

2019–2020 Annelise Thimme Article Prize Laudatio

Kira Thurman, “Performing Lieder, Hearing Race: Debating Blackness, Whiteness, and German Identity in Interwar Central Europe,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72 (2019): 825-65.

It is our distinct pleasure to award the Annelise Thimme prize to Kira Thurman for her splendid study of classical music, Blackness, and “racial listening” in interwar central Europe. The centerpiece of her analysis is African Americans’ performance of Lieder in German and Austrian metropolises in the 1920s and 1930s. At a time when most people saw the works of Schubert, Schumann, Strauss and Brahms as exemplars of traditional German culture, trained Black American singers—in particular, Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson—dared to perform these songs in concert and in turn challenged notions of whiteness and Germanness. Professor Thurman has culled through a wealth of documents—concert programs, letters, musical scores, memoirs, and diaries—to offer one of the most nuanced examples of “reception history” that we can recall.

How, Thurman asks, did German audiences and reviewers respond to Hayes’s and Anderson’s brilliant performances? The answer is varied. On one level, audiences were overwhelmingly enthusiastic, and Thurman conveys with great finesse and drama how shock and audible grumbling at the sight of a Black person on stage turned within minutes into rapture. On the other hand, positive assessments that these singers somehow “sounded German” conveyed the deep and often unconscious belief that classical music was fundamentally white. If Hayes and Anderson could challenge the predominant notion of Black musical forms, rooted in jazz and African American spirituals, as primal and uncultivated, the enthusiasm for these “exceptional” performances reveal the persistence of these very stereotypes.

Thurman deftly studies people’s surprise at the disjunction between the German sounds on stage and the Black bodies that produced them. One contemporary reviewer suggested that concertgoers close their eyes while listening in order to bypass the sensory misalignment “in which the sound of a singer’s voice fails to match his or her visual appearance” (852). And if some marveled at the performances of these, in Thurman’s words, “musical shape shifters,” others were unimpressed. To some critics, Hayes’s and Anderson’s renditions of Lieder were “guttural” and rough, in keeping with a seeming primeval essence that could not be overcome even with the best German music teachers and diction lessons. With these contradictory responses, Thurman argues powerfully that through these performances, white audiences in Berlin and Vienna engaged in a transatlantic wrestling with Blackness and identity in the 1920s and 1930s. But they also took part in a specific discourse about whether people of African ancestry could ever embody Germanness. Indeed, although Germans at the time claimed “their” classical musical was universal, their understanding of this musical tradition was underpinned by anti-Black racism, as Thurman shows.

Among the many things that make this article so powerful is Thurman's own background as a performer with a knowledge of music theory and history. She can analyze not just media reception, but also the diction, timbre, control, and technique presented on stage, and, as such, the way that each element of vocal performance can and was coded in racial terms. Indeed the online article has links to Hayes's and Anderson's recordings, thus allowing us to hear what the German and Austrian audiences heard. And, as we learn, listening is never neutral. Drawing on theories of the "listening ear" and the "sonic color line," we discover how audiences came (and still come) to music with preconceptions about voices as racialized—as "white" or "dark" and "brown," as some suggested in response to the interwar performances.

Theoretically informed and richly analyzed, the article also stands out for its lucid and elegant prose and for Thurman's incisive analysis of her individual sources. Thurman ultimately challenges readers to think about issues that face us today. Who is an American? Who is a German? And how can music and popular culture both break down and reinforce racial stereotypes at time when xenophobia is on the rise? Given the brilliant contribution this article makes to the scholarship on race, visibility, audibility, citizenship, and the ambiguity of belonging in Central Europe, the selection committee is proud to award this year's Annelise Thimme prize to Kira Thurman.

The committee also awarded honorable mention to

Yanara Schmacks, "'Motherhood Is Beautiful': Maternalism in the West German New Women's Movement between Eroticization and Ecological Protest," *Central European History* 53 (2020): 811–34.

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