial Library, I.

However, she did produce a fourteen-page essay thanks to which we know the details of her trip.[78] For example, we learned that she sailed to Brazil on the same ship as Toscanini and the NBC symphony, the SS *Brazil,* a coincidence due perhaps to her informal connections with the State Department. While aboard the oceanliner, the musicians on the ship arranged a concert.[79] Evanti performed five songs, taking up about half of the show. She was accompanied by a Mrs. S. Lustgarten, who may have been the wife of one of the players in the orchestra.[80] The Symphony's first flutist, John Wummer, joined Evanti in "The Gypsy and the Bird," by Julius Benedict (1804-1885). After an intermission, other members of the NBC Symphony performed a comic skit with music. The concert was mentioned in the ship's newsletter titled "Good Neighbor Cruise News Moore-McCormack Lines," highlighting the web of political and commercial interactions supporting cultural diplomacy.[81] Since Moore-McCormack gave the NBC Symphony a discount on the transportation costs, the company may also have helped fund Evanti's travel.[82] Her connection with the NBC Symphony ended on June 12, when she and the orchestra disembarked in Rio Janeiro.

Once in Rio, Evanti spent much of her time socializing with Brazilian musicians, demonstrating that an indispensable part of these tours was the personal connections made by the travelers as representatives of their countries. She also worked through governmental organizations to build relationships with locals. Contacts at the American Embassy, a Mrs.

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[78] Lillian Evanti, "The South American Way," unpublished essay, E-T collection.

[79] Concert program, 10 June 1940, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection.

[80] There were two string players with the last name Lustgarten who may have been accompanied by their wives.

[81] Newsletter, scrapbook, E-T collection.

[82] Musical organizations receiving such perks were expected to mention the cruise lines during breaks in radio broadcasts. Meyer, "Toscanini and the Good Neighbor Policy," 242.

Xanthaky, and the military attaché Harry Brown introduced Evanti to influential people in Rio.[83] Evanti's network led her to the Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos, known for his *Bachianas Brasileiras*.[84] Evanti found in Villa-Lobos a personality to match her own. She described his

> It was worth the trip to Rio to to [sic] meet Villa Lobos, a noble head, fleet mind, and a ready tongue. He simply steals the show, and we the audience look on "encantado." We spoke in French or I might say I listened in French for he is so dynamic and fluent that one doesn't dare interrupt for fear of losing an inuendo [sic] of his wit and wisdom. His eyes are alive, full of humor, full of passion, patriotism, power, and potentiality.[85]

Villa-Lobos pontificated on the different types of Brazilian music and introduced Evanti to the musician Ernesto dos Santos, known publicly as Donga, an Afro-Brazilian musician pivotal in developing the samba.

At the same time, the pianist Arthur Rubinstein and the choreographer Léonide Massine were in Rio de Janiero. Like Evanti, they met Villa-Lobos, who wanted Massine to see the dances of the native peoples as inspiration for a possible ballet (it was never produced). A group including Evanti, Villa-Lobos, Rubinstein, Massine, and Smith traveled to the Irája neighborhood of Rio to witness a ceremony.[86] As she later recalled:

> We the audience were perched on the stage while the spectacle below began in all seriousness. There was a mixture of Negro and Indian with Portuguese undertones and overtones. They were all colors and types, with hair of all textures, wooly, crinkled and straight. I counted a dozen thick crimpy braids crowning one proud lady. Hunters had brought down many a bird for there were feathers and more feathers. One head dress looked like a glorified feather duster, and there was a profusion of beads and tropical seeds adding picturesqueness. Some were bare footed others with sandals. An orchestra was in the background, including several types of drums, a decorated lead pipe, played by sliding a stick rhythmetically [sic]; and a dish from which sparks emerged as the players

[83] Evanti, "The South American Way," 6.

[84] Kathleen Tappen and Bernice T. Morris, *Prominent Women in Latin America* (Office of the Coordination of Inter-American Affairs, Washington DC: 1944); Evanti, "The South American Way," 1.

[85] Evanti, "The South American Way," 1.

[86] Evanti, "The South American Way," 3; Smith, "Musical Tour," 43.

> made weird scratching sounds. Singing in unison they intoned a four bar melody and I can't tell how many repeats. A central figure introduced many fancy intricate steps, dancing with his legs crossed. I don't know why he wore modern high shoes, much too big for his short thin legs. We held our breath when the Devil appeared in vibrating red velvet, with a full triple cape upon which was embroidered a musical lyre. The women flanked on either side sang in loud, strident tones, keeping a rhythmic foot movement. With so many verses you just couldn't resist joining in.[87]

Evanti's report commended the contributions of non-white peoples in the musical culture of the countries she visited. In addition to witnessing these ceremonies, she learned more about Brazilian folk music from musicologist Luiz Heitor Corrêa de Azevedo. She also attended performances of capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art that combines music, dance, and spirituality. Evanti felt that these experiences informed her performances of classical music by Brazilian composers as "one feels the folk source in all the contemporary music of Brazil."[88]

Another Brazilian composer Evanti met on her travels was Oscar Lorenzo Fernández, the founder of the Conservatório Brasileiro de Música in Rio. Later during her tour she would perform one of his songs. Through Fernández, she met with Ítala Gomes Vaz de Carvalho, the daughter of the Brazilian composer Antônio Carlos Gomes (1836-1896). Evanti attended a tea at her villa with Smith and Corrêa de Azevedo.[89] Evanti also met with non-musicians who were influential in the artistic scene. One such individual was the leader of the Sociedade de Cultura Artistica, Rudolph Josetti, who was rumored to have Nazi sympathies.[90] Smith understood that a part of his job was to gauge German influence in Brazil and he recorded Evanti's interactions with Josetti in his report to the Division:

> The Sociedade de Cultura Artistica . . . is the leading musical and cultural organization in the capital. Its President, Dr. Rodolpho Josetti, is sometimes described as a fascist or Nazi

[87] Evanti, "The South American Way," 3.
[88] Ibid., 5.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Hess, *Aaron Copland in Latin America,* 43.

> but he was sufficiently broadminded to invite Lillian Evanti to sing at his house, which is hardly what Hitler would have done.[91]

These social events were more than just parlor entertainment. By building personal relationships, ambassadors could judge the political affiliations of their hosts and perhaps even influence them. Moreover, Evanti was evidently so well known that Smith could drop her name into his report and assume that his reader knew she was African American. Josetti must have enjoyed the performance at home for soon after the Cultura Artistica engaged Evanti for a performance at the Municipal Theater on 12 July, probably at his suggestion. On this occasion, she performed songs from classical and romantic composers and "Canção do Mar" by Fernández before closing with a set of five spirituals.[92] The Brazilian composer was present in the hall, and the audience called for his "Canção do Mar" to be repeated.[93]

While on tour, Evanti leveraged her connections with artists to secure radio performances. At the home of the painter Candido Portinari she met the director of the Department of Press and Propaganda (DIP) Lourival Fontes and his wife, the ethnomusicologist Mario de Andrade, the Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti and his wife, and the sculptor Lelio Landucci, as well as Smith.[94] It was perhaps this event that secured her an appearance on the radio show "Hora do Brazil," a creation of the DIP that all radio stations in Brazil were required to air.[95] The broadcast would disseminate speeches by the Vargas administration, news from Rio and other parts of Brazil, patriotic trivia, and musical selections. For music, the DIP favored

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[91] Smith, "Musical Tour," 55, quoted in Hess, *Aaron Copland in Latin America,* 43.

[92] Evanti, "The South American Way," 6; Concert program, 12 July 1940, box 32, folder "Foreign Programs," E-T collection.

[93] Evanti, "The South American Way," 5.

[94] Ibid., 7; Sprague Smith, "Musical Tour," 55.

[95] Bryan McCann, *Hello, Hello Brazil: Popular Music in the Making of Modern Brazil* (London: Duke University Press, 2004), 20.

erudite compositions by Brazilian composers, with Villa-Lobos being a particular favorite. Brazilian intellectuals, however, disparaged the propagandistic nature of the program, calling it "Hora do fala sozinho" (the hour that talks to itself).[96] Evanti, likely unaware of both the program's political slant and the criticism against it, sang six selections from her repertoire by Handel, Rimsky-Korsakov, Nickerson, Roig, Antônio Carlos Gomez, and Hageman.[97]

Sometime after 12 July, she flew to São Paulo but did not perform there. Instead she met with local luminaries, including the composer Mozart Camargo Guarnieri and the scholars Oneyda Alvarento and Guilherme de Andrade e Almeida.[98] Evanti then traveled to Argentina. In Buenos Aires, the secretary of the American embassy provided her a letter of introduction to the radio station El Mundo, where she secured a month-long contract. We do not know what she performed or how many sessions were broadcast.[99]

She also met with Alberto Williams, a composer and the founder of the Buenos Aires Conservatory. Williams was educated in Europe but, upon returning to Argentina, began composing in a nationalist style. Throughout her travels in South America, Evanti expressed profound interest in the contributions of the African diaspora to local culture, a subject she discussed with Williams. She later wrote:

> I asked him [Williams] if there were any African influences in the music of the Argentine. "Most assuredly" he replied. "I can name you several of our most characteristic dances that have African origin." So I asked permission to take notes. "There's the 'Tango' brought from Africa to Portugal and to the Argentine by way of Spain. The 'Milonga' is a song and dance that gets its derivation from the 'Tango'. The 'Marote' is of Negro origin, as well as the 'Zamba'. He also told me that in the time of de Rosa his daughter often went accompanied at night to the 'Candombes' (a place where

[96] McCann, *Hello, Hello Brazil*, 29.
[97] Scrapbook, E-T collection.
[98] Evanti, "The South American Way," 7.
[99] Ibid., 8.

the Negroes danced and sang) to hear these original songs.[100]

Although Evanti appreciated the value of Black culture in Argentina, others saw things differently. The Argentine musicologist Carlos Vega, for example, dismissed the possibility of African influence. Evanti was incredulous upon learning of his position.

> Can you imagine my surprise, reading from the book of Carlos Vega the following, 'Nosotros creenos que no existe en el cancionero argentino ni el mas leve vestigio de musica negra.' [We believe that in the Argentine song repertory not the slightest vestige of Black music exists]. In other words, he denies the existence of Negro influence in Argentine songs. I have spoken to most of the important critics concerning this statement, but they do not take this book seriously. Perhaps when he has completed his investigations he will have another opinion.[101]

Evanti used her report to push back against people who tried to erase traces of Blackness from the history of Argentine music and continuously struggled for the recognition of Black culture across the Western hemisphere. In Argentina Evanti gave three lecture-recitals on spirituals: one at the Instituto Cultural Argentino Norteamericano (ICANA) on 13 August, one at the Association Cristiana Feminine, and the third at the University of Buenos Aires.[102] At ICANA, she alternated between live demonstrations and recorded examples.[103] She also taught the audience to sing "Swing Low Sweet Chariot," which they surely enjoyed as much as they did her gregarious personality. Her concerts attracted the attention of Nestor Ortiz Oderigo, an Argentine scholar of African American music. Evanti provided information for a book he was writing about African American music, *Panorama de la Música Afroamericana,* which became

[100] Ibid., 11. Candombe is a style of music and dance associated with Afro-Uruguayan culture, not a place.

[101] Ibid.

[102] "The South American Way," 12; "Lillian Evanti Dio Una Conferencia-Concierto en la Asoc. C. Femenina," *La Hora - Diario de los Trabajadores* (Buenos Aires), 9 October 1940, scrapbook, E-T collection.

[103] Concert program, 13 August 1940, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection.

one of the few volumes on the subject available in Spanish at the time.[104]

On 3 September, she gave a fourth concert, much larger than the previous three. It took place at the Teatro Ateneo, and its first half featured works by Handel, Gluck, Mozart, Schubert, Koechlin, and Ravel. The remainder of the concert presented music of the United States: four spirituals arranged by Burleigh and Nickerson followed by a U.S. group Evanti seems to have performed only in Latin America: "Hey Diddle Diddle" by Herbert Hughes, "Sea Shell" by Carl Engel, and "Do Not Go My Love" and "At the Well" by Richard Hagemann.[105] Evanti added these works, which she did not ordinarily sing, to more fully represent American musical identity. It was a fitting way to end her 1940 tour: a few weeks later Evanti sailed for home and on 26 October, arrived back in New York.[106]

Evanti traveled to Latin America again in 1941, 1947, and 1948. Unfortunately, these trips are not nearly as well documented as her earlier journey. I know about the dates of her travels in 1947 due to passenger manifests held by the National Archives and Records Administration and digitized and rendered full-text searchable by Ancestry.com. 1941 excursion to Mexico was mostly a social affair. She traveled in July and stayed until October, visiting her cousin Harold Murray and his wife Olympia, who owned a paper company in Mexico City.[107] In the summer of 1947, she traveled around the Caribbean by plane, visiting Puerto Rico, St. Thomas, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Cuba.[108] She returned to Mexico in 1948 for a

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[104] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 109; Nestor Ortiz Oderigo, *Panorama de la Musica Afroamericana* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Claridad, 1944).

[105] Scrapbook, E-T collection; Concert program, 3 September 1940, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection.

[106] "A Diva Arrives from South America," *Pittsburg Courier,* 9 November 1940.

[107] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 110; Taylor, *Original Black Elite,* 401.

[108] Passenger and Crew Manifests of Airplane Arriving at San Juan, Puerto Rico, 7 July 1947, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787-2004, Record Group Number 85, NARA Roll 30, NARA, Ancestry.com; Passenger Manifests of Airplanes Arriving

concert at the Instituto Mexicano-Norteamericano de Relaciones Culturales in Monterrey, where she performed a mix of arias, classical songs, and spirituals.[109]

Evanti and Pan-Americanism in the United States

Evanti continued advocating for including people of African ancestry in Pan Americanism back home in the United States. During the winter of 1940-1941, she gave several talks on Afro-Latin musical influence to local Black organizations in Washington.[110] To further support cross-cultural exchange in the spring of 1941 Evanti set up her own Council on Inter-American Relations. As a press release from 29 May 1941 notes,

> The council has been organized as a channel of information on Negro life and culture realizing that better understanding will help to cement the link of solidarity for a permanent policy.[111]

To be sure, the council was limited in scope. The organization's primary activity was a book drive. It collected and donated works on African American life to libraries in Latin America, optimistic that familiarity with Black American culture would ease prejudice and foster friendship. In a newspaper article, Evanti stated:

> We hope through these libraries to be able to tell our neighbors to the South more of the true story of the social and cultural life of the Negro; much about his contributions to the

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at Saint Thomas U.S. Virgin Islands, 14 July 1947, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1787-2004, Record Group Number 85, NARA Roll 13, NARA, Ancestry.com; Passenger and Crew Manifests of Airplanes Arriving at San Juan, Puerto Rico, 15 July 1947, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service 1787-2004, Record Group Number 85, NARA Roll 31, NARA, Ancestry.com; Passenger Manifests of Airplanes Departing from San Juan, Puerto Rico, 16 July 1947, Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service 1787-2004, Record Group Number 85, NARA Roll 20, NARA, Ancestry.com.

[109] Concert program, 6 September 1948, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection; Charles Poore, "Mexico City Recitals," *Christian Science Monitor,* 2 October 1948.

[110] Scrapbook, E-T collection.

[111] Press release, 29 May 1941, box 32, folder 24, E-T collection.

sciences, to art and literature.[112]

Evanti drew upon her substantial D.C. network to attract attention and donations to the council. For example, she chaired an executive board consisting of D.C. civil rights leaders C. Herbert Marshall, Dorothy B. Ferebee, Elsie Austin, and Evanti's brother, among others. The advisory board included the scholars Rayford Logan, Alain Locke, and Lewis Hanke, the educators Ambrose Caliver and Horace Mann Bond, the Nobel Peace Prize winner Ralph Bunche, and the assistant director of the Pan-American Union, Pedro de Alba. One of the council's early meetings was a musical event at Evanti's house attended by around 200 people. De Alba gave a speech after Evanti and Camille Nickerson had sung. As a gesture of solidarity, several Latin American dignitaries, including ministers from Honduras, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Cuba, also appeared at this meeting. Local government workers took part, such as: Oscar Chapman, Assistant Secretary of the Interior; Richard Pattee, Department of Cultural Relations; William J. Thompkins, Recorder of Deeds; Arthur C. Wright, Director of Southern Education; Garnet C. Wilkinson, Assistant Superintendent of D.C. Schools; and Ambrose Caliver, U.S Office of Education.[113]

The council continued to meet until it had collected a sufficient quantity of books. On 2 December 1942, it met for the last time at the International House.[114] There were speeches by civil rights leader Herbert Marshall, Haitian diplomat Dantés Bellegarde, Pedro de Alba, and Howard University Professor Valaurez Spratlin.[115] The meeting culminated with a presentation of books. The records leave no account of the quantity, titles, or final locations of the donated

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[112] "Books to Help Latin America Understand U.S. Negro Sought," *Washington Times Herald*, 23 May 1941, scrapbook, E-T collection.
[113] "Mme. Evanti Hostess to Latin-Americans," *New York Amsterdam News*, 7 June 1941.
[114] Event program, 2 December 1942, scrapbook, E-T collection.
[115] Ibid.

volumes.

No gathering organized by Evanti would be complete without music however. Unfortunately, most of the selections performed are not specified in any documents. Still, we know the meeting opened and closed with the assembled group singing Evanti's "Himno-Panamericano," one of several songs she wrote for causes close to her heart. Evanti wanted the *Himno* to be performed as widely as possible, therefore she wrote accessible and appealing music and had it arranged for solo voice, SSA choir, SATB choir, and for soprano soloist and choir. The choral arrangements were made by Felix Günther, an Austrian-born pianist and conductor who edited and compiled *Anthems of the United Nations: The Inspiring National Songs the Allies Are Singing on the Battlefields and at Home,* published by the Edward B. Marks Music Corporation in 1942.[116]

There are two versions of the *Himno* for voice and piano. (Although *himno* resembles the English word "hymn," in Spanish it means something closer to "anthem," as in "national anthem.") One version was published by Marks and the second was self-published by Evanti. Both were copyrighted in 1941, with lyrics by Evanti in English and Spanish. With her knowledge of multiple languages, she likely did the translations herself. However the Spanish language lyrics are cumbersome and difficult to sing. The text setting revealing that Evanti's Spanish skills, which was serviceable in conversation, were not up to the task of translating the already unwieldy English. The work calls for the countries of the Americas to stand together and to "hold our faith secure for a peace that shall endure" before listing the benefits of joint action using the awkward bureaucratic phrases such as "coordinating collective security" and "peaceful

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[116] Rudolf A. Bruil, "Felix Günther," The Remington Site, 10 July 2011, http://www.soundfountain.org/rem/remguenther.html.

solidarity of this western hemisphere."[117] Given these sentiments, it is not surprising that she dedicated the work to the Pan American Union.

The piece is written in ABA form and bouncy dotted rhythms predominate. Evanti uses a thick chordal harmony with octave doubling and rolled chords in the left hand of the piano creating a grand sound fitting for a declamatory anthem. The words are set syllabically, ensuring clarity. The B section is short, only eight measure long, and it features a brief foray into the minor mode.

Musical Example 5.1: Measures 5-10, Lillian Evanti, "Himno Pan-Americano" (New York: Edward B. Marks Music Cooperation, 1941) M1680.E93 H56 1942, Special Collections, University of Miami Libraries, Coral Gables, FL.

In the self-published version, Evanti expanded the song and made it more suitable for group

[117] Lillian Evanti, "Himno Pan-Americano," (1910 Vermont Avenue Washington D.C.: Lillian Evanti, 1941), E-T collection.

singing. In this second version, she repeated the A section producing an AABA form song. She added a piano transition before first repeat of the A section that features a percussive triplet figure reminiscent of a military drum. She also converted the B section into a solo and doubled its length. The new material she added to the B section, marked *cantabile e expressivo,* contrasts with the A section, especially in the piano accompaniment which switches from marcato chords to swirling arpeggios.

Musical Example 5.2: Measures 23-26, Lillian Evanti, “Himno Pan-Americano,” (1910 Vermont Avenue Washington D.C.: Lillian Evanti, 1941) box 9, folder 11, Lesley Frost Ballantine Papers, 1890-1980, MC 195, Milne Special Collections and Archives, University of New Hampshire Library, Durham, NH.

Evanti likely intended for the A sections to be sung by a chorus and the more difficult B section by a soloist, perhaps Evanti herself. In fact, the self-published version includes an SATB arrangement of the A section on the back page which largely replicates the harmonies of the

piano part.

Evanti achieved considerable success with her hymn. Ever the savvy businesswoman, she promoted it extensively. She received assurances from Bolivar Pagán, the commissioner of Puerto Rico, and Louis C. Rabaut, a congressman from Michigan, that they would recommend her hymn to the OIAA.[118] The response of the OIAA is unknown, but in December 1941, the U.S. Department of Education ordered fifty copies of the song.[119] Not wishing to limit herself to a domestic audience, she promoted the song to foreign representatives of Latin American countries.[120] Evanti even performed the hymn for the Chilean ambassador and his wife at the Chilean embassy in Washington.[121] She also sent the song to foreign radio stations, including Radio Mundo in Argentina and Radio Cultura in Brazil.[122] Her letter arrived at Radio Cultura the same day the station was preparing a Pan American program. Frank Smith, an employee, wrote Evanti that:

> On my way home I read your letter, glanced at the hymn, it was unmistakably good and turned back immediately tothe [sic] radio. I made arrangements of your hymn for the orchestra. You must excuse my doing this without consulting you, but there was not time.
>
> My orchestra played it as [the] final number on the Pan American program and it was a great success. I intend to start our daily broadcasts with your hymn and feel it will become an important factor in cementing pan-american [sic] and democratic feelings.[123]

Celso Guimares, the director of Radio Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, also admired the

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[118] Bolivar Pagán to Nelson A. Rockefeller, 16 December 1941, scrapbook, E-T collection; Louis C. Rabaut to Lillian Evanti, 14 January 1942, scrapbook, E-T collection; Louis C. Rabaut to Lillian Evanti, 11 February 1942, scrapbook, E-T collection.

[119] Purchase order, 17 December 1941, scrapbook, E-T collection.

[120] Adrian Recinos to Lillian Evanti 14 January 1942, scrapbook, E-T collection; J. C. Mlaueo (handwriting indistinct) to Lillian Evanti, 25 February 1942, scrapbook, E-T collection.

[121] Invitation from Chilean embassy to Evanti, 19 January 1942, scrapbook, E-T collection.

[122] Mr. Braun to Lillian Evanti, 4 February 1942, scrapbook, E-T collection; Frank Smith to Lillian Evanti, 17 January 1942, scrapbook, E-T collection.

[123] Ibid.

"Himno Pan-Americano." Guimares translated the lyrics into Portuguese and asked Radamès Gnattali, a Brazilian composer and conductor who worked in classical and popular music, to orchestrate it.[124] The anthem also caught the ear of the popular Brazilian singer Francisco Alves, one of the most famous Brazilian singers of that era and who made many recordings, including "Aquarela do Brasil," a patriotic song closely associated with Vargas's Estado Novo. In January 1942 — when the hemisphere was under greater threat than at any previous point in the conflict given the attack on Pearl Harbor just weeks earlier — Alves performed Evanti's composition on the radio.[125] Then, after hearing Alves's performance, a publishing house in Brazil asked Evanti for the rights to the song; however, she had already promised the creation to Marks.[126] In October 1941, the "Himno Pan-Americano" enhanced a ceremony on Mexico City for the Día de la Raza, a holiday to honor indigenous peoples celebrated in Spanish-speaking countries. A large multi-racial choir of children sang the hymn accompanied by a police band.[127]

Evanti as a Composer

Evanti's success with her "Himno Pan-Americano" evidently inspired her. Between 1942 and 1943, she composed six additional songs, some on current events and figures.[128] "Honor a Trujillo" (Honor to Trujillo), with lyrics by L.B. Lamarche in English and Spanish, praises the Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, whom she had met in 1939.[129] Her fond memories of her

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[124] "Madame Evanti's Contribution to Pan-American Unity," *Newspic,* June 1946; M. Russel Goudey to Lillian Evanti, 12 February 1942, scrapbook, E-T collection.

[125] Irmáos Vitale to Lillian Evanti, 31 January 1942, scrapbook, E-T collection

[126] Ibid.

[127] "Hymn Pan Americano," undated newspaper article, scrapbook, E-T collection; Concert program, 12 October 1941, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection.

[128] See Appendix 4 for a list of Evanti's compositions by year.

[129] Lillian Evanti and L.B. Lamarche, "Honor a Trujillo," in W.C. Handy, *Unsung Americans Sung* (New York: W.C. Handy, 1944), 65; Lillian Evanti and L.B. Lamarche, "Honor a Trujillo,"

time in the Dominican Republic (and perhaps Trujillo's flattery and charm) blinded Evanti to his quite evident faults. A military commander who first ruled through a presidential puppet, Trujillo assumed the presidency in 1942 after a sham election where he ran uncontested.[130] In fact, "Honor a Trujillo" celebrates Trujillo's inauguration. Many in the U.S. State Department saw the facade of friendship between the United States and Trujillo as an embarrassment. Nonetheless, compromise was necessary: the military demands of World War II and the larger Good Neighbor project depended on the United States upholding a policy of non-intervention in Latin America. Thus the United States continued to work with Trujillo up until 1960.

"Honor a Trujillo" was published by W.C. Handy. Known as the father of the blues, Handy was the first to publish in the genre. After dissolving his first publishing company, which he had run with Harry Pace, W.C. Handy went into business with his brother Charles.[131] Although the Handy Brothers Press is best known for the blues, it published the works of Black composers in a variety of styles and genres. It was an important source of support for Black female composers such as Florence Price, Margaret Bonds, Maude Cummings Taylor, Ismay Andrews, Shirley Graham Du Bois, Camille Nickerson, and, of course, Evanti.[132] Handy also published a collection of song, stories, articles, and poems titled *Unsung Americans Sung* (1944), which documented African Americans' wartime contributions to their country. It was this patriotic anthology that included Evanti's "Honor a Trujillo."[133]

"Honor a Trujillo" praises the dictator with flowery language. Lamarche waxes poetic

(Washington, D.C.: Lillian Evanti, 1942?), E-T collection.

[130] Roorda, *The Dictator Next Door.*

[131] For more information on W.C. Handy see David Robertson, *W.C. Handy: The Life and Times of the Man Who Made the Blues* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011).

[132] W. C. Handy, *Negro Authors and Composers of the United States* (New York: Handy Brothers, 1938); *New York Age,* 2 September 1950.

[133] Robertson, *W.C. Handy,* 222.

over Trujillo's "brow [which] reflects noble thought and devotions" and claims that "a nimbus of glory resplendent with light unshaken by tempests surrounds him with might."[134] Evanti engages in text painting in this phrase. In m. 36 on the word "light," the vocal line leaps up a sixth to a D5, the second highest pitch in the song, on the word light, suggesting the loftiness of "glory resplendent." The piano part simultaneously jumps down a fifth to B1, which is doubled at the octave further highlighting this moment. In turn, the singer also promises to be "loyal, faithful, and true" to the leader, declaring, "We pledge our hearts to you." Evanti matches the grandiose sentiments of the lyrics with an accompaniment that simulates a large ensemble, and frequently deploys octave doubling in the bass for a majestic sound.

The song consists of a chorus, a verse, and a repeat of the chorus. While the chorus is in D major, the verse dips into B minor. Additionally, the verse contains a three-measure meter change from 6/8 to 4/4 on the lyrics "Our land is his muse and his inspiration."[135] This meter change effectively doubles the length of the measures and alters the underlying pulse, creating a suspension of time as if Trujillo were in a dream-like state reflection on his nation. A bombastic finale with a thick, chordal texture calls to mind the drums and brass of a military band.

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[134] Spanish lyrics read "Honor a Trujillo varón esforzado que luce en su frente laurel constelado por nimbos de gloria que nunca jamás del tiempo marchi tan las rachas violentas." Lillian Evanti and L.B. Lamarche, "Honor a Trujillo," in W.C. Handy, *Unsung Americans Sung* (New York: W.C. Handy, 1944), 65.

[135] Spanish lyrics read "La Patria es la musa de su inspiración." Ibid.

Musical Example 5.3: Measures 41-47, Lillian Evanti and L.B. Lamarche, “Honor a Trujillo,” in W.C. Handy, *Unsung Americans Sung* (New York: W.C. Handy, 1944), 65.

Musical Example 5.4: Measures 19-23, Lillian Evanti and L.B. Lamarche, “Honor a Trujillo,” in W.C. Handy, *Unsung Americans Sung* (New York: W.C. Handy, 1944), 65.

Evanti's fawning tribute to a dictator responsible for repression and genocide is a troubling aspect of her legacy, as was Handy's interest in publishing it. Eventually, she did seem to recognize that the song was problematic, as she rarely performed it and did not promote the composition.

Evanti was far more politically astute in her other compositions. Her "V for Victory March" is one example. This work was self-published, and Evanti made at least five versions, tweaking the music and lyrics to best relate to current events. Originally titled "V for Victory March" (1942), she changed the name of the song to "Forward March to Victory" (1942, revised 1943) and then "United Nations" (after 1945, arr. SATB 1953) after the war was won.[136] All of these version were dedicated to United Nations, the term the Allies used for themselves after formalizing their common goals in the "Declaration by United Nations," signed in January 1942. In the version titled "Forward March to Victory," Evanti chose the cover art carefully. The image shows soldiers from the different branches of the armed forces and was likely created by her friend Lois Mailou Jones.[137] She composed the first version shortly after the Battle of the Coral Sea, from 4-8 May 1942. This battle was a much-needed morale boost for the Allies as it was the first time they stymied an invading Japanese fleet. With a simple ABAB form, this march called

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[136] Lillian Evanti, "V for Victory March" (Washington D.C.: Lillian Evanti, 1942), folder 518, Marian Anderson Collection of Music Manuscripts, Kislak Center for Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; Lillian Evanti, "Forward March to Victory" (Washington D.C.: Lillian Evanti, 1942), box 215-20, folder 40, Lois Mailou Jones Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C; Lillian Evanti, "Forward March to Victory" (Washington D.C.: Lillian Evanti, 1943), box 28, folder 33, Marian Anderson Collection of Printed Music, Kislak Center for Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; Lillian Evanti, "United Nations," (Washington D.C.: Lillian Evanti, nd.) box 103, folder 29, Archives Research Center, Robert W. Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, GA; Lillian Evanti, "United Nations," (arranged for SATB choir) (Washington D.C.: Lillian Evanti, 1953) box 7, over size folder 5, E-T collection.

[137] The signature of the artwork is indistinct.

for total Allied victory in the name of liberty and freedom. Written squarely in duple meter and set syllabically, the music is rousing and full of patriotic spirit.

Evanti experimented with different ways to build tension into the half cadence at the end of the A section, demonstrating her abilities as a composer. In all versions, she uses a rising chromatic line. However, in the first edition, it is obscured by embellishments.

Musical Example 5.5: Measures 13-16, Lillian Evanti, "V for Victory March" (Washington D.C.: Lillian Evanti, 1942), folder 518, Marian Anderson Collection of Music Manuscripts, Kislak Center for Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

When she revised the song as "Forward March to Victory" (1942), she simplified the song by bringing it down by a third from E-flat major to C major. Evanti removed the large leaps, rendering the ascending half steps easier to sing. She also changed the words to read, "We'll march together our flags unfurled march to liberate the world/ In unity from shore to shore united forever more."[138] Now satisfied with the melody, she continued to modify the lyrics. The 1943 revision of "Forward March to Victory" quotes from Roosevelt's Four Freedoms Speech. In this famous utterance, given 6 January 1941, the president called for the United States

[138] Lillian Evanti, "Forward March to Victory" (Washington D.C.: Lillian Evanti, 1942), box 215-20, folder 40, Lois Mailou Jones Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

to end its isolationism and to fight to support global democracy.

Musical Example 5.6: Measures 13-16, Lillian Evanti, “Forward March to Victory” (Washington D.C.: Lillian Evanti, 1943), box 28, folder 33, Marian Anderson Collection of Printed Music, Kislak Center for Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

Repeating the word “freedom” on each rising notes emphasizes the growing tension toward the cadence, making the song more rhetorically effective. By echoing these words, she calls upon the president’s powerful oratory — along with the difficulty of the struggle at hand — further linking the song to the war effort. She retained this section without change in the “United Nations” but made more substantial changes to the B section, eventually almost tripling the length.

The most interesting change is a coda she attached to the 1942 version of “Forward March to Victory.” This coda includes a spoken section which adds drama to the ending, a format not uncommon at this time. For example, *Song of Thanksgiving* (1944) by Ralph Vaughan Williams, which celebrates the triumph of the Allies, and *Lincoln Portrait* (1942), by Aaron Copland, which honors the sixteenth president of the United States both contain spoken word. Although the effect is compelling, Evanti removed the spoken sections from later editions.

Patriotic motivations aside, Evanti also wanted to make money from the piece. Hoping that friendly nations worldwide would sing her song, she wrote to multiple embassies and had it

translated into Chinese, Dutch, Spanish, Czech, French, and Norwegian.[139] She sent copies to politicians, including Congressional Representative Helen Gahagan Douglas, the mayors of Los Angeles and New York, the ambassadors of France, Costa Rica, Venezuela, Britain, the Dominican Republic, and Syria, as well as various performing arts groups such as the Blue Jacket Choir of the U.S. Navy, Salt Lake City's Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the Clarence Cameron White Club, the Army Band, the United States Army Band in Berlin, and the San Francisco Municipal Band.[140] Although the song was not widely taken up, it was performed on the radio show Army Hour on 15 July 1945.[141]

During the war, Evanti also gave several concerts for soldiers. She likely wrote the song, "On Furlough Mañana," for these performances, which was inspired by her time in Latin America.[142] Besides the title (the idea of "mañana" was often co-opted by the U.S. music industry) this songs alludes to Cuba and employs a Latinesque rhythm in the chorus. Evanti dedicated the song to "our soldiers and their sweethearts," a thoughtful gesture that reached beyond the immediate audience. The lyrics are written from the point of view of a woman singing about how much she looks forward to seeing her soldier when he is on leave from his duties.[143] After the war, Evanti repurposed this song removing the references to war,

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[139] Royal Norwegian Embassy to Lillian Evanti, 27 October 1942, box 7, folder 4, E-T collection.

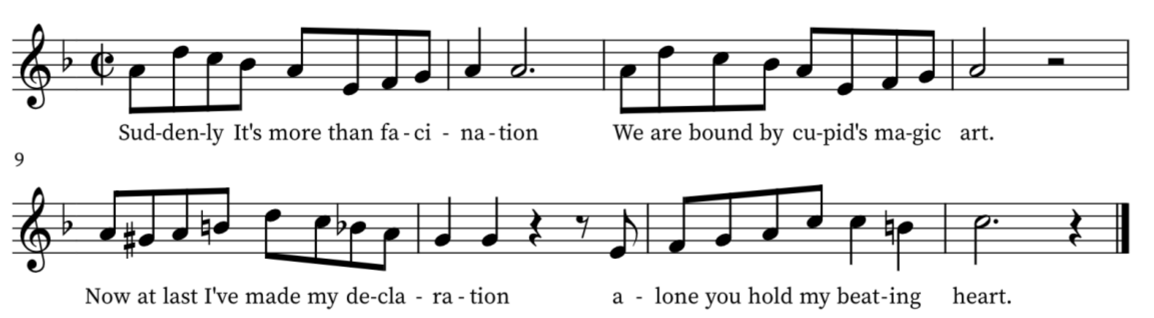
[140] Letters, box 32, folder 26, E-T collection.

[141] NCB to Evanti, 10 August 1945, box 32, folder 26, E-T collection.

[142] "Entertain United Nations Soldiers," *New Journal and Guide*, 7 November 1942; "Stars of Stage, Concert Stage, Radio Lend Talents to Harlem Center," *New Journal and Guide*, 19 December 1942; "Lillian Evanti Sings for Camp Lee Soldiers," *New Journal and Guide*, 20 March 1943; "Soldiers Hear Mme. Evanti," *Chicago Bee,* 21 March 1943; "News of the Camps," *Chicago Bee* 28 March 1943; "Zeta Artists Aid Soldier's Morale Building Program," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 20, 1944; Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 105; Evanti, "On Furlough Mañana" (self-published, nd) E-T collection.

[143] Lillian Evanti, "On Furlough Mañana" (self-published, nd) E-T collection.

transforming it into a peace-time love song titled "I'm Yours For Tonight."[144] The piece was published by Evanti's "Columbian Music Company." Unlike her grand and stately patriotic songs, this number projected passionate romance. The seductive introduction has a slinky opening melody that exploits half steps to conjure an exotic sound.



Musical Example 5.7: Measures 5-12. Lilian Evanti, "I'm Yours For Tonight" (Washington D.C.: Columbian Music Company, nd), box 161-13, folder 4, Camille Nickerson Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Although the beginning flirts with D minor, the chorus bursts into an F-major declaration of love with a syncopated rhythm that highlights the way "Latin" music was widely perceived in the United States: alluring and sensual. Evanti explicitly marked the chorus as a rhumba, but the habanera rhythm in the left hand of the piano may stand out more to listeners.

[144] Lillian Evanti, "I'm Yours For Tonight" (Washington D.C.: Columbian Music Company, nd), E-T collection also in Box 161-13, folder 4 Camille Nickerson Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Musical Example 5.8: Measures 13-16, Lilian Evanti, "I'm Yours For Tonight" (Washington D.C.: Columbian Music Company, nd), box 161-13, folder 4, Camille Nickerson Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Lois Mailou Jones, who created the cover art, remembered that when Evanti sang "On Furlough Mañana," she "had so much sex appeal."[145] This was an aspect of her image than needed to be carefully managed when performing for a mixed-race audience. Evanti mostly sang for all-Black units but occasionally performed for white soldiers.[146] However, she only sang "On Furlough Mañana" for African American audiences, confining herself to patriotic songs, spirituals, and classical selections when singing for white soldiers. This strategy would avoid any hint of a controversial interracial relationship.

Besides, by this time, Evanti was in her mid-fifties and closer in age to the mothers of the soldiers than their girlfriends. Therefore it is fitting that when she was performing for service

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[145] Interview with Lois Mailou Jones, 1974, E-T collection.

[146] "Entertain United Nations Soldiers," *New Journal and Guide*, 7 November 1942; "Stars of Stage, Concert Stage, Radio Lend Talents to Harlem Center," *New Journal and Guide*, 19 December 1942; "Lillian Evanti Sings for Camp Lee Soldiers," *New Journal and Guide*, 20 March 1943; "Soldiers Hear Mme. Evanti," *Chicago Bee,* 21 March 1943; "News of the Camps," *Chicago Bee* 28 March 1943; "Zeta Artists Aid Soldier's Morale Building Program," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 May 1944; Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 105.

men in Harlem, she performed a song she wrote for her son.[147] "My Little Prayer" was composed for Thurlow on a poem by Evanti's mother and has the characteristics of a lullaby.[148] The song is written for a soprano and the text suggests that a child is singing, asking God to "Teach me the things to do, to say most pleasing in Thy sight." Only thirty-one measures long, the song consists of simple four-bar phrases in 6/8 meter. Repeated use of quarter note-eighth note rhythms have a hypnotic effect, as do the piano's arpeggiated chords, which imitate a harp.

The willingness of Evanti and other African Americans to support the United States throughout World War II is especially remarkable in light of the treatment of Black Americans at home and in the armed forces. Although Evanti was received as a distinguished guest and an envoy of American culture in other countries, she was unwelcome in segregated restaurants in her hometown. Indeed, it is a testament to Evanti's determination that her Latin American travels happened at all, as diplomatic posts were unlikely to be awarded to racial minorities. However, the State Department's policy of facilitating private organizations rather than assuming direct control enabled individuals such as Evanti to manipulate the policies of the kingmakers to their own ends.

Evanti's work as an advocate revitalized her career and shaped her legacy. If her career had ended after her tours of Europe and the United States in the 1920s, she would still be notable as a Black opera pioneer. However, having already established herself as an artist, she turned her energies to tireless evangelism on behalf of Black culture. From her initial vision of a "rousing song" of protest, which she had confided to Du Bois in 1934, Evanti was ultimately inspired to

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[147] "Stars of Stage, Concert Stage, Radio Lend Talents to Harlem Center," *New Journal and Guide*, 19 December 1942.

[148] Lillian Evanti and Mrs. Bruce Evans, "My Little Prayer" (New York: Handy Brothers Music Company, 1943), E-T collection.

take up the pen herself. The success of her *Himno Panamericano* inspired her as a composer just as her cultural diplomacy activities expanded her reach as an artist.

Yet as noted, in Latin America Evanti sang solely in concerts. Opera was still her driving passion. Soon she would realize her dream of performing opera in her native country and triumph onstage with the National Negro Opera Company.

Chapter 6: "In Search of Something Racial, " Evanti and the National Negro Opera Company

On the evening of 28 August 1943, Evanti gazed out upon an audience of thousands from a floating stage anchored at the bottom of the Watergate Steps which led from the Potomac up to the Lincoln Memorial. A light breeze across the river ruffled the many layers of Evanti's elaborate costume. It was the same dress she had sewn for herself years earlier in Italy when she performed the role of Violetta in *La Traviata.* In Italy she had embraced Verdi's tragic and conflicted heroine, who must decide between a stable, loving relationship or a life of freedom and pleasure. This conflict is manifested in the aria "È strano / Ah, fors'è lui / Sempre libera," particularly its extraordinary cabaletta "Sempre libera" an excellent vehicle for Evanti to show off her coloratura. Once back home, Evanti had made "Ah for's é lui" something of a signature aria, performing it on tour in the United States. Now, she was finally singing it (in English translation) in its complete context, in a fully staged opera in her hometown.

The force that propelled this dream into reality was Mary Cardwell Dawson (1894-1962) and her National Negro Opera Company (NNOC). This group was founded in 1941 to provide performance opportunities to African American singers denied roles in white-dominated opera houses. Dawson's original ambitions were to perform: she was an accomplished singer and pianist who studied at the New England Conservatory of Music, the Chicago Musical College, and at a studio operated by the Metropolitan Opera Company.[1] As a young woman, Dawson was discouraged by the complete absence of Black people in the opera and symphony performances she attended in Boston. In light of this depressing landscape, Dawson decided to abandon her

[1] Eric Ledell Smith, "Pittsburgh's Black Opera Impresario: Mary Cardwell Dawson," *Pennsylvania Heritage* (1995): 5.

career in performance. Instead, in the mid-1920s, she formed her own music school in Pittsburgh. Nurtured by Dawson's talents and ceaseless work, the school grew quickly. By 1932, it offered pipe organ, piano, voice, violin, cornet, saxophone, flute, and trumpet, along with music theory, dance, public speaking, dramatics, and several foreign languages. At least eight teachers were employed at the interracial school.[2] Thus, the institution reflected the surrounding community, which was a mix of African Americans and European immigrants.[3]

In addition to teaching, Dawson directed dramatic works and choirs. She staged theatrical productions in 1927 and 1932, and the Cardwell Dawson Choir performed at the 1939 New York World's Fair.[4] Black churches were key to her development strategy as she frequently recruited from their choirs while also drawing on local high schools and her own studio. For Dawson, treating the singers as professionals was essential. Consequently, she paid soloists for their work. Dawson wanted to have a greater influence so in 1931 she founded the Pittsburgh chapter of the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM), thus transforming herself from a music teacher into an advocate. According to Dawson, "the object of the association [was] to create a keener interest in and appreciation of Negro Music, its composers and artists, and to develop higher professional standards among Negro musicians through lectures, recitals and study."[5] Her advocacy was so effective that she was elected president of the National Association in 1940-1941. The administrative and organizing abilities developed through these experiences were critical to the success of the NNOC.

Dawson's first encounters with Evanti came through the NANM. Dawson invited her to

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[2] Bryan, "Radiating a Hope," 26.
[3] Ibid., 28
[4] Ibid., 29.
[5] Ibid., 29.

perform at the organization's national convention which took place in Pittsburgh in August 1934. Evanti appeared alongside violinist Louis Vaughn Jones and Florence Price, who played her own piano concerto.[6] Evanti regaled the public with two favorites "È strano / Ah, fors'è lui / Sempre libera," and Burleigh's arrangement of "Lord, I Want to Be a Christian." Dawson added Evanti's name to her address book and organized another performance through yet another one of her side jobs, "Cardwell Concert Management," in Pittsburgh in March 1938.[7]

"Rousing Verdi from the Grave": The Birth of the NNOC

In 1940 Dawson created a National Opera Committee as a branch of the NANM, which later split from the NANM, becoming the NNOC.[8] Its headquarters occupied the third floor of a large house on 7101 Apple Street, which Dawson rented in the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh and which served as an office and rehearsal space. (In 2020, the house was named one of the Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and efforts are underway to renovate the building and turn it into a museum and community arts center.[9]) Dawson was hardly the first to take this bold step. In 1873, the Colored American Opera Company, consisting entirely of amateur singers, staged Julius Eichberg's comedy *The Doctor of Alcantara.*[10] In 1889, Black singer and entrepreneur Theodore Drury (1867-1943) created his own Grand Opera Company, ambitiously named given that it performed only opera scenes and toured only for one season. Drury regrouped in 1900 with a fully staged production of

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[6] Ralph Lewando, "Negroes Play Last Concert," *Pittsburgh Press,* 31 August 1934.

[7] Wells, "Grand Opera as Racial Uplift," 18.

[8] Smith, "Pittsburgh's Black Opera Impresario," 6.

[9] Mozo Marketing, "About," National Opera House, 2023, https://nationaloperahouse.org/about/.

[10] James M. Trotter, *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (Boston: Lee and Shepard Publishers, 1878), 245.

Bizet's *Carmen*, and for the next eight years, his company staged at least one opera each season in New York City.[11] After the company shut down, Drury continued to work as a concert singer and music teacher in the northeast, periodically directing operas and oratorios. Several other companies produced only one opera: the Colored Opera Company, Chicago, 1886; Farini's Grand Creole and Colored Opera Company, New York City, 1891; the Afro-American Opera Company, Chicago, 1896; the Aeolian Opera Association, Harlem, 1934; and the Detroit Negro Opera Company, 1938.[12]

The NNOC's first full production was Verdi's *Aida* at the Syria Mosque in Pittsburgh on the closing night of the NANM annual convention on 29 August 1941.[13] *Aida* was both an ambitious and a natural choice. It opera requires vast resources, star-quality leading singers, two grand choruses, dancers, and splendid scenery and costumes. But Dawson also wanted to make a statement. In addition to proving the NNOC singers' abilities, through *Aida,* Black performers would celebrate historical Black greatness, as the opera depicts mighty African kingdoms with wealth and power. In the opera, Egypt and Ethiopia are at war and Aida, the daughter of the Ethiopian king Amonasro, is captured and enslaved in Egypt. In spite of her desperate position, she falls in love with Radamès, the leader of the Egyptian armies. The daughter of the Egyptian pharaoh, Amneris, wishes to have Radamès as her husband and is suspicious of the slave girl Aida. Amonasro commands Aida to manipulate Radamès into revealing Egyptian military secrets. Trapped between her loyalty to her homeland and her lover, she ultimately agrees to betray Radamès. This betrayal has devastating consequences: Radamès is sentenced to die as a

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[11] Turner, "Class, Race, and Uplift in the Opera House," 340; Southern, *The Music of Black Americans,* 294.

[12] Robin Elliot, "Blacks and Blackface at the Opera," 40.

[13] Bryan, "Radiating a Hope."

traitor, and Aida, unable to imagine life without him, chooses to perish with Radamès. In sum, the opera tells the story of individuals trapped by forces larger than themselves while loyalty to their respective countries compels them to behave in ways contrary to their desires.

In *Aida,* race was important enough to the plot that white singers customarily performed the leading roles in blackface, confirming yet again that Blackness, albeit imagined and performed by white people, was already an essential part of the opera world. Even though all the characters are African, racial distinctions are made between the Egyptians and the Ethiopians as the latter are often depicted with darker skin. Scholars have debated the meaning of race in *Aida,* with some dismissing the opera as an orientalist fantasy, an exoticized Egypt displayed for Western consumption, while others identify the work as anti-imperialist, because Egypt, with its colonial desires toward Ethiopia, is depicted as the aggressor.[14] For the NNOC, however, producing *Aida* meant telling a story of Black agency.

The company went to great lengths to tell that story. Over 200 singers, dancers, and instrumental musicians performed before an audience — integrated — of over 2,000.[15] As would remain typical for NNOC productions, the singers were primarily Black, but the director, Frederick Vajda, former assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera, was white, as were the orchestral musicians. The soloists were LaJulia Rhea as Aida and William Franklin as Amonasro, reprising their roles from a 1937 performance with the Chicago Civic Opera

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[14] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (Random House: New York, 1993), 112; Ralph P. Locke, "Beyond the Exotic: How 'Eastern' Is Aida?" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 17, no. 2 (2005): 105–139; Paul Robinson, "Is 'Aida' an Orientalist Opera?" *Cambridge Opera Journal* 5, no. 2 (1993): 133–140; Christopher R. Gauthier and Jennifer McFarlane-Harris, "Nationalism, Racial Difference, And 'Egyptian' Meaning in Verdi's *Aida,"* in *Blackness in Opera,* eds. Naomi, André Karen M. Bryan and Eric Saylor (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012): 55-78.

[15] Rubi Blakey, "NANM Scores with "Aida" in Climax to Annual Meeting," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 6 September 1941.

Company. Other cast members included Napoleon Reed as Radamès, Nellie Dobson Plante as Amneris, and Shelby Nicholls as Ramfis. For the chorus, Dawson recruited from small Black vocal groups across the country thus helping talented Black singers denied access to the operatic stage who would then return to their communities with this experience. Members of the chorus trained in different cities and came to the conference for the performance from the NYA Chorus of Chicago, the Forbes Music Study Club of Cleveland, the Helen Carter Moses Singers of Columbus, the Detroit Negro Opera Company, the Imperial Opera Company of Chicago. In addition to these group, various individuals from Texas, Florida, New York, Indiana, and Georgia also traveled to join the chorus.[16]

Critics from the *Pittsburgh Courier, Pittsburgh Press*, and the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph,* offer valuable insights on the performance. In sum, they argue that the NNOC's production was a victory for the Black community. But they also hint at a broader question: what does opera gain when Black performers and Black experiences appear onstage? Rubi Blakey, a Black critic for the *Pittsburgh Courier,* proclaimed the performance "one of the finest interpretations of Verdi's colorful pageant of three score and ten years ever accomplished on an American stage by any organization, including the Metropolitan Opera."[17] He also proposed that the performance signaled a change in African American culture, stating, "This most impressive performance marks an epoch for the American Negro." J. Fred Lissfelt, a white man writing for the *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph,* also found the production significant for Black Americans and urged that it "be repeated over the land for the encouragement of the Negro race."

P.L. Prattis, a Black journalist who held leadership positions at the *Chicago Defender* and

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[16] Maude R. George, "Clarence H. Wilson Heads Musicians," *New Journal,* 13 September 1941.

[17] Blakey, "NANM Scores with "Aida.""

later the *Pittsburgh Courier,* is the most direct about the idea that an integrated audience would benefit from watching this production. "It was not simply 'good for Negroes' opera," he declared. Rather "it was a show that might have roused Verdi himself from the grave." Prattis also explains how the Black community might capitalize on the success of this performance, even quoting Lissfelt and praising the white critic as a "convert to the intrinsic merit of the race's gift."[18] None of the reviews directly consider the implications of having an all-Black cast perform an opera consisting of only Black characters, although Ralph Lewando, a white music critic of the *Pittsburgh Press,* makes some instructive comments. Observing "a manner that was thrilling by reason of the earnest efforts of all the participants," he reflected, "it is remarkable how the Negro throws himself into music and stage action with such incomparable fervor. This 'Aida' was simply lived through, as well as sung and acted, with a feeling for its content that at times approached the sublime."[19]

Clearly the skilled transformation of singers who use their bodies to bring the score to life on stage is the beating heart of opera as Lewando recognizes. He also applauds the singers' mastery and stagecraft. However, he indulges in reductive thinking by ascribing their abilities to race. He trades in stereotypes of Black people as a race inclined to music due to their passionate over-emotional impulses. Yet lived experience is by no means irrelevant, as Naomi André points out. For example, she examines Leontyne Price's 1984 farewell performance in the title role of *Aida* at the Met, focusing on the moment Aida agrees to betray her lover on behalf of her nation. As André argues, because Price's life experiences as a Black woman in the United States fit the

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[18] P.L Prattis, "'Aida Immortalized Here; Should Appear in Every Large City," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 6 September 1941.

[19] Ralph Lewando, "Presentation of Opera 'Aida' at Mosque Climaxes Convention of Negro Musicians," *Pittsburgh Press,* August 30, 1941.

character her performance is infused with the human cost of American racism.[20] In *Aida,* Rhea attempted something similar. Like the Ethiopian protagonist, and like Price, Rhea inhabited a country that required painful sacrifices. (Not only that, but Rhea held her dignity above financial and career advancement, turning down performance opportunities that required traveling on segregated trains.[21])

Aida was repeated in the same location in Pittsburgh on 30 October 1941 with a small change in the cast: Jack Smith Jr. replaced Shelby Nichols as Ramfis.[22] This repeat production did not receive substantial media attention.The NNOC's first performance was a smashing success, attracting a large audience and positive reviews. However, not everything went smoothly; conflict over the stagehands' payment delayed the premiere by forty-five minutes, foreshadowing the company's near-constant financial difficulties.[23]

The Philosophy of the NNOC

In the spring of 1942, changes in Dawson's personal life freed her to focus fully on the NNOC. With her husband, she relocated to Washington, D.C., where her husband had just taken a job. Although Dawson had to close her music school, in this new setting, she could pursue the NNOC's goals on an immense scale, namely, vindicating the artistic dreams of an entire race. As she wrote:

> It is the hope and dream of all races to attain the highest level in musical expression and culture. The National Negro Company seeks, through organized efforts, to further the

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[20] André, *Black Opera,* 19-20

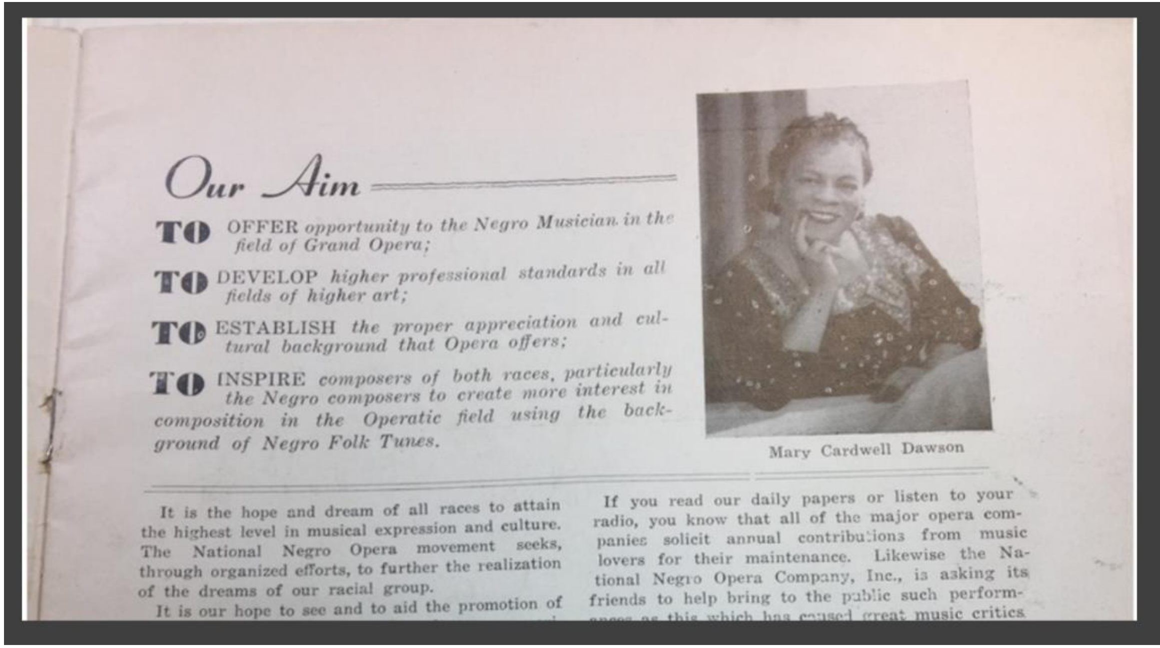
[21] David Goodman, "'On Fire with Hope': African American Classical Musicians, "Major Bowes' Amateur Hour," and the Hope for a Colour-Blind Radio," *Journal of American Studies* 47, no. 2 (2013): 491.

[22] "To Be Repeated," *Pittsburgh Sun Telegraph,* 4 October 1941.

[23] Lewando, "Presentation of Opera 'Aida' at Mosque."

realization of the dreams of our racial group.[24]

Dawson outlined her ambitions with four aims.



Our Aim

TO OFFER *opportunity to the Negro Musician in the field of Grand Opera;*

TO DEVELOP *higher professional standards in all fields of higher art;*

TO ESTABLISH *the proper appreciation and cultural background that Opera offers;*

TO INSPIRE *composers of both races, particularly the Negro composers to create more interest in composition in the Operatic field using the background of Negro Folk Tunes.*

Mary Cardwell Dawson

It is the hope and dream of all races to attain the highest level in musical expression and culture. The National Negro Opera movement seeks, through organized efforts, to further the realization of the dreams of our racial group.

It is our hope to see and to aid the promotion of

If you read our daily papers or listen to your radio, you know that all of the major opera companies solicit annual contributions from music lovers for their maintenance. Likewise the National Negro Opera Company, Inc., is asking its friends to help bring to the public such perform-

Image 6.1: National Negro Opera Company, souvenir program for *La Traviata*, Washington, D.C., 1943, E-T collection.

Black musical excellence would involve (1) cultivating performances for Black singers, (2) raising professional standards, (3) developing audiences that appreciate opera, and (4) inspiring Black composers to use traditional Black music as the basis for opera, all aims that mirror the goals of racial uplift discussed in chapter one. Dawson also envisioned the NNOC expanding into a nationwide network of music guilds that would "assure the performance of opera by the Negro artists in every city."[25] Such guilds would operate as de-centralized community centers, reflecting an unspoken fifth goal: accessibility. The NNOC also moved toward this goal by performing its repertory in English translation. As we will see, Dawson also

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[24] National Negro Opera Company, souvenir program for *La Traviata,* Washington, D.C, 1943, E-T collection.

[25] Ibid.

wanted her company to perform operas with characters from a variety of racial backgrounds. As one of her students recalled, "she made sure we weren't pigeonholed to sing one or two things."[26]

"To Keep Singing Until I Die": Evanti and the NNOC

Galvanized by her initial success with *Aida* in Pittsburgh*,* Dawson then staged it Chicago. She originally planned for two nights, 10-11 October 1942, but canceled the second night. A pre-performance opinion piece printed in the *Chicago Defender* hints at the difficulty of selling tickets, mentioning "an apathetic audience whose tastes must be refined before opera movements among us can be sustained and supported."[27] Immediately Dawson took steps to reduce this "apathy." In what would nowadays be called outreach, she collaborated with the Chicago Negro Opera Guild of the National Negro Opera Company and held a concert on 24 January 1943, at Wendell Phillips High School. Evanti was a part of this campaign. Having stayed in touch with Dawson, she sang at the 24 January concert alongside the Black baritone Todd Duncan and a chorus performing excerpts from Aida. Ever the promoter, Dawson also spoke at the event, urging the Black community in Chicago to support the NNOC.[28]

The NNOC's next operatic production was *La Traviata,* equally ambitious but with a different racial orientation in its storyline: white upper-class Parisians. An announcement in the *Birmingham Weekly Review* stated, "blasé Washington is due for a shock and a treat," suggesting

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[26] Smith, "Pittsburgh's Black Opera Impresario," 3.

[27] "Needed: An Opera Audience," *Chicago Defender*, 10 October 1942.

[28] "Negro Opera Company Will Present Its First Program Here Sunday," *Chicago Tribune,* 21 January 1943; "Evanti and Todd Duncan Sing at DuSable Jan. 24th," *Chicago Defender,* 23 January 1943.

that Black singers presenting white roles would cause a stir.[29] Furthermore, the chorus was integrated. As with the previous production, the orchestra consisted of white musicians from a local orchestra, in this case, the National Symphony Orchestra, directed by Vajda.[30] Either Evanti or Vajda, or perhaps the two together, translated the work into English; newspaper accounts differ.[31] One unusual detail was the setting. As discussed above, the opera was performed outdoors on a floating stage called the Watergate in Washington, D.C. This venue was the summer home of the National Symphony Orchestra from 1935 until 1965. Certainly it lent excitement to the production.

Dawson built the production around Evanti. As discussed in chapter three, when Evanti performed the role in Italy, her audience may well have believe she was white. Much depends on context, however. Now, Evanti was onstage with a self-proclaimed Negro opera company, playing a romantic role with the dark-skinned Joseph Lipscomb. The audience would readily understand Evanti as Black, especially given the media's prediction of potential "shock" value. Although Evanti wore the same costume for the role on both sides of the Atlantic, audience perception of her race was now defined by her relationships and social background, thus reaffirming race as a social category rather than a biological one.

[29] "Italian Grand Opera Sung in English by Negroes," *Weekly Review* (Birmingham, Alabama), June 12, 1943.

[30] Ibid.

[31] John Chapman, "All Negro 'Traviata' At Garden," *Daily News,* 30 March 1944.

Left Image 6.2: Evanti as Violetta in Italy circa 1930, photo by Emilio Sommariva, box 1, folder 3, E-T collection.
Right Image 6.3: Evanti as Violetta with William Franklin as Germont 1944, photo box 2, photo 63, E-T collection.

Unlike Price, despairing along with Aida for her tortured country, Evanti had no experience with Violetta's world. But, like Violetta, she lived with arbitrary rules, including strictures determining which women were eligible for marriage. As a courtesan, Violetta was barred from marrying Alfredo due to artificial bourgeois propriety. In Evanti's time, Black women were sexually available to white men, but such relationships could not be legitimized through marriage in parts of the United States. Another point of comparison is the body: Violetta's consumption marked her sexual impropriety. Evanti's body, on the other hand, hinted at the sexual wrongdoings of powerful men with her mixed heritage recalling the trauma of rape routinely inflicted on Black women by white men. In short Evanti's performance as Violetta could reveal truths about the compounding effects of race, gender, and class in the lives of Black

women.[32] Further, although her redemption comes at the cost of her life, Violetta's story ultimately confirms her integrity and virtue.

Before the performance, Evanti interviewed with a reporter from the *Washington Post.* Why, she was asked, did she wish to participate in the performance? Evanti referred to her two passions: "to aid Negroes to enhanced importance in American artistic life," and, "to 'keep singing until I die.'"[33] As we have seen, these values, which she now articulated with increasing fervor, had remained consistent over the course of her career.

The NNOC's advertising campaign paid off. The first performance, on 28 August 1943, attracted such demand that it was repeated on the next day, drawing a combined audience of over 12,000.[34] Critics responded rapturously to Evanti's performance, with a correspondent from the *New York Amsterdam News* proclaiming:

> Evanti brought to her performance an unforgettable Violetta. She completely dominated the stage by the assured authenticity of her acting and the controlled artistry of her voice. Evanti was a diva whose work burst through the restraining bonds of race and achieved a distinction not surpassed in any department by other and more famous interpreters. Poised, beautiful, gowned in elaborate costumes of her own design, her interpretation of the role was brilliantly sympathetic and completely satisfying.[35]

Charles Theodore Stone of the *Chicago Bee* was similarly enthralled:

> With a voice of great lustre, flexibility and exquisite beauty, she sang the gay infectious aria "Au false L'Lui" [sic] and tossed off its "Sempre Libra" [sic] with vivacity and original gestures which gave it added meaning. Not in all of our opera going experience, have we been so completely impressed with Violetta Valery's elegance and queenly

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[32] Rachel A. Feinstein, *When Rape Was Legal: The Untold History of Sexual Violence During Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[33] "Negro Singers Will Present Opera Here," *Washington Post,* 8 August 1943.

[34] Associated Negro Press, "'Traviata' Hit in Capital," *New York Amsterdam News*, 11 September 1943.

[35] Ibid.

grace, as was revealed by Mme. Evanti's presentation.[36]

Not surprisingly, Glenn Dillard Gunn of the *Washington Times-Herald* enthused over "tone quality, volume, precision and clarity of diction, both verbal and musical, last night's performance" which "was the best it has been my good fortune to hear in any previous performance of 'La Traviata.'" Having previously admired Evanti, he again made special mention of her. "She is a coloratura whose vocal gifts and attainments include all the resources of the lyric soprano," he wrote, adding, "her interpretation was, in consequence, both brilliant and sympathetic.[37]

The NNOC's *Traviata* garnered more attention than the production of *Aida.* A correspondent from the *Chicago Defender* reviewed both the opera and its reception writing:

> So impressed were Washington's seasoned critics with the rendition of this difficult opera by an all-Negro cast that the daily papers for the first time shelved their racial bias and gave an enthusiastic, inspiring account of the presentation of the Verdi Score.[38]

In other words, even in a city with segregated restrooms, critics managed to judge the performance on musical merit. Thus they lent credence to Dawson's vision that the NNOC would contribute to a future where in racial bias was not just shelved only for the single night of an opera production, but thrown out entirely.

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[36] Theodore Charles Stone, "'La Traviata''Acclaimed by 2,500; Evanti Heads the Array of Artists," *Chicago Bee,* 29 August 1943.

[37] *Washington Times-Herald*, 29 August 1943, quoted in "Negro Singers Score Hit in Verdi's 'La Traviata,'" *Chicago Defender*, 9 October, 1943.

[38] Ibid.

“Coming Up the Wrong Way”: Evanti and the NNOC in Chicago, Pittsburgh, and New York

After this grand success, the NNOC decided to repeat the performance in Chicago’s Civic Opera House the following year. On 10 October 1943, Evanti and Lipscomb performed their roles, although Dawson drew the rest of the cast and the chorus members from the Chicago area. In contrast to the raves in Washington, reviews were mixed. Claudia Cassidy, a white music critic for the *Chicago Tribune*, showed her displeasure. Unlike her counterparts in the nation’s capital, she took issue with the production’s racial dimension:

> The National Negro Opera Company could be one of the most interesting music projects now sprouting, but instead it is coming up the wrong way. Instead of breaking its own ground in search of something racial and irresistibly vital, it is content to copy the white man’s opera … Last season’s productions of “Aida” were reasonably successful in spite of this, because of the barbaric splendor of the opera and the exuberance of the voices chosen to sing it, but last night’s “La Traviata” lapsed into a dull evening at the Civic Opera House.[39]

In other words, Cassidy, bound by an essentialist framework, assumes that Black opera must be “barbaric” and Black singers “exuberant.” To be sure, Cassidy may see herself as encouraging African Americans to embrace their traditions. But clearly, she had her own ideas about what it meant to be a Black artist, along with the *right* way to “come up”: leaving “white man’s opera” for white people alone.

Whatever Cassidy actually meant, an anonymous article printed in the *Chicago Defender* reacted angrily:

> It was with a sense of injured feeling that we read Miss Claudia Cassidy’s review…The fact that the cast in this instance is Negro has no direct bearing on the subject [of the opera’s quality]. If works of art are to be delimited along racial lines, then, we should begin by questioning the wisdom of the great American producers who brought America

[39] “Director Slows All Negro Cast in ‘La Traviata,’”*Chicago Tribune,* 27 October 1943.

> into contact with Italian, French and German operas that have been performed on our stage, if you please, by American singers.[40]

Thus Cassidy was guilty not only of prejudicial artistic judgment but of willfully misrepresenting the history of opera performance in the United States. The anonymous author objects to the idea that white Americans are neutral, unraced people pointing out that white American singers come to Italian, French, and German operatic roles from outside of those cultures. Effectively, the *Chicago Defender* accused Cassidy of bigotry:

> But when she speaks of a Negro opera company "coming up the wrong way" simply because it is producing "white man's opera," it is obvious that so an irrational admonition could only be the prompting of blind prejudice.

With this rebuttal, the writer points out that American opera has always relied on the musical culture from other people and places. Pointedly, the question of resources is never raised: if the overwhelmingly white world of classical music has failed to produce a bonafide American opera, how can this burden possibly be placed on Black Americans, who confront many more challenges than their white colleagues? The anonymous author writes:

> If white America with unlimited opportunities, with power and money to do what she wants, isn't able as yet to produce a first rate native grand opera based upon indigenous themes, why impose such a requirement on oppressed, exploited and segregated black America?
>
> …The National Negro Opera company is not "coming up the wrong way." It is coming up the right way – that is through legitimate and creditable performances of accepted standard operas.[41]

The fact that these difficulties did not occur to Cassidy points out the myopic vision afflicting much of the classical music establishment.

[40] "A Spurious Criticism," *Chicago Defender,* 6 November 1943.
[41] Ibid.

The NNOC presented *Traviata* again in Pittsburgh at the Syria Mosque, where Dawson had previously staged *Aida,* on 25 January 1944. Critics again lavished praise on Evanti's performance; they also complimented the large chorus.[42] However, even the more generous reviewers conceded that Evanti's co-stars needed more training. Lissfelt, who had praised *Aida* so effusively, reprimanded Evanti's fellow performers:

> The Pittsburgher, Joseph Lipscomb, in the leading tenor part, if he listens to sane advice, will study further and not again assay such a difficult part until his voice finds some groove in which it might go steadily along for more than a measure at a time. William Robinson's "Germont, the Elder," was a doleful portrait and musically never rose from a monotone.[43]

Not only were performance standards generally low — with the exception of Evanti — but the sets were described as "incredibly shabby" and the costumes, aside from Evanti's, "inexcusably bad," all due to a lack of funds.[44] Still, the hall was packed with around 5,000 guests and more were turned away at the door.

The NNOC revived the production on 29 March 1944 in New York City's Madison Square Garden. This cavernous venue, which could seat over 18,000, was a strange choice for an opera company. The singers required amplification, substantially altering the sounds of their voices. One benefit, however, of the location was that a large crowd could — and did — attend; estimates in the press for audience numbers ranged from 8,000-14,000. Due to his substandard

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[42] Donald Steinfirst, "Negro Opera Company is Acclaimed," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette,* 26 January 1944; Ralph Lewando, "La Traviata is Well Sung by Negro Opera Company," *Pittsburgh Press,* 26 January 1944; J. Fred Lissfelt, "Verdi Opera Sung by Negro Cast," *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph,* 26 January 1944; Gertrude Von Schalk, "'La Traviata' With Evanti Wins Acclaim In Pittsburgh," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 5 February 1944; Ebeneezer Ray, "Lillian Evanti Triumphs In 'La Traviata,'" New *York Age,* 5 February 1944; Karle Ken, "'Traviata' Best Performance," *Chicago Bee,* 6 February 1944.

[43] Lissfelt, "Verdi Opera Sung by Negro Cast."

[44] Steinfirst, "Negro Opera Company Is Acclaimed"; Lissfelt, "Verdi Opera Sung by Negro Cast."

performance in Pittsburgh, William Robinson was replaced by William Franklin, who, by all accounts, stole the show.[45] Indeed, Evanti evidently had difficulty adapting to the auditorium. Her abilities as an actress shone through, but she did not sing as impressively as on prior occasions.[46]

As in Chicago, several critics took issue with the choice of repertoire. Criticism came from a surprising quarter, an article by Blair William and Fredi Washington in the New York City-based Black newspaper *The People's Voice.*[47] Little is known of William; Washington, however, was a civil rights advocate and one of the first people of color to gain widespread recognition as an actress. (Tellingly, she became famous after appearing as Peola in *Imitation of Life,* the 1934 film in which her character passes as white.) Washington and William wished the NNOC would "choose an opera more adaptable to negroes," although they leave open the question of what opera would be more suitable.[48] Also weighing in was critic and composer Virgil Thomson for the *New York Herald Tribune,* who could be counted on for strong opinions. In 1934, his *Four Saints in Three Acts,* had premiered in Hartford with an all-Black cast playing sixteenth-century Spanish saints.[49] The opera's lyrics were full of phrases without easily understood meaning; neither did the libretto tell a story. The score is a mosaic of Baptist hymns,

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[45] Virgil Thomson, "Music," *New York Herald Tribune,* 30 March 1944; John Chapman, "All Negro 'Traviata' At Garden"; Carl Dixon, "Negro Opera Company Scores in New York," *New Journal,* 8 April 1944; Chauncey Northern, "William Franklin Steals the Spotlight as Large Crowd Listens to Opera at the Garden," *New York Age,* 8 April 1944; Blair William and Fredi Washington, "Proper Training and Study Needed for Serious Attempt at Opera," *People's Voice,* 8 April 1944;

"Negro Opera Performs; Fears Prove Groundless," *Chicago Bee,* 9 April 1944; Alvin Moses, "New York Night Life," *Chicago Bee,* 16 April 1944.

[46] William and Washington, "Proper Training and Study Needed."

[47] Ibid.

[48] Ibid; "Negro Opera Performs; Fears Prove Groundless."

[49] Lisa Barg, "Black Voices/White Sounds: Race and Representation in Virgil Thompson's *Four Saints in Three Acts,*" *American Music* 18, no. 2 (2000): 121-161.

Neo-Baroque arias, nursery rhymes, and Anglican chant, all sung in front of a hypermodernist set created out of cellophane. Thomson called upon a vocabulary of race-based connotations which positioned Black performers as child-like, devout, and possessing a unique Black sound. Thus he reduced Blackness to a symbolic object subject to manipulation in his Dada-esque tableau.[50]

It was not the only time Thomson suggested that Black music and culture on their own were not fully formed. When writing about Afro-Brazilian music in 1940 — at the height of the Good Neighbor Period — he opined, "Negroes seem always… to have acted as musical soil and fertilizer. They have never yet been either the seed or the final flower of anything."[51] Thomson nonetheless felt qualified to give a direct suggestion to the NNOC:

> It has never seemed to me that Negroes had much to gain from attempting to adopt the theater of Romanticism. They are not a Romantic people, and they do not understand bourgeoise violence. The Baroque in tragedy, in comedy and in religion is their home town. They understand its afflatus and its pageantry, its conventions, its excesses and all its humane elegance. The operas of Handel are made for them. They could make real spectacle out of these, and they could sing their grandiloquent airs and choruses with the most touching dignity… Nineteenth-century Italian opera … is as unsuitable to him and as difficult for him to do convincingly as the great Baroque repertory has become for contemporary white people.[52]

Thomson thus advances another flavor of racism, reflecting a pseudo-evolutionary ideology of race where darker-skinned peoples are developmentally behind whites and are imagined to have more in common with the European peoples of several centuries ago than their contemporary neighbors. His characterization of the music of the Romantic and Baroque eras is both bizarre and overly general, as is his notion that Black people are uniquely suited to Baroque or Neo-

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[50] Ibid; Watson, *Prepare For Saints.*

[51] Virgil Thomson, "Music: Heavy Hands Across Caribbean," *New York Herald Tribune*, 17 October 1940, quoted in Hess, *Representing the Good Neighbor,* 123.

[52] Thomson, "Music," *New York Herald Tribune,* 30 March 1944.

Baroque styles. Commenting on William Franklin's portrayal of Germont, Thomson speculates that although he has "not seen [Franklin's] 'Porgy,' [Thomson] can imagine it as more convincing than his Germont."[53] In reaching first for Gershwin rather than Handel, Thomson reveals his true thinking on the most suitable role for Black singers.

In addition to constantly battling race-based critiques of their performances, the NNOC persistently faced economic problems. The performances never made a profit, and Dawson was always fundraising to cover costs. From the very beginning, Dawson and Evanti argued over Evanti's compensation. At the Watergate concert in 1943, when Evanti saw the crowds that had gathered, she demanded a larger salary and refused to leave her dressing room until she had received an additional $200.[54] Nonetheless, the two women maintained a warm relationship — for a while. Evanti assembled a scrapbook of newspapers clippings about the NNOC for Dawson to commemorate her accomplishments signing it "Best wishes to Mary Cardwell Dawson, General Manager of National Negro Opera Co. In memory of the First Performance August 28 - 1943. From Lillian Evanti."[55]

As it turned out, Evanti's concerns about salary were entirely justified. For the Madison Square Garden performances the following year, Dawson wrote a bad check and Evanti had to retain a lawyer to recover her wages. The conflict remained between them, although the press barely breathed a word of the quarrel. Nor did Evanti mention the incident in her memoirs, undoubtedly because of the goal she and Dawson shared: to advance the role of African Americans in the arts. However, these financial disputes soured their relationship, and Evanti never appeared with the NNOC again.

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[53] Ibid.
[54] "Ladies of the Opera Can't Agree," *Washington Afro-American,* 8 July 1944.
[55] Scrapbook, box 65, folder 15, NNOC collection Library of Congress.

This was not the only time Dawson failed to pay her artists the agreed-upon amount. Newspaper accounts from the summer and fall of 1944 detail Dawson's arguments with a labor union, The American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA). Dawson accused the union of making unreasonable demands, such as requiring special publicity agents to the tune of $150 per week.[56] These clashes with AGMA would continue, and in the 1950s the union forbade their artists from appearing in her productions.[57]

The NNOC After Evanti

Although it was ostensibly one of the main goals of the NNOC to support works by Black composers, in fact Dawson prioritized the Western European canon. Between 1942 and 1952, the company performed *Aida* and *Traviata* six and four times respectively, adding Gounod's *Faust* in 1952 with fundraising recitals and music festivals held in between. The tactic of producing canonical works that the dominant culture assumed to be universal helped ensure that the NNOC was taken seriously as an opera company with something to say to opera lovers of all races. However, as African American singers began to appear in opera houses in the 1950s, the NNOC turned its attentions to works composed by Black composers.

In 1949, after two performances of *Aida* at the Watergate were cancelled due to rain in 1949, the company was constantly in debt.[58] To alleviate these difficulties, Dawson re-worked R. Nathaniel Dett's oratorio *The Ordering of Moses* (1937) into an opera with costumes and dancers and staged the work at Black churches in New York and Washington in a series of fundraisers.[59]

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[56] *Washington Tribune*, 16 September 1944.
[57] Wells, "Grand Opera as Racial Uplift," 8.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid., 21

A retelling of the Exodus story, the oratorio showcases Black theology and is built around the spiritual "Go Down, Moses," long an emblem of Black solidarity. In 1956, the NNOC mounted Clarence Cameron White's *Ouanga*! (1932), an opera about the life of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, a leader of the Haitian Revolution. Significantly, it features Haitian music, including a simulated Vodou ceremony alongside European features. Dawson was determined to see White's opera performed at the Metropolitan Opera House. However there was an obstacle to this plan, the hall could be rented to artists for recitals but only the Metropolitan Opera Company could present operas on that stage. To get around this Dawson agreed to present *Ouanga!* in a concert format without scenery.[60] To convince the Metropolitan's Reginald Allen that the company would not embarrass the Metropolitan with an amateur performance, Dawson wrote a letter that included copies of previous programs proving the NNOC had previously given professional presentations at regional venues. Eventually, her request was granted.

Reviews for the opera were mixed. Critics praised the singers but not White's score. Several objected to the combination of styles in the opera, arguing that the pacing was too slow.[61] Although Dawson planned a fully-staged rendition Carnegie Hall in September, ticket sales were meager, perhaps due to the poor reviews. In the end, the scheduled four nights were cut to just one.[62] The result was another financial disaster for the company and as a result, the NNOC never fully staged a major opera again. The company folded shortly after Dawson's death in 1962.

Despite these vicissitudes, Evanti's involvement with the NNOC was one of the high

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[60] Ibid., 26.

[61] Howard Taubman, "Opera: 'Ouanga,' Voodoo on Haiti," *New York Times,* 28 May 1956; "'Ouanga' is Heard at Metropolitan," *New York Herald Tribune,* 28 May 1956.

[62] Carl Diton, "Haitian Opera 'Ouanga' Strikes Shortage Good at Carnegie Hall," *Chicago Defender,* 13 October 1956.

points of her career. Yet it is a triumph tinged with sadness. She was fifty-three years old when she sang *Traviata* with the company, which, as noted, failed to compensate her adequately. We can only imagine what direction Evanti's career would have been like if this organization had existed in the 1920s or 1930s. Perhaps she would not have been compelled to travel to Europe. Maybe these valuable performance opportunities would have eased her way into the Met? Notwithstanding, for Evanti the NNOC was a dream realized:

> Twenty years ago the idea of a Negro opera unit would have sounded strange… Organization was not without difficulties. There were prejudices, unfortunately; but Negroes met their challenges. They have now established themselves as important contributors to musical life in America.[63]

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[63] "Negro Singers Will Present Opera Here."

Conclusion

Final Years

Evanti's last major international concert tour was from August 1951-May 1952. She gave speeches and concerts, but for much of the trip, she was a tourist, visiting old haunts and socializing with friends new and old. After a brief stop in Italy, she attended a peace conference in Yugoslavia in early November, giving a concert and speaking about music and world peace.[1] From here, she traveled west, stopping in Vienna to spend Christmas with her ex-husband's former organ instructor, Louis Dité. She also met with artists in Vienna, including tenor Anton Dermota, Lied composer Joseph Marx, the American Director of Cultural Relations in Vienna (unidentified), and two American students studying music on Fulbright scholarships.[2] She then passed through Paris and upon reaching Lisbon she socialized with Diplomatic Consul Clifton Wharton and his wife, Evangeline.[3] Wharton was one of the first Black Americans to work as a diplomat in a European country. From Lisbon, Evanti flew to Monrovia, Liberia as one of the many Black luminaries invited to attend the inauguration of President William Tubman on 7 January 1952. In addition to attending the ceremony, Evanti gave two performances.[4]

Returning to Europe, Evanti met with American diplomats in Spain, once again taking up the role of cultural ambassador in music. She sang concerts at American cultural organizations,

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[1] Evanti, "Negro in Grand Opera," 121; "Musika i mire se uvjetuju," *Viesnik,* 27 October 1951, scrapbook, E-T collection; "Intellectuals Talk of Peace," *Birmingham Post,* 5 November 1951.

[2] Lillian Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Evans-Tibbs, 5 November 1951, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection; Lillian Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Tibbs, 20 December 1951, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection.

[3] Lillian Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Evans-Tibbs, 25 January 1952, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection.

[4] Lillian Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Evans-Tibbs, 20 December 1951, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection; Lillian Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Evans-Tibbs, 8 January 1952, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection.

including at the Instituto Internacional in Madrid, La Casa Americana in Valencia, and at an unnamed venue in Seville. She also gave an interview and performed spirituals for Voice of America, the radio station run by the United States government and an important tool of cultural diplomacy.[5] In April, Evanti traveled to Northern Europe for the final months of this tour, giving concerts and radio performances in Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Norway.[6] Some weeks later, she returned home

Back in the United States, Evanti's first grandchild, Thurlow Evans-Tibbs Jr. was born in August 1952. Two years earlier, in 1950, her son Thurlow had married a librarian, Elizabeth Moore.[7] Although the wedding took place in Minnesota, the couple lived in Washington and judging from letters sent between them, Evanti relied on Elizabeth for assistance in running her household when she was traveling. Her son was her closest living relative as her ex-husband had died in 1944, her mother in 1945, and her brother in 1949. These letters also hint at trouble between Evanti and her son: Evanti directed queries about him to her daughter-in-law rather than directly to her son. The couple had a second child, Diane Elizabeth Evans-Tibbs in 1956. Sometime before 1958, the young family moved in with Evanti at 1910 Vermont Avenue. Tragedy struck in 1959 when Elizabeth Moore Evans-Tibbs died of cancer at the age of only

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[5] Lillian Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Evans-Tibbs, 25 January 1952, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection; Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Evans-Tibbs, 22 February 1952, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection; Lillian Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Evans-Tibbs, 25 February 1952, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection.

[6] Lillian Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Evans-Tibbs, 5 April 1952, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection; Lillian Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Evans-Tibbs, 25 April 1952, box 32, folder 2, E-T collection; Concert Program, University of Oslo, 30 April 1952, box 32, folder "Foreign programs," E-T collection; Evanti to Elizabeth and Thurlow Evans-Tibbs, 2 May 1952 box 32, folder 2, E-T collection; "Evanti Ends European Tour," *New Journal,* 17 May 1952.

[7] "Brilliant Reception Honors Mme. Evanti's Son and Pretty Bride," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 4 November 1950; "Mrs. Thurlow E. Tibbs, 37, Librarian, Wife of Attorney," *Evening Star,* 3 March 1959.

thirty-seven.[8] Evanti's son likely expected his mother to step up and help him with the house and children, but outside of entertaining, Evanti had little patience for the tasks traditionally delegated to women. The difficulties of this situation drove mother and son apart, and Evanti moved out of the house within the year.

Evanti continued to sing locally around the Washington area and occasionally traveled out of state. But by the late 1950s, she retired from concertizing.[9] To support herself, she taught voice lessons out of her home.[10] She also gave lectures for Black college students, emphasizing what in that era was called "charm," that is, the very qualities she had so carefully cultivated in her youth — and successfully marshaled — throughout her life.[11] She began assembling notes for her autobiography and a book about African American opera singers.

All the while, she continued to follow the civil rights struggle. In September 1958, she wrote a letter to the *Evening Star* in which she gave the governors of Virginia and Arkansas a piece of her mind: in defiance of the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, these elected officials closed many public schools to avoid integration.[12] Her attack was two-pronged; she categorized "chauvinism [as] an unreasoning attachment to a fallen cause" but saved the bulk of her criticism for those who would subvert the Supreme Court telling "those who are guilty of anarchy" to "hang their heads in shame."[13] In 1963, civil rights and union

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[8] "Mrs. Thurlow E. Tibbs, 37, Librarian, Wife of Attorney," *Evening Star,* 3 March 1959.
[9] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 123.
[10] Washington, D.C. government to Lillian Evanti, 22 April 1957, box 32, folder 24, E-T collection.
[11] "Singer to Lecture," *Evening Star,* 13 March 1957; "Lillian Evanti Will Speak at Md. State," *Daily Times* (Salisbury, MD), 10 January 1958; "At Greensboro: Art, Music, History Combined for College 'Festival of Living,'" *Tampa Bay Times,* 20 April 1959.
[12] John A. Kirk, *Beyond Little Rock: The Origins and Legacies of the Central High Crisis* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2007).
[13] Lillian Evanti, "Letters to the Editor: Integration," *Evening Star,* 19 September 1958.

leaders worked together to plan a mass march on Washington. Here 250,000 people heard Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. give his moving "I Have a Dream" speech. Evanti attended that momentous event with her friend, the Black artist and educator Alma Thomas.[14]

By 1965 Evanti's health and finances were in decline. She developed diabetes and survived a disabling stroke. Her relationship with her son was strained, although she was able to see her grandchildren, who may have been living with their great-aunt.[15] Her own living situation was unstable and she moved at least four times in the last two years of her life as she had left her beloved family homed to conflict with her son. Lillian Evanti died in a nursing home in Washington D.C. on 6 December 1967.[16]

Evanti's Legacy

Evanti's legacy is difficult to define clearly. Prone to grandiose statements and fits of drama, she strove toward her dreams in utter contradiction to the realities of life. She was hot-headed and could be arrogant and self-promoting. But she was also forgiving, warm, and dogged in pursuing what she felt was right. The scope of her ambitions, so ahead of her time, might make her appear naive or unrealistic. Yet she continually worked to build the world that she imagined, and which she believed was within the grasp of humankind. Indeed, it was the magnitude of her dreams and the refusal to bow to reality that enabled her success as an artist.

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[14] Untitled writings, box 2, folder 16, Alma Thomas papers, circa 1894-2001, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

[15] The letter below states that the children were living with Alma who I believe was Thurlow Sr.'s paternal aunt. There is no indication if this was a short or long-term child-care arrangement. Cora and Louis Moore to Lillian Evanti, 8 June 1965, box 32, folder "biographical materials," E-T collection.

[16] Carl Sims, "Lillian E. Tibbs Dead; First Negro Opera Diva," *Washington Post,* 8 December 1967; "Last Rites Held for Mme. Evanti," *Baltimore Afro-American,* 16 December 1967; "Mme. Evanti, First Race Diva Dies," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 23 December 1967.

Although still largely unknown to mainstream opera scholarship, Evanti was never forgotten in the Black community, particularly in Washington D.C. In 1984, her grandson Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr., began raising money to make a film about her. Many in the Black community rallied to this cause and held a fundraiser to produce a short documentary that aired three years later on WETA-TV, a Washington D.C. public broadcasting station, in 1987.[17] Thus, even two decades after her death Evanti was a source of inspiration.

With this in mind, how do we account for the near total lack of recognition by the scholarly community? The voice of the historian is similar to the singer's voice, with the ability to reveal, transmit, and create cultural and societal value. Musicologists must take greater care in cultivating the cultural archive. Evanti's compelling story is now being told but we can only wonder how many other untold stories of Black classical musicians remain to be uncovered. We would do well to open our ears to their long and distinguished legacy.

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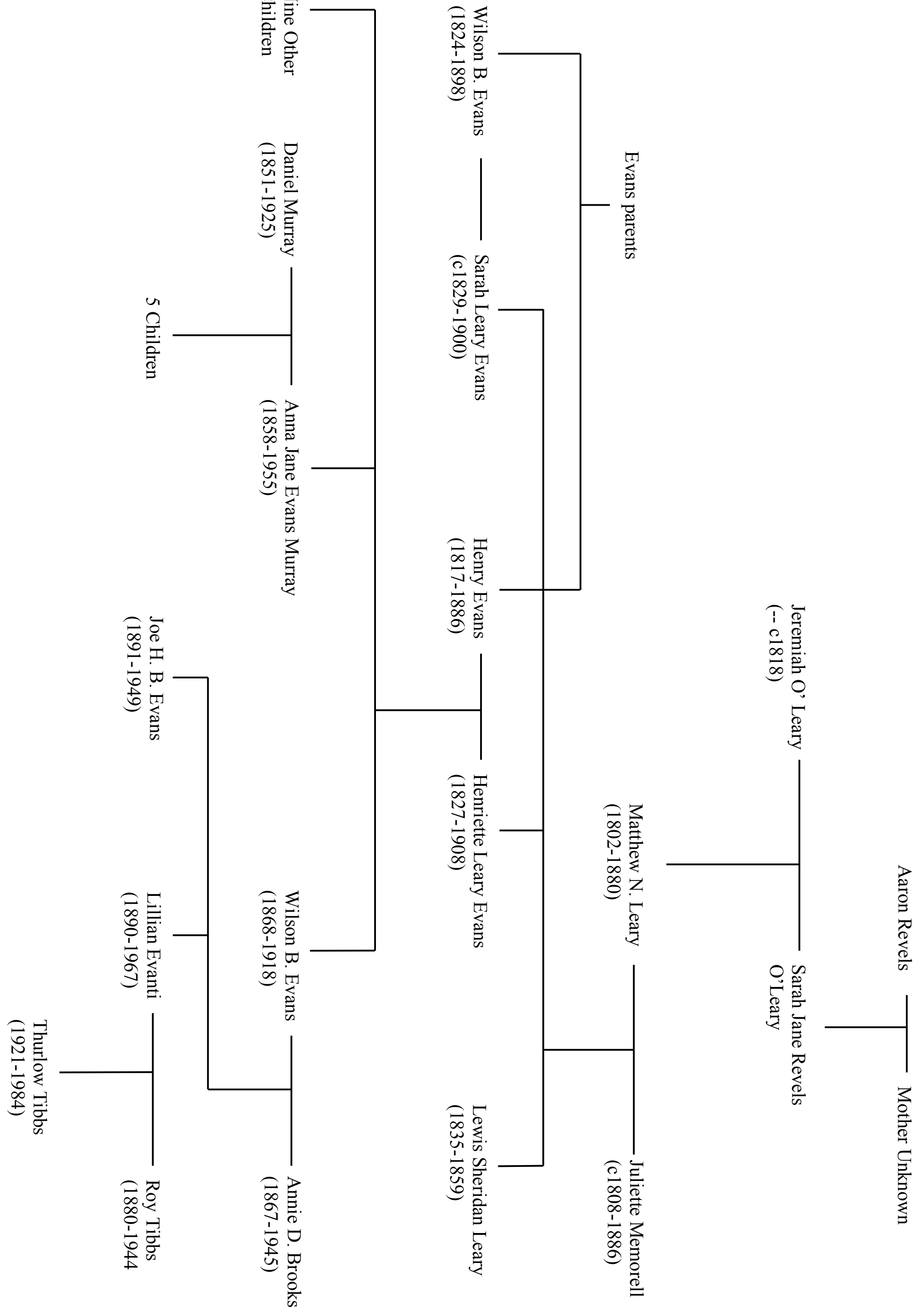
[17] Event Program "Madame Evanti Legacy," 1984, Lois Mailou Jones Collection, Howard University Archives; *Madame Evanti* documentary, Imani Productions for WETA-TV, 1987.

Appendix 1. Lillian Evanti's Family Tree



Appendix 2. Selected Performances by Evanti in the United States, With Press Sources

December 1922
4 December: First Congregational Church/Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia[1]
8 December: Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee[2]
11 December: Woodland Park Auditorium, Lexington, Kentucky[3]
15 December: Lincoln High School, Kansas City, Missouri[4]
December, Exact Date Unknown: Louisville, Kentucky[5]
Summer 1923

Exact Dates Unknown[6]:
Elizabeth City, North Carolina
Fayetteville, North Carolina
Durham National Training School, Durham, North Carolina
A&T College, Greensboro, North Carolina
Slater College, Winston-Salem, North Carolina
Livingston College, Salisbury, North Carolina
Johnson C. Smith University, Charlotte, North Carolina
Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina
26 July: Dover State College, Dover, Delaware[7]

Fall 1925
12 October: Shaw University, Raleigh, North Carolina[8]
16 October: Armory Auditorium/Booker T. Washington High School, Atlanta, Georgia[9]
23 October: International House, New York City, New York[10]
27 October: Lincoln Theater, Washington D.C.[11]

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[1] William Frank Williams, "News and Views from the Gate City," *Savannah Tribune,* 7 December 1922.
[2] "Piano Recital Given by Fisk Graduate," *Nashville Tennessean,* 9 December 1922.
[3] "Roy Wilfred Tibbs at Auditorium Dec. 11," *Lexington Herald-Leader*, 26 November 1922.
[4] Nora Douglas Holt, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender*, 23 December 1922.
[5] J. Le C. Chestnut, "Under the Capitol Dome," *Chicago Defender,* 16 December 1922.
[6] Maude Roberts George, "Music Notes," *Chicago Defender,* 15 September 1923.
[7] "Concert at Colored College This Evening," *Morning News* (Wilmington, Delaware), 26 July 1923.
[8] "Recital at Shaw is Well Received," *News and Observer* (Raleigh, North Carolina), 14 November 1925.
[9] "Urban League Weekly Bulletin," *Atlanta Constitution,* 11 October 1925; "Famous Negro Singer Sings Here Tonight," *Atlanta Constitution,* 16 October 1925.
[10] "Mme. Evanti to Sing Here Friday," *New York Amsterdam News,* 21 October 1925; "Music," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 31 October 1925; Lucien H. White "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 31 October 1925.
[11] Walter J. Singleton, "Mme. Evanti Gives Farewell Recital on October 27th," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 24 October 1925; "Lillian Evanti Sings Here Tuesday Night," *Evening Star,* 25 October 1925; "Mme. Lillian Evanti Singer, to Be Honored," *Washington Post,* 25 October 1925; Helen

Exact Dates Unknown: concerts in Philadelphia and Baltimore[12]

Fall 1926

5 October: Raleigh City Auditorium, sponsored by St. Ambrose Church, Raleigh, North Carolina[13]

October, Date Unknown: Greensboro, North Carolina[14]

9 October: Jacksonville, Florida[15]

11 October: Alabama State Normal School, Montgomery, Alabama[16]

23 October: Cheney, Pennsylvania[17]

27 October: Omaha, Nebraska[18]

29 October: Denver, Colorado[19]

1 November: Kansas City, Missouri[20]

2 November: Poro College, St. Louis, Missouri[21]

3 November: Cincinnati, Ohio[22]

5 November: West Virginia Collegiate Institute Charleston, West Virginia[23]

12 November: McCollester Hall, Detroit, Michigan[24]

15 November: Philadelphia, Pennsylvania[25]

18 November: Eighth Street Theater, sponsored by the George L. Giles post No. 87 of the American Legion Chicago, Illinois[26]

21 November: Belasco Theater, Washington D.C.[27]

Fetter, "Lillian Evanti's Recital," *Evening Star,* 28 October 1925; Cleveland G. Allen, "Mme. Lillian Evanti's Recital," *New York Amsterdam News,* 28 October 1925; "Mrs. Roy Tibbs Sails," *Cleveland Gazette,* 7 November 1925.

[12] "Lillian Evanti Sings Here Tuesday Night," *Evening Star,* 25 October 1925.

[13] "Lillian Evanti in Concert Thursday," *News and Observer,* 3 October 1926.

[14] "Lydia Mason on Concert Tour with Mme. Evanti," *New York Age,* 16 October 1926; *New York Age,* 19 October 1926.

[15] Ibid.

[16] "Lillian Evanti Appears on Normal Concert Menu," *Montgomery Advertiser,* 11 October 1926.

[17] "Will Return to France After Tour of States," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 6 November 1926.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] "Music and Reviews," *Kansas City Times,* 2 November 1926.

[21] R.P. Watts, "St. Louis, Mo.," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 13 November 1926.

[22] "Will Return to France After Tour of States," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 6 November 1926.

[23] Ibid; "Mme. Evanti in W. VA," *New York Age*, 13 November 1926.

[24] "Lillian Evanti Coming Nov. 12," *Detroit Free Press,* 31 October 1926.

[25] "Will Return to France After Tour of States.".

[26] Sylvester Russell, "Madam Evanti Captures Windy City Audience," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 27 November 1926; Laura Rowles-Roberts, "Evanti Wins Chicago," *Philadelphia Tribune,* 27 November 1926.

[27] "Lillian Evanti Next Week," *Evening Star,* 14 November 1926; "Stage and Screen Presentations," *Washington Post,* 21 November 1926; Helen Fetter, "Lillian Evanti's Recital," *Evening Star,* 22 November 1926.

28 November: Copley Theater, Boston, Massachusetts[28]

Fall 1927

18 October: Big Bethel AME Church, Benefit for Morris Brown University, Atlanta, Georgia[29]

21 October: Tuskegee Institute, Tuskegee, Alabama[30]

27 October: Harvard University, Paine Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts[31]

3 November: Cheyney Normal School, Cheyney, Pennsylvania[32]

4 November: Attucks Theater, Norfolk, Virginia[33]

11 November: Grand Avenue Temple, Stellar Opera Company, Grand Avenue Temple, Kansas City, Missouri CANCELED[34]

14 November: High School Auditorium, Wichita, Kansas[35]

18 November: Chicago, Orchestra Hall, Negro in Art Week, Chicago, Illinois[36]

25 November: St. Louis, Poro College, St. Louis, Missouri[37]

1 December: Schenley High School, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania[38]

3 December: New York City, Bijou Theater, New York City, New York[39]

5 January: High School Auditorium, Montclair, New Jersey[40]

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[28] "Lillian Evanti Heard in Benefit Recital," *Boston Daily Globe,* 29 November 1926;

[29] "Urban League Weekly Bulletin," *Atlanta Constitution,* 18 October 1927.

[30] "Mme. Evanti in Recital at Tuskegee Institute," *New York Age,* 22 Oct 1927; "Mme. Evanti at Tuskegee," *Chicago Defender,* 22 October 1927.

[31] "Music Notes and Comment," *Boston Daily Globe,* 23 October 1927.

[32] F.R.P., "Cheyney Day Draws Crowd to Chester County School," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 5 November 1927.

[33] "To Appear in Recital Here," *New Journal and Guide,* 29 October 1927; A.D. Dinkins, "Packed House Thrilled by Mme. Lillian Evanti," *New Journal and Guide,*12 November 1927.

[34] "Hear Lillian Evanti," *Plain Dealer,* 11 November 1927; "Music And Musicians," *Kansas City Star,* 28 August 1927; "Negro Coloratura Returns," *Kansas City Star,* 30 October 1927; "Grand Avenue Temple Concert Canceled," *Kansas City Times,* 11 November 1927.

[35] "Lillian Evanti in Concert," *Wichita Eagle* 13 November 1927; "Noted Soprano Sings Tonight," *Wichita Eagle* 14 November 1927.

[36] Edward Moore, "New Harpist Makes His Debut with Symphony," *Chicago Tribune,* 19 November 1927; "Negro Art Week in Chicago, Nov. 16-23, *Pittsburgh Courier,* November 19 1927; Maude Roberts George, "Music, *Chicago Defender,* 29 October 1927; Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 3 December 1927.

[37] "Recital by Lillian Evanti," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch,* 26 November 1927.

[38] "Evanti!," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 19 November 1927.

[39] "Mme. Lillian Evanti in New York Recital," *New York Age,* 26 November 1927; Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 3 December 1927; "Programs of the Week," *New York Herald,* 4 December 1927; "Singer Charms in Negro Spirituals," *New York Times,* 5 December 1927; "Music," *New York Amsterdam News,* 7 December 1927; Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 10 December 1927.

[40] "Concert," *Montclair Times* (Montclair, New Jersey), 24 December 1927.

Exact Dates Unknown: Denver, Colorado; Dayton, Ohio; Gary, Indiana; Columbus, Ohio; Baltimore, Maryland; and Reading, Pennsylvania[41]

Winter/Spring 1932
7 January: Orchestra Hall, Detroit, Michigan [42]
11 January: Grand Avenue Temple, Kansas City, Missouri[43]
20 March: Belasco Theater, Washington D.C.[44]
3 April: Town Hall, New York City, New York[45]

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[41] F.R.P "Cheyney Day Draws Crowd to Chester County School," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 5 November 1927; "Musical Activities Nearby," *Pittsburgh Press,* 24 December 1927.
[42] "Symphony in Novelty," *Detroit Free Press,* 3 January 1932; Herman Wise, "Music," *Detroit Free Press,* 11 January 1932.
[43] "Concert by Lillian Evanti," *Kansas City Star,* 3 January 1932; *Kansas City Star,* 10 January 1932; Minna Kennedy Powell, "Music," *Kansas City Times,* 12 January 1932.
[44] "Colored Soprano to be Welcomed," *Evening Star,* 4 March 1932; "Gala Welcome Set for Capital Singer," *Washington Post,* 6 March 1932; "Mme. Evanti to Appear Here at the Belasco," *Washington Tribune,* 11 March 1932; "Honor Lillian Evanti Tibbs," *Atlanta World,* 15 March 1932; "Home-Coming of Madame Evanti," *Washington Tribune,* 18 March 1932; "Evanti Concert Today," *Evening Star,* 20 March 1932; E. de S. Melcher, "Music and Musicians," *Evening Star,* 21 March 1932; Edward H. Lawson, "Mme. Evanti Wins Acclaim of Capital," *Washington Post,* 21 March 1932; "Mme. Evanti Wins Acclaim Here in Notable Recital, *Washington Tribune,* 25 March 1932.
[45] "Calendar of Concerts," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle,* April 3, 1932; F.D.P. "Lillian Evanti Gives Recital," *New York Herald Tribune,* 4 April 1932; Harold A. Strickland, "Music," *Brooklyn Times Union,* 4 April 1932; Lucien H. White, "In the Realm of Music," *New York Age,* 9 April 1932; W.B.C. "Lillian Evanti Sings," *New York Times,* 4 April 1932; Carl Diton, "Music News," *New York Amsterdam News,* 6 April 1932; Associated Negro Press, "Large Town Hall Filled to Witness Evanti Debut, *California Eagle,* 22 April 1932; W. E. B. Du Bois to Lillian Evanti, 22 March 1932, W. E. B. Du Bois Papers.

Appendix 3. Selected Concerts by Evanti in Europe

June 1924-August 1925

9 March 1925: Lakmé in *Lakmé,* Nice Municipal Casino Theater, Nice, France[46]

May 1925: Salon of Madeline Salmon Tan-Harbe, Paris, France[47]

Date Unknown: Radio concerts in Paris, France[48]

November 1925-June 1926

19 December: Monte Carlo Casino Orchestra with violist Charles Foidart, Monte Carlo, Monaco[49]

26 December: Monte Carlo Casino Orchestra with singer Raoul Henry, Monte Carolo, Monaco[50]

Date Unknown: Opera with Nice Municipal Casino Theater, Nice, France[51]

Date Unknown: Violetta in *La Traviata*, Toulon, France[52]

Date and location Unknown: *Manon*[53]

December 1926-July 1927

24 December 1926: Lakmé in *Lakmé,* Le Trianon in Paris, France[54]

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[46] "Casino Municipal," *Menton and Monte Carlo News,* 7 March 1925; *Cote d'Azur* quoted in "Mme. Lillian Tibbs Wins Success in Grand Opera," *Buffalo American,* 22 October 1925; "Mme. Lillian Evanti, Singer, to be Honored," *Washington Post,* 25 October 1925.

[47] "Soirée musicale chez M. Et Mme Joseph Salmon," *Le Figaro,* 16 May 1925; "Les Salons," *Comoedia,*18 May 1925; "Color Prejudice Unknown Abroad Claims Soloist," *Chicago Defender,* 26 September 1925; "Mme. Lillian Evanti, Singer," *Washington Post,* 25 October 1925.

[48] "Invades Grand Opera in The French Capital," *New Journal,* 31 October 1925.

[49] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 70; Photo 19 December 1925, box 25, folder 64, E-T collection;

L'Eclaireur du Dimanche (Nice, France), 13 December 1925; "On The Riviera," *Paris Times,* 11 December 1925; "Amusements," *Menton and Monte Carlo News,* 19 December 1925.

[50] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 70; "Amusements," *Menton and Monte Carlo News,* 19 December 1925; *L'Eclaireur du Dimanche* (Nice, France), 20 December 1925.

[51] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 62.

[52] E.H. Lawson, "Lillian Evanti in Opera," *Washington Post,* 31 March 1929; "Colored Opera Star Here Until November," *Washington Post,* 20 June 1926.

[53] "Colored Opera Star Here Until November," *Washington Post,* 20 June 1926.

[54] *Le Gaulois,* 27 December 1926; "Music Notes," *New York Herald* (Paris edition), 19 January 1927; "Trianon-Lyrique: Mme Lillian Evanti dans 'Lakmé,'" *Comoedia,* 24 January 1927; Irving Schwerke, "Notes of the Music World," *Chicago Tribune* (European Edition), 26 January 1927; "Music Notes," *New York Herald* (Paris edition), 26 January 1927; A. Hemingburg, "Parisian Operagoes Acclaim Mme. Evanti," *Chicago Defender,* 5 February 1927; "Lillian Evanti Sings Grand Opera in Paris," *New York Age,* 5 March 1927; *Pittsburgh Courier,* 12 March 1927.

18 January 1927: Repeat of the above

28 January 1927: Repeat of the above

30 January 1927: American Women's Club, Paris, France[55]

11 February 1927: Radio Performance, Paris, France[56]

12 February 1927: La Salle des Agriculteurs, Paris, France[57]

Date Unknown, 1927 or 1928: Performances in Montpellier, Toulon, Menton, Nîmes, and Monte Carlo[58]

January 1928-December 1929

4 February 1928: Lakmé at the Municipal Opera in Nîmes[59]

9 February 1928: Manon in Montpellier[60]

12 February 1928: Manon in Nîmes[61]

25 March 1929: Rosina in the *Il barbiere di Siviglia* in Pegli near Genoa.[62]

4 July 1929: Violetta in *La Traviata* at Teatro Verdi in Milan[63]

Italy 1928/29, Exact Dates Unknown: Performances in Verona, Turin, Bergamo, and Genoa. In Genoa she played Violetta in *La Traviata.*[64]

Italy, Dates Unknown: Concerts in Florence and at Lake Como; *Lucia di Lammermoor* in Lucca; *La Traviata* in Vignola[65]

Late 1929 or early 1930,[66] Italy, Exact Dates Unknown: Inés in *L'Africaine* in Palermo[67]

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[55] "Music Notes," *New York Herald* (Paris edition), 26 January 1927.

[56] *La Liberté,* 11 February 1927.

[57] Concert program, 12 February 1927, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection; "Les Récitals de la semaine," *Comoedia,* 14 February 1927; Stan Golestan, "Seances Musicales," *Le Figaro,* 18 February 1927; "American Singer Wins Paris Concert Acclaim," *New York Age,* 2 April 1927; "Mme. Evanti Hailed by Paris Audiences," *Chicago Defender,* 2 April 1927; George Cecil, "Parisiana," *South China Morning Post,* 3 June 1927.

[58] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 64.

[59] Letter, Lillian Evanti to Annie Brooks Evans, 5 February 1928, box 32, folder 18, E-T collection; Associated Negro Press, "Mme. Evanti Wins French Audience," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 3 March 1928.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.

[62] *New York Age*, 3 May 1929.

[63] Evanti, "Negro in Grand Opera," 75; *Corriere della Sera,* 5 July 1929.

[64] Evanti, "Negro in Grand Opera," 72.

[65] Evanti, "Negro in Grand Opera," 74.

[66] Reviews for Evanti's performance as Inés are mentioned in a program from April 1930 therefore Evanti must have performed this role before that date. Concert program, 16 April 1930, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection

[67] Evanti, "Negro in Grand Opera," 83; Photo of Evanti in costume by Emilio Sommariva, box 1, F6, E-T collection. There are two copies of this photo in Evanti's archives, one is labeled "'L'Africaine' Palermo, Sicily as Inez" the other is labeled "Gilda, Rigoletto, Milan." It is possible she wore the same costume for both roles.

February 1930-July 1931

16 April 1930: Recital at the Conservatory di Milano with cellist Massimo Amfitheatroff[68]

3-4 May 1930: Violetta in *La Traviata* at the Teatro Comunale in Chiari, Italy[69]

17 May 1930: Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Teatro Cotogni in Castelmassa, Italy[70]

26 May 1930: Violetta in *La Traviata* at the Teatro Lirico in Milan, Italy[71]

1 July 1930: Lucia in *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Dopolavoro Ferroviario di Verona, Italy[72]

26 November: Violetta in *La Traviata* at the Teatro Lirico in Milan, Italy[73]

1930, Italy, Exact Dates Unknown: Opera performances in Turin, Albano Sant'Alessandro, and Reggio Emilio[74]

1931: *Love Triumphant* in Bath, UK[75]

1930-1931, Germany, Exact Dates Unknown: Performances in Baden-Baden, Heidelberg, and Frankfurt am Main.[76]

May 1932 - August 1933

7 June 1932: Wigmore Hall, London, United Kingdom[77]

October 1932: Bechstein-Saal, Berlin, Germany[78]

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[68] Concert program, 16 April 1930, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection; "I concerti della settimana," *Corriere della Sera,* 22 April 1930; Associated Negro Press, "Evanti Wins Plaudits of Italians," *Philadelphia Tribune,* 29 May 1930.

[69] Promotional poster, *La Traviata* at Teatro Comunale in Chiari, Italy, 3- 4 May 1930, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection.

[70] Promotional poster, *Lucia di Lammermoor* at Teatro Cotogni in Castelmassa, Italy, 17 May 1930, Chiari, 3- 4 May 1930, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection.

[71] Promotional poster, *La Traviata* at Teatro Lirico in Milan, Italy, 26 May 1930, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection; *Evening Star,* 29 June 1930; Associated Negro Press, "Acclaimed at Naples," *Pittsburgh Press,* 5 July 1930.

[72] Promotional Poster, *Lucia di Lammermoor,* 1 July 1930, boxed with scrapbooks, E-T collection; *Evening Star,* 27 July 1930.

[73] Promotional poster, *La Traviata* at Teatro Lirico in Milan, IT, 26 November 1930, box 32, folder "foreign programs," E-T collection; "La 'Traviata' al Lirico," *Corriere della Sera,* 27 November 1930.

[74] Associated Negro Press, "Evanti Wins Plaudits of Italians," *Philadelphia Tribune,* 29 May 1930.

[75] *Evening Star,* 7 June 1931; *London Times,* quoted in Evanti, "Negro in Grand Opera," 97.

[76] Evanti, "Negro in Grand Opera," 73.

[77] "Lillian Evanti," *The Observer,* 5 June 1932; "Music This Week," *London Times,* 6 June 1932; "Concerts," *London Times,* 11 June 1932; HJK, "Singers of the Month," *Musical Times,* 1 July 1932; Maude Roberts George, "News of the Music World," *Chicago Defender,* 6 August 1932.

[78] Walter Hirschberg, "Aus Berlin," *Signale für die musikalische Welt*, 26 October 1932; Gregor Ziemer, "Berlin Notes and News," *Chicago Tribune* (European Edition), 24 October 1932.

16 January 1933: Munich, Germany[79]

March/April 1933: Wiener Saal, Salzburg, Austria [80]

1932-1933, Germany, Exact Dates Unknown: Recitals in Berlin, Cologne, Munich, Stuttgart, Nuremberg[81]

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[79] Associated Press, "U.S. Concerts Success," *Evening Star,* 18 January 1933; "Lillian Evanti Wins High Praise in Munich," *Pittsburgh Courier,* 28 January 1933; "Wins Praise from Germans," *Chicago Defender,* 28 January 1933.

[80] Lillian Evanti to Annie Evans, 3 April 1933, box 32, folder 18, E-T collection; "Theater, Kunst und Musik," *Salzburger Volksblatt*, 1 April 1933; D. K-z. "Theater, Kunst und Musik," *Salzburger Volksblatt*, 3 April 1933.

[81] Evanti, "The Negro in Grand Opera," 98

Appendix 4. Evanti's Compositions (arrangements and revisions not included)

1920
"I Wish You Would Always Smile," words by Dow McClain, published by Dow McClain

1941
"Himno-Pan Americano," words by Evanti, published by Edward B. Marks

1942
"Honor a Trujillo," words by L.B. Lamarche, self-published; published 1944 by Handy in *Unsung Americans Sung*
"Victory March," words by Evanti, self-published
"Twenty-Third Psalm," words by Anonymous, published by Handy

1943
"My Little Prayer," words by Mrs. Bruce Evans, published by Handy
"Speak to Him Thou from the Higher Pantheism," words by Alfred Tennyson, published by Handy
"The Mighty Rapture," words by Edwin Markham, published by Handy

1948
"Dedication," words by Georgia Douglas Johnson, published by Handy
"God's Promise," words by Anonymous, published by Handy
"High Flight," words by John Gillespie Magee Jr., published by Handy
"There's a Better Day a-Coming," words by Georgia Douglas Johnson, self-published
"Tomorrow's World," words by Georgia Douglas Johnson, self-published

1950
"Beloved Mother," words by Georgia Douglas Johnson, self-published

1951
"Hail to Fair Washington," words by Georgia Douglas Johnson, self-published

1952
"Slow Me Down Lawd," words by Minna Mathison, published by Handy

1953
"United Nations," words by Evanti, self-published

Unpublished and publication date unknown
"Hail to Agikiwe," words by Evanti
"I'm Yours For Tonight"/"On Furlough Mañana," words by Evanti, self-published

“Naturama,” words by Evanti
“Salute to Ghana,” words by Evanti
“Salute to the Independence of Sierra Leone,” words by Evanti
“Thank You Again and Again,” words by Evanti, published by Handy
“Waltz,” no lyrics (for piano)
“ZOB Burial Hymn,” words by A.T. Anderson

Lost
Two spirituals based on the 91st and 150th psalms

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Evans-Tibbs collection, gift of the estate of Thurlow E. Tibbs, Jr. Anacostia Community Museum Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Lois Mailou Jones Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Lillian Evanti Collection, Center for Black Music Research, Columbia College Chicago, Chicago, Illinois.

Marian Anderson Collection of Printed Music, Kislak Center for Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

Moton Family Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

National Negro Opera Company Collection, 1879-1997, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

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Brooklyn Daily Eagle
Brooklyn Times Union
Boston Globe
Buffalo American
Burlington Free Press
California Eagle
Chicago Bee
Chicago Defender
Chicago Tribune
Cleveland Gazette
Colorado Statesman
Corpus Christi Times
Cote d'Azur
Courier-News
Crisis
Daily Mail

Detroit Free Press
Evening Star
Fayetteville Semi-Weekly Observer
Harlem Liberator
Indianapolis Freeman
Kansas City Times
Kansas City Star
Labor Defender
La Liberté
L'Eclaireur du Dimanche
Le Figaro
Le Gaulois
Lexington Herald-Leader
London Times
Menton and Monte Carlo News
Montclair Times
Montgomery Advertiser
Morning News
Musical Times
Nashville Tennessean
National Republican
New Journal and Guide (also called *New Journal,* or *Journal and Guide*)
News and Observer
News Journal
New York Amsterdam News,
New York Herald
Paris Times
People's Advocate
People's Voice
Pittsburgh Courier
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
Pittsburgh Press
Philadelphia Tribune
Plain Dealer
Salzburger Volksblatt
Savannah Tribune
Signale für die musikalische Welt
Southern Workman
St. Louis Post-Dispatch
The Morning Call
The National Forum
The Negro Music Journal
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