

Tuning In: Race, Listening, and the Metropolitan Opera Radio Broadcasts

In August 2023, North Carolina radio station WCPE circulated a letter soliciting feedback on the “suitability” of six contemporary operas from the upcoming 2023-24 Metropolitan Opera Saturday Matinee Broadcast Season.¹ Station manager Deborah Proctor disparaged the operas’ musical style, plots, “offensive language,” and “non-biblical” source material. Three of the six works singled out were by Black or Mexican composers, including operas by Terence Blanchard, Daniel Catán, and Anthony Davis. Among widespread public backlash, musical superstar Rhiannon Giddens denounced WCPE’s stance, posting that “the Met broadcasts are the only way many people get to hear the productions, which are situated in New York and priced way out of many people’s budgets. Radio is supposed to be egalitarian and an equalizer, not used as a weapon, as you are doing.”²

This story is characteristic of our current moment, both in the Metropolitan Opera’s endeavors to diversify its repertoire and in WCPE’s attempt at censorship (especially in relation to race, gender, or sexuality). Yet there are connections to a much longer history as well, one that weaves together race, opera, and radio in important ways. Giddens echoes century-old rhetoric about the utopian potential of opera on the radio, whereas WCPE’s comments about “the right kind of music” mirror early uplift discourse and Southern “opt-out” policies of the 1930s-50s.³

For over ninety years, Met radio broadcasts have served as Saturday ritual for millions of listeners. Despite this rich history, musicological scholarship typically focuses on stage productions and audiences in the auditorium, while radio’s influence has often been overlooked

¹ Anastasia Tsioulcas, “N.C. Radio Station Reverses Decision to Withhold Broadcast of Contemporary Met Operas,” *National Public Radio*, September 29, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/29/1202425600/met-opera-wcpe-north-carolina>.

² Rhiannon Giddens, (@rhiannongiddens). “Open letter to @theclassicalstation,” Instagram, October 5, 2023, https://www.instagram.com/rhiannongiddens/p/Cx_neuoOhaA/

³ On Southern “opt-outs,” see Jennifer Stoeber, “Black Radio Listeners in America’s ‘Golden Age,’” *Journal of Radio and Audio Media* 26, no. 1 (2019): 122-23.

in favor of subsequent media such as television.⁴ In spite of this inattention, the Met broadcasts are critical to any understanding of opera in America; and from the act of listening to the musical genre and institution to the technology itself, these broadcasts were always already about race. Sound is racialized through the listener's ear—what Jennifer Stoeber calls the “sonic color line”—and this racialized hearing permeates reception of Black opera singers, as Nina Sun Eidsheim has explained.⁵ Opera as a genre is enmeshed with racialized repertory and performance practices, while the Met was the country's most notoriously segregated operatic institution, refusing to cast Black singers until Marian Anderson's 1955 debut.⁶ And as early radio's acousmatic voices threatened to blur societal categories of race, ethnicity, class, and gender, white radio companies and producers reacted by “containing” Black voices on the radio within aural representations of minstrelsy for decades.⁷ At this intersection of race, listening, genre, institution, and technology, the Metropolitan broadcasts are a particularly important site for understanding Black opera.⁸

⁴ Exceptions include Paul Jackson, *Saturday Afternoons at the Old Met: The Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts, 1931-1950* (Amadeus Press, 1992) and Tim Lockley, “‘Our American Way of Living’: Lucy Richardson Milligan and American Radio on the Eve of World War II,” *Media History* 26, no. 4 (2020): 457-471. On radio's significance, see Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xiv-xv.

⁵ Jennifer Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (NYU Press, 2016), 4. Nina Sun Eidsheim argues white US listeners connect Black singers with a “phantom genealogy activated by non-sonorous cues.” Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Duke University Press, 2019), chapter 2.

⁶ Racist performance practices in opera include the unique persistence of blackface; see Naomi André, Karen Bryan, and Eric Saylor, *Blackness in Opera* (University of Illinois Press, 2012), 2-3, also Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (University of Illinois Press, 2018), 2-4.

⁷ See Hilmes, *Radio Voices*, 15 and chapter 3. Radio minstrelsy included theatrical Black dialect as well as minstrel characters and plots (such as *Amos 'n' Andy*). These radio sounds evoke Matthew Morrison's argument that sonic legacies of minstrelsy forged a persistent “Blacksound” in American popular culture. See Morrison, “Race, Blacksound, and the (Re)making of Musicological Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 781-823.

⁸ Black opera is the focus of this article, which does not purport to discuss all singers of color on the Met broadcasts. There are many additional important stories about race, opera, and radio: I am mindful of Alejandro L. Madrid's reminder that the “white-black racial dichotomy that has dominated the U.S. national imagination for most of the country's history” has worked to marginalize other groups such as Latinos. See Madrid, “American Music in Times of Postnationality,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 699-703, 747.

This chapter analyzes this intersection, focusing on opera for the millions of radio listeners (as opposed to the scant few in the hall). I begin by closely attending to listening cultures and practices, or how Black radio listeners interacted with the Met broadcasts for decades before ever hearing a Black singer on a Saturday afternoon show. This not only decenters stage performances, but foregrounds *listening* as opposed to composers or works.⁹ In spaces far from the opera house, Black audiences often listened askance to these broadcasts, forging their own relationships with predominately white media products.¹⁰ At times, listening to the broadcasts directly inspired subsequent generations of Black operatic voices.

I then turn to the broadcasts themselves, assessing how integration proceeded over the air versus onstage. I begin with production, unpacking how program format and competing institutional interests helped impede integration, then turn to analyzing the first decade of Black performers on the broadcasts. From roughly 1955-65, these singers inspired millions of radio listeners but were also forced to negotiate difficult relationships with institutions, performance practice, and media. Ultimately, I argue the Met broadcasts present a crucial and multifaceted site for understanding Black opera, ranging from exclusionary practices and reinscription of racial stereotypes to powerful opportunities for agency, intimacy, and self-fashioning.

Listening to the Broadcasts: Opera, Radio, and Race

Radio in the US really *began* with opera, via Lee de Forest's experimental operatic broadcasts in the 1910s.¹¹ Opera radio programming came in fits and starts in the 1920s, but eyes were always on the Metropolitan Opera, America's highest-profile operatic institution. Following

⁹ Musical disciplines have increasingly studied listening practices, aurality, and sound in recent decades. See Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Duke University Press, 2014), 6-9.

¹⁰ On listening askance, see Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line*, 268.

¹¹ De Forest broadcast *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *I Pagliacci* from the Metropolitan Opera on January 13, 1910.

protracted negotiations, in 1931 the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) garnered exclusive rights to a 24-week radio season, beginning with a Christmas Day transmission of *Hänsel und Gretel*.

Millions tuned in to this initial broadcast, then became regular consumers: a 1935 survey cited weekly listenership of about nine million.¹² By the early 1940s, the US/Canada audience comprised about ten million, with relays via international shortwave adding four million listeners in South and Central America.¹³ Broadcasts originally aired on NBC, then ABC (1944-58) and CBS (1958-60). Texaco created a custom network of around 115 radio stations from 1964-2004.¹⁴ Via these massive networks, a huge percentage of the country could access the broadcasts, generally more than 95% of the US.¹⁵

While the Met broadcasts were available to vast geographic areas, it's difficult to glean specific statistics on Black listenership, particularly before 1950.¹⁶ Jennifer Stoevers notes that radio scholars have rarely studied "the impact of white mainstream radio on the large group of radio listeners for whom its primary messages were clearly not intended." Arguing for reconsideration of the unacknowledged impacts of these Black listeners, Stoevers explains that reading radio archives for Black self-representation, alternate meanings, and agency is especially important prior to the rise of targeted programming and Black-owned radio stations.¹⁷

¹² David Hamilton, *The Sound of the Met* (Museum of Broadcasting, 1986).

¹³ "Opera Goes on Air to All Hemisphere," *New York Times*, November 30, 1941.

¹⁴ After 2005, approximately 300 U.S. radio stations comprised the Toll Brothers-Metropolitan Opera Radio Network, serving around forty-two countries and eleven million weekly listeners. See Press Releases, Broadcasts, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

¹⁵ In 1951, the broadcasts were carried by 295 stations in forty-nine states and D.C. See "ABC Stations Carrying Metropolitan Opera," *Opera News*, January 1, 1951, 28.

¹⁶ Amongst midcentury listenership surveys about the broadcasts, I have yet to locate any that query listeners about race or ethnicity. For more on Black radio audiences in general, see Kathy M. Newman, "The Forgotten Fifteen Million: Black Radio, Radicalism, and the Construction of the 'Negro Market,'" in *Communities of the Air: Radio century, Radio Culture*, ed. Susan Merrill Squier (Duke University Press), 109-133.

¹⁷ See "Black Radio Listeners," 121.

Bearing in mind the “racist silences” of archives and source material, I utilize Stoeever’s interdisciplinary sound studies methodology, gleaning radio histories from other media in order to explore Black listenership and the Met broadcasts.¹⁸ From the beginning of the radio shows, many Black newspapers regularly included the Met broadcasts in everything from larger stories on opera to printed radio schedules.¹⁹ *Jet* and *Ebony Magazines* routinely reported on the programs in the 1950s and ‘60s, and Black press coverage sometimes spotlighted specific broadcasts featuring Black singers. Thus Black operatic consumers were clearly tuning in to opera on the radio, whether or not white opera companies and radio stations considered them as audience members.

Listening: Spaces and Practices

Once on air, the Saturday Met broadcasts forged unique listening cultures. Though not *in* the Metropolitan Opera, the radio audience caught hints of live audience presence, sounds which perhaps forged a bond between the thousands in the house and the millions listening on the radio. Yet those tuning in often listened in radically different spaces than a concert hall, including in informal, domestic settings. A 1940 NBC survey on the broadcasts reported that 66.5% of listening took place in living rooms; the bedroom was the second most common location.²⁰ Dianne Brooks recalls that during her childhood, opera “was everywhere for me, blaring through the house on weekend afternoons.”²¹

¹⁸ Stoeever notes radio is imbedded in many media, including “music, journalism, cinema, and literature.” “Black Radio,” 120-21.

¹⁹ See “Those Wild Radio Waves,” *Atlanta Daily World*, January 27, 1934, 2.

²⁰ See Listener Comments, Broadcasts, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York. The survey asks about gender, age, marital status, and occupation, but not race or ethnicity.

²¹ Dianne Brooks, ““They Dig Her Message”: Opera, Television, and the Black Diva,” in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, ed. Henry Jenkins III, Jane Shattuc, and Tara McPherson (Duke University Press, 2003), 300.

These domestic spaces were gendered: women comprised a substantial percentage of the daytime radio audience and often performed gendered labor while listening.²² In the 1940 survey, 71.9% of respondents were women, while 63.1% of respondents listened to the broadcasts while doing another activity, such as sewing/knitting, reading, cleaning, cooking, and general housework.²³ Bass-baritone Willis Patterson recalled:

During my early childhood years, certain tunes lingered around the house as a result of the Saturday afternoon broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera Company. My mother listened to them on the radio, not because she had any understanding of the elements listed above, but because she liked the vocal sounds. There were lovely, lilting, catchy melodies, some of which she frequently found herself humming while doing her household chores, in spite of the annoying interruption of words that made no sense and were impossible to pronounce. It was strange how some of those tunes found their way into the sounds she made while scrubbing clothes on the washboard and moving from room to room with dustcloth in hand. Breaking the usual sequence of hymns and spirituals that were so automatic to her sweeping and dusting was an occasional theme from “La donna e mobile” or “Pres des ramparts de Seville.” To a non-African-American, sounds like this may have seemed an unusual presence in the Saturday afternoon musical fare of our ghetto home in the 1930s and forties. It would have seemed strange even to some blacks not accustomed to being in our neighborhood, but they were not uncommon occurrences to those of us who lived there.²⁴

Patterson’s description invokes not only domestic spaces and gendered labor, but also how the broadcasts attracted new operatic consumers. Thanks to the Saturday shows, his mother mixed operatic snippets into her working musics.

Patterson also highlights *overhearing* his mother’s relationship with the radio. Indeed, this new operatic listening could be communal: sources mention intergenerational listening, for example, as families tuned in or grown children returned home on Saturdays to listen. Broadcasts also resounded in institutional spaces from schools to hospital wards (where nurses read *Opera*

²² Long histories connect gender and class to assumptions about public and private spheres; see Marcia Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), 100-108.

²³ See Listener Comments, Broadcasts, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

²⁴ Willis Patterson, introduction to *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience*, ed. Wallace McClean Cheatham (Scarecrow Press, 1997), xv.

News to patients and patients started listening groups for nurses.)²⁵ The agency behind these communal operatic experiences likely varied immensely, from intentional family rituals to accidental snippets of opera overheard from other rooms to potentially invasive forced listening. Who, in any given space, had the power to control the airwaves? Perhaps even more than in the opera house, radio opera's listening locations offer crucial sites for studying the intersection of listening, power, gender, race, and class.

Automobiles were another new space for operatic consumption.²⁶ Broad geographic coverage and the lengthy broadcasts made these shows especially attractive accompaniments to long drives or any profession that necessitated extensive travel.²⁷ Many accounts include sparse details about individual identities, but some mid-century Black listeners were clearly tuning in to opera in their cars. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, opens *Stride toward Freedom* with a lyrical description of automotive operatic listening:

On a cool Saturday afternoon in January 1954, I set out to drive from Atlanta, Georgia to Montgomery, Alabama. It was a clear wintry day. The Metropolitan Opera was on the radio with a performance of one of my favorite operas—Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*. So with the beauty of the countryside, the inspiration of Donizetti's inimitable music, and the splendor of the skies, the usual monotony that accompanies a relatively long drive—especially when one is alone—was dispelled in pleasant diversions.²⁸

²⁵ Students at the historically Black Catholic college Xavier University in New Orleans took the broadcasts as inspiration for their own operatic productions. See "Opera Flourishes in the South," *Opera News*, January 16, 1950, 14. *Opera News* published many letters about listening in medical facilities; see, for example, a note from "G.M.S.," head of nursing at a private sanatorium in Pennsylvania. "Letters to the Editor," *Opera News*, November 14, 1949, 27.

²⁶ Scholars have often connected car culture with music, but almost exclusively through the lens of teenagers and popular music. See, for example, Mark Duffett and Peter Beate, eds., *Popular Music and Automobiles* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).

²⁷ *Opera News* included letters from salesmen or truck drivers tuning in on their routes, or workers listening during their commute. See "Letters to the Editor," *Opera News*, January 1, 1951, 32.

²⁸ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (Ballantine Books, 1960), 11. For this January 30 *Lucia* broadcast with Lily Pons and Jan Peerce, King likely commenced listening to Atlanta ABC affiliate WGST (920 AM out of the segregated Georgia Institute of Technology).

King situates the broadcast as a private, contemplative experience during a long drive. The car's contained space reverberates with Donizetti's music—clearly already known to King—and he links his automotive listening with the external world of the clear winter sky and the farmlands of Georgia and Alabama. For King, and perhaps other listeners as well, these Saturday broadcasts offered precious space not only for musical listening, but also solitude or reflection.²⁹

Finally, whether in the kitchen, living room, or a car, the broadcasts offered opportunities for singing along, or what Kiri Miller has described as a hybrid of “mediated and live musicality.”³⁰ Charles Keil notes playing/singing along with recordings has often been ignored by scholars, in part because of its domestic environments.³¹ Yet journals, memoirs, and letters detail just how frequently listeners sang along with the Met broadcasts.

Some accounts feature pleasurable amateur singing in domestic spaces, but others testify to an early operatic *training*. The broadcasts served as a widely available teaching tool for would-be opera singers (even those who had little preexistent knowledge of the genre).³² Many Black vocalists recall childhoods spent singing along with the broadcasts; see for example, Lenora Lafayette and her sister's memories from 1930s Baton Rouge.³³ Jessye Norman recalled in detail how radio listening encouraged participatory musicking:

²⁹ Driving obviously had different connotations of “safety” for King and other Black motorists in this era: access to freedom and mobility impossible on segregated public transportation, yet rife with danger in other ways. See annual editions of *The Negro Motorist Green Book* from the 1930s-1960s for more information on connections between race, automobiles, and travel.

³⁰ See Kiri Miller, *Playing Along: Digital Games, Youtube, and Virtual Performance* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 13.

³¹ Keil cited in Miller, *Playing Along*, 13.

³² This chapter focuses on Black listener/vocalists from the 1930s-60s, but a broader study could encompass later eras as well. For example, tenor Lonel Woods recalled that during his childhood in Chicago in the late 1970s or early '80s, he was “listening to the weekly Metropolitan Opera radio broadcasts from his brother's stereo, singing every part during the Saturday afternoon broadcasts.” A former colleague in the Crane School of Music at SUNY-Potsdam, Lonel was a much-loved member of the community and greatly mourned upon his passing in 2021. See Lonel Woods, “Serendipity and Divine Providence,” interview by Jason Hunter, <https://www.potsdam.edu/academics/crane-school-music/LonelWoods>

³³ Kyla Dean Pitcher, “The Musical Journey of Opera Singer Leonora Lafayette: A Louisiana Treasure” (PhD diss, Louisiana State University, 2006), 5, https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/2936.

This was most revelatory on Saturday afternoons, when it was time for my weekly chores. There was cleaning to be done in the kitchen and in my own room...I made my duties stretch the entire length of the opera broadcast that I discovered on that magic box, my radio. My program of choice: the Saturday-afternoon broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera...One of the first operas I recall hearing was *Lucia di Lammermoor*, in the late 1950s. This would have been with Roberta Peters in the lead, and other times with Mattiwilda Dobbs...The well-known ensemble from this luscious opera stayed in my mind, and I remember humming the melody to myself rather often.³⁴

Norman situates these radio programs as a revelatory, magical place. Singing along connects the listener in particularly special ways to the mediatized voice: Jacqueline Warwick describes this as a complex dialectic between two bodies, one “created through interacting with recordings in private, as opposed to being one listener in a large audience and hearing a singer from the stage.”³⁵ As operatic praxis, these radio moments invited intimate relationships with the professional voices soaring into home listening spaces. It enhanced possibilities for young Black vocalists to envision themselves as opera singers, and after 1955, to forge these embodied relationships with other Black opera voices on the broadcasts. What did it mean to Jessye Norman as she first hummed along with Roberta Peters and then pioneering Black coloratura Mattiwilda Dobbs? What kinds of emotions or dreams drifted through the minds of young singers as they lifted their voices in imagined operatic communities? Whether trying to match the timbre of a beloved singer or tuning in to a new discovery, these broadcasts provided an important private musicking lab for emerging Black opera stars.

From humming along in the kitchen to overhearing snatches of opera in a hospital to driving with operatic accompaniment, these new listening spaces and practices were quite unlike attending opera in person. Some of these differences were particularly salient for Black listeners.

³⁴ Jessye Norman, *Stand Up Straight and Sing!* (Houghton Mifflon Harcourt, 2014), 7-8.

³⁵ Warwick notes that “the listener explores the position of the vocalist, trying (as it were) to sing from within that singer’s throat.” Jaqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (Routledge, 2007), 39-41.

The Met broadcasts had originally emerged from agendas to “de-urbanize” and “democratize” opera, an audience-building initiative based on “‘highbrow’ ideals of transcendence, autonomy, complexity, and timelessness” [Figure 1].³⁶ Certainly radio’s “democratizing” access did bring opera to some listeners unable to afford opera tickets. Yet operatic uplift rhetoric—even in home settings—sometimes helped reinscribe class divisions, serving to signify middle- or upper-class Black identity.

And a massive experiential gulf separated these domestic listening spaces from performances *in* opera houses. From the 1930s-60s, many U.S. opera institutions practiced discriminatory seating and ticketing practices. The Metropolitan Opera, for example, employed some segregated seating customs in the auditorium through the 1950s, only desegregated the house restaurant in 1951, and played on tour in segregated venues until the early 1960s.³⁷ Thus, the listening opportunities offered by the Met broadcasts opened certain kinds of operatic access denied by the policies of segregation, or offered private operatic consumption away from the white gaze. King’s experience listening to opera over Atlanta radio, for example, was radically unlike attending opera in person: segregated opera performances by the Met touring company at Atlanta’s Fox Theatre continued into the 1960s.³⁸

For the first twenty-four years of these opera broadcasts, of course, Black radio audiences listened exclusively to white voices from the Metropolitan. Only with Marian Anderson’s

³⁶ Kate Guthrie, *The Art of Appreciation: Music and Middlebrow Culture in Modern Britain* (University of California Press, 2021), 3. The Met broadcast agenda mirrored much early radio rhetoric on cultural uplift (actual impacts were far less utopian). See Hilmes, *Radio Voices* and Timothy Taylor, “The Role of Opera in the Rise of Radio in the US,” in *Music in the World: Selected Essays* (University of Chicago Press, 2017), 74-75.

³⁷ “Negroes Admitted to Met Opera Sherry’s Bar,” *Jet Magazine*, November 29, 1951, 61. On seating, see Carol Oja, “Marian Anderson and the Desegregation of the American Concert Stage,” October 20, 2016, Fellows’ Presentation Series at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Cambridge, MA, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHB98VcB7So>

³⁸ On Atlanta tours, see Rudolf Bing to Mrs. Harold N. Cooledge, 21 November 1951 in Bing Correspondence, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York. On protests over Met performances in segregated houses, see Frank Daniel, “Don’t Control Seating, Opera’s Bing Tells King,” *Atlanta Journal*, May 6, 1961.

broadcast debut in 1955 would Black singers begin *performing* on these programs. As discussed below, the integration of the Met opera broadcasts was uneven during the first decade of interracial performances. Even the extent to which radio listeners knew the racial identities of operatic voices varied dramatically based on positionality and consumption of ancillary media.³⁹ Some Black listeners were likely familiar with specific singers due to coverage in the Black press; they may also have been sensitized to more subtle markers of racial identity (such as a performer attending an HBCU). On the other hand, some white listeners were likely completely unaware they were listening to interracial operatic performances, aided in these misapprehensions by radio's acousmatic nature. As we turn to production of and performances on broadcasts featuring the first generation of Black Met singers, we should continue to situate these radio shows not only within the context of race and technology, but also keeping in mind these diverse millions of radio listeners, listening spaces, and listening cultures.

Making the Broadcasts: Producing, Performing, and Reception in mid-century America

By the 1950s, the Met broadcasts had already been on the air for nearly two decades, featuring full-length matinees live from the Metropolitan Opera House on Saturday afternoons.⁴⁰ Beginning in late November or early December and running through mid-April, the broadcast season generally comprised around twenty operas; in a typical year the radio audience would only hear about 8% of the Met's stage performances. As administrators selected the twenty works to feature each broadcast season, they tried to strike a balance between canonical operas, new productions, and star vehicles, but every decision was contentious. Major fights broke out

³⁹ Nina Eidsheim refers to this as the "acousmatic question," noting it always illuminates the *listener* rather than the vocalizer. Eidsheim, *Race of Sound*, introduction.

⁴⁰ Start time was generally 2:00pm EST (occasionally longer operas necessitated earlier starts).

about everything from how broadcasts overlapped with subscriptions series to works which had to be performed on a specific day (such as *Parsifal* on Easter weekend). Singer schedules were also a massive headache.⁴¹

During Rudolf Bing's tenure as Metropolitan general manager from 1950-72, the company averaged around 245 stage performances per year.⁴² Beginning with the first year of integrated stages in 1955-56, the subsequent seventeen seasons with Bing as manager included at least 733 stage performances by Black singers.⁴³ Representation varied widely, from less than 2% of season stage performances featuring a Black singer in 1956-57 to around 28% in 1962-63.

In terms of broadcasts, 439 radio programs aired during Bing's tenure, seventy-two of which included a Black singer. During the 202 broadcasts of the first integrated decade of 1955-65, thirty-five shows featured Black singers [**Figure 2**]. Representation varied a great deal here as well, and three performers (Martina Arroyo, Leontyne Price, and George Shirley) comprise more than 2/3 of this era's broadcasts by Black singers.⁴⁴ There are revealing details about *who* gets a broadcast and *how* often. Despite his stage premiere just a week after Anderson, for example, Robert McFerrin was never heard on a Met broadcast. Several singers only appeared on a single broadcast, or significantly later than their stage debuts. There is a sizable gap of two years between Anderson's debut and the next broadcast featuring a Black singer. Finally, there is noticeably halting integration of Black singers on radio broadcasts in the late 1950s, followed by more significant representation in the early 1960s. Some of this piecemeal integration of the

⁴¹ Singer contracts often included generalized "broadcast rights" rather than guarantees for a specific broadcast date.

⁴² Bing's twenty-two seasons as manager featured 5,429 performances (including tour and summer performances).

⁴³ This analysis does not include members of the chorus, dancers, or supernumeraries.

⁴⁴ The per-year-average of Black singers in broadcasts varied from 0% in several seasons to nearly 43% in 1962-63. From 1955-72, Price and Shirley each sang on nineteen broadcasts. Arroyo appeared on fifteen, followed by Grace Bumbry (9), Junetta Jones (4), Reri Grist (4), Gwendolyn Killebrew (3), Mattiwilda Dobbs (2), Marian Anderson (1), Gloria Davy (1), and Shirley Verrett (1).

broadcasts likely stemmed from the exigencies of the season itself (such as singer availability). Yet it also seems obvious those barriers overlapped significantly with a conservative approach to highlighting Black singers on broadcasts. For all the ways in which the Met stage performances were slow to desegregate, the airwaves seemed even more so, at least for a few years.

The broadcasts, of course, were more than just singing. They offered radio audiences a live performance framed with exclusive content. After 1940, the broadcasts settled into a highly structured formula (see **Figure 3**).⁴⁵ Milton Cross—who served as announcer from 1931-75—opened shows with a short description of the opera, personnel lists and intermission feature guests, a quick synopsis of Act I, and a brief plug from the sponsor. Each intermission feature ran about twenty to thirty minutes, with one, two, or three features depending on the opera. In the 1950s-60s, “*Opera News on the Air*” typically occupied the first intermission, offering musical analysis of the week’s opera or discourse on a topic.⁴⁶ The second intermission was usually the popular “Texaco Opera Quiz,” where guest panelists answered listener-submitted questions.⁴⁷ Third intermission features ranged from Clifton Fadiman’s interviews to a biographical series by Francis Robinson. Closing announcements highlighted the following week’s broadcast, concluding with plugs for *Opera News* and the sponsor.

Aided by this rigid broadcast format, spoken portions of Met broadcasts studiously avoided overt discussion of race, at least in terms of casting or performers. On-air singer bios usually only mentioned nationality, voice type, and number of appearances with the company (occasionally longer bios or press releases might note details such as matriculation at an HBCU

⁴⁵ Figure 2 compiled from Broadcast Intermission Scripts, Run times/registers 1958-1963, and Broadcast Forms, all from Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

⁴⁶ “*Opera News on the Air*” was usually hosted by Boris Goldovsky with guests.

⁴⁷ From 1958-96, Edward Downes usually served as quizmaster. Texaco received about 10,000 potential questions a year; the Met archive retains a set of listener questions submitted in the 1980-90s. See Broadcast Collection, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

or racialized roles).⁴⁸ It's unclear whether this general silence about race on the broadcasts came from any specific institutional policy, such as NBC's contemporaneous "Integration without Identification" (which cast Black performers on television without "calling undue attention to it").⁴⁹

In fact, dozens of individuals and different institutions contributed to the Met intermission features, obscuring exactly who crafted broadcast policy on race. For the Metropolitan opera company, the broadcasts were invaluable direct fundraising from the radio audience; this expanded in 1935 with the creation of the Metropolitan Opera Guild.⁵⁰ The Guild began publishing *Opera News* in 1936, a weekly magazine focused on the broadcasts.⁵¹ The Texas Company (later Texaco) began sponsoring the broadcasts in 1940, forgoing full-length commercials in lieu of short fifteen-second "identifications" before each act.⁵² Texaco would ultimately sponsor the broadcasts for sixty-four years at a cost of roughly \$300 million, a

⁴⁸ For example, Robert McFerrin was described in the January 1955 weekly Met press release merely as a young American baritone who had won the Metropolitan Opera Auditions of the Air in 1953. A longer press release the same week noted McFerrin's attendance at Fisk University and performance history with the National Negro Opera Company. See Press Releases, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

⁴⁹ NBC relied on the "continuity acceptance" department to vet TV shows for racialized material. Working with Black public relations expert Joseph Baker in the early 1950s, NBC's "Integration without Identification" policy aimed to cast Black actors in roles more akin to regular life. See Murray Forman, "Employment and Blue Pencils: NBC, Race, and Representation, 1926-55," in *NBC: America's Network*, ed. by Michele Hilmes (University of California Press, 2007), 122, 129, also Danielle Ward-Griffin, "Reality TV? Leontyne Price, the NBC *Tosca*, and the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Musicology* 41, no. 3 (2024): 367-401.

⁵⁰ In 1933, 1/3 of the \$300,000 raised by the Met that year came from radio listeners. See Hamilton, *Sound of the Met*.

⁵¹ Though working to support the Met, the Guild functioned as a separate entity. *Opera News*, which included broadcast info such as cast lists, timings, photographs, and feature articles, was published from 1936-2023. It had a substantial readership: in 1963, for example, there were 75,000 subscribers. See Barry Kittleson, "Public's Blossoming Love of Opera No Springtime, Fly-by-Night Romance," *Billboard*, June 15, 1963.

⁵² Rules allotted Texaco at least twenty minutes of ad time each Saturday, but producer Geraldine Souvaine insisted the short sponsor callouts were *not* actually ads. Geraldine Souvaine to Max Rudolf, 29 February 1956, Bing Correspondence, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

Earlier sponsors included NBC (1931), followed by American Tobacco (1933-34), Lambert Pharmaceutical (1934-35), and Radio Corporation of America (1936-37). The broadcasts were underwritten by Toll Brothers from 2003-23 and will be sponsored by the Robert K. Johnson foundation from 2023-32. See Sponsorship and Finances, Broadcasts, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

relationship reinforced through complimentary boxes, broadcast luncheons, awards for Texaco executives, and a Texaco gallery at the new Lincoln Center opera house.⁵³

Texaco hired radio producer Henry Souvaine to organize Met broadcast intermission features in 1940, succeeded by his widow Geraldine Souvaine from 1954-81. The broadcast working process circulated multiple forms to nearly forty people, from Texaco officials to executives at ABC/NBC/CBS, the Metropolitan Opera Guild/*Opera News*, on-air talent such as Boris Goldovsky, and opera staff such as Rudolf Bing.⁵⁴ In 1953, Met assistant general manager Reginald Allen wrote to other Met officials that “we may well wish to ask ABC—and through the Texas Company—for a bit more control, or for a different method of handling the intermission features.”⁵⁵ His letter emphasizes concerns that the most audible representation of the Metropolitan Opera evaded opera management’s control (in fact, Texaco held the copyright on intermission features). Therefore, while the Met certainly had a great deal of agency in casting decisions and repertoire choice, Texaco, the Souvaines, *Opera News*/The Guild, and other third parties had a huge amount of control over broadcast content. And these various institutions and entities likely had different or even competing interests regarding racial integration on the radio broadcasts.⁵⁶

⁵³ The \$300 million figure estimates direct reimbursements, gifts, and other financial relationships. See Texas Correspondence, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York, as well as Broadcast Collection and Texaco Exhibit, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

⁵⁴ See Broadcast Forms, Metropolitan Opera Archives, New York.

⁵⁵ Reginald Allen to Lowell Wadmond, Rudolf Bing, and Lincoln Lauterstein, 27 January 1953, Bing Correspondence, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York. See also tense exchanges between Rudolf Bing and Geri Souvaine in March 1958, Bing Correspondence, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

⁵⁶ Texaco’s views on operatic integration are unclear, though sponsorship for the broadcasts was initially a PR campaign to temper revelations about Nazi sympathies and illegal oil shipments by the company’s chairman. For more, see Adam Hochschild, “In Many Ways, Author Says, Spanish Civil War was ‘The First Battle of WWI,’” interview by David Bianculli, *Fresh Air*, NPR, March 28, 2016, audio, <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/10/519462137/in-many-ways-author-says-spanish-civil-war-was-the-first-battle-of-wwii>. Texaco was successfully sued for pervasive racial bias in the 1990s, paying an enormous settlement of \$115 million.

Influenced by some or all of these factors, racial exclusion was even more pervasive on broadcast features than in operatic casting: it took until 1962 to feature a Black guest on a spoken broadcast segment. From 1955-65, only four intermission segments included *any* Black voices: two brief appearances on “*Opera News on the Air*” by Leontyne Price and George Shirley in December 1962; a pre-taped solo interview with Price on January 18, 1964; and an interview with Marian Anderson for the “Biographies in Music” program on April 10, 1965.⁵⁷ And while “*Opera News on the Air*” often featured female vocalists as guests, women appeared on the quiz extraordinarily infrequently in the 1950s-60s.⁵⁸ Whether this additional set of barriers for broadcast features stemmed from radio’s heritage of sonic minstrelsy or from a culture which placed musical “expertise” exclusively in the hands of white men, broadcast features rarely offered Black performers any opportunity to speak to the American public.

Black Singers on the Broadcasts, 1955-65

Bearing these details in mind—slow integration over a decade of broadcasts, the rigid show format, competing interests involved in show creation, and general silence on race during spoken segments—it’s clear the Met radio broadcasts are centrally important to discussions of race and opera in the US. Stage productions themselves, via racialized plots and performance traditions such as blackface, shaped elements of the radio programs. The broadcasts also intersected with newspapers, magazines, television, and recordings in a complicated intermedial economy; *Opera News*, for example, often framed broadcast singers, characters, and performance practice in overtly racialized ways.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ From 1955-65, Black performers were heard on 0.01% of the 444 intermission features.

⁵⁸ From 1955-65, 189 Texaco Quizzes included 781 guests, usually a rota of the same dozen or so individuals. Women only appeared in a speaking role 54 times (0.06%).

⁵⁹ *Opera News* often reported on segregated performances, featured photographs of singers in blackface, or included anecdotes such as the presentation of a Confederate flag to Met manager Edward Johnson during a Southern concert tour. See Max Lexandrowitsch, “Random Thoughts on the Road,” *Opera News*, April 16, 1951, 26.

The stories that follow focus on the initial generation of Black opera singers on Met broadcasts; these are selective threads rather than exhaustive commentary, focusing on larger roles and initial broadcast appearances from 1955-65.⁶⁰ As the first Black opera stars appeared on Met broadcasts, they awed millions yet navigated extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Dealing with both invisibility and hypervisibility, serving as barrier-breaking models for Black audiences listening and singing along while simultaneously negotiating racist framing in both operatic practice and ancillary media, the broadcast stories of these five singers illuminate the varied experiences of race, radio, and opera in midcentury America.

Early Exposure: Marian Anderson, Gloria Davy, and Mattiwilda Dobbs in the 1950s

As news of Marian Anderson's Metropolitan Opera contract broke in October 1954, Met manager Rudolf Bing was flooded with letters, including some from listeners hoping to hear Anderson on a broadcast.⁶¹ Noting Anderson was nearly fully booked in spring 1955, Bing apologetically explained she was contracted for three Met performances only, none of which were broadcasts. On January 7, 1955, Anderson appeared onstage as Ulrica in *Un Ballo in Maschera*, the first Black singer in a major role with the company.⁶² She sang to a sold-out crowd of almost 4,000 attendees, while reporters breathlessly chronicled the event for the avid public. Fifteen days later, there was a Met broadcast of *Un Ballo in Maschera*...but not with Anderson. Rather, white mezzo-soprano Jean Madeira appeared in blackface as Ulrica on the January 22 broadcast, as pictured in that week's *Opera News*.⁶³ The January issue of *Opera News* also included Max de Schauensee's article on Ulrica, lividly described as a vile "object of

⁶⁰ For example, Martina Arroyo and Junetta Jones sang a number of *comprimario* roles in this period which I do not examine here.

⁶¹ See André Dixon to Rudolf Bing, November 9, 1954 and R. Ubriaco to Rudolf Bing, October 18, 1954, Marian Anderson, Bing Correspondence, Metropolitan Opera Archives, New York.

⁶² See Nina Eidsheim's analysis of Anderson's stage debut in *The Race of Sound*, Chapter 2.

⁶³ "Un Ballo in Maschera, Opera of the Week," *Opera News*, January 17, 1955, 17.

repellence.” His article contained photographs of four Ulricas at the Met, including Anderson’s appearance just two weeks earlier. Thus, the earliest radio audience understandings of Anderson at the Met were filtered through print and visual media, and entangled with racialized performance traditions and the adjacent January 22 *Un Ballo* broadcast.

Eleven months later, Met radio audiences *would* belatedly hear Marion Anderson as Ulrica, a broadcast comprehensively advertised in white and Black newspapers nationwide.⁶⁴ Oklahoma City paper *The Black Dispatch*, for example, noted that:

Marian Anderson, world renowned contralto, will sing one of the leading roles in Verdi’s *Un Ballo in Maschera* when ABC-Radio presents its 1955-56 series of Saturday afternoon Metropolitan Opera broadcasts direct from the stage Saturday at 1pm EST. Miss Anderson will sing the role of Ulrica in the opera of murder at a masked ball.⁶⁵

As millions tuned in to ABC stations on December 10, 1955, they heard a typical Met broadcast structure: Cross’s opening and closing remarks, plugs, plot resums, “*Opera News on the Air*” (hosted by Norman Dello Joio with guests Laurel Hurley and Richard Tucker), and the “Texaco Opera Quiz” (hosted by Robert Lawrence with panelists Mary DeWitt Peltz, Jay Harrison, and Max de Schauensee).⁶⁶ The script made little reference to Anderson at all, merely noting it was the broadcast debut of “the voice of Marian Anderson” as Ulrica.⁶⁷ Despite this lack of fanfare, radio audiences could hear vigorous applause in the hall at Anderson’s entrance. Many listeners likely recognized her familiar voice from other radio contexts, including the fateful 1939 Lincoln

⁶⁴ In December 1955 Anderson alternated appearances as Ulrica with white singer Sandra Warfield: Warfield’s Ulrica had “her face and hands dyed a swarthy brown.” Joseph Kaye, “In Footsteps of Fame,” *Kansas City Star*, December 7, 1955.

⁶⁵ “Radio-TV Roundup-Commentary by the Associated Negro Press,” *The Black Dispatch*, December 8, 1955.

⁶⁶ Fourteen radio broadcast scripts for *Un Ballo in Maschera* spanning 1940-2001 feature relatively consistent language about Ulrica: she is described as “wretched,” “frightening,” “weird,” and dressed in rags. In the February 1959 broadcast script Ulrica is described as having “a dark face,” changed to “swarthy” in 1973. Ulrica’s physical description was mostly removed by 1980. See *Un Ballo in Maschera*, Broadcast Scripts, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

⁶⁷ It’s unclear whether this description was a reference to Anderson’s preexistent fame or an attempt to de-racialize her.

Memorial concert which drew a radio following of two million people.⁶⁸ Yet audiences on December 10 could also easily encounter radio minstrelsy: on San Francisco station KFBK, for example, listeners who tuned in to the Met broadcast an hour early would start their morning with “Uncle Remus” (a minstrel show for children).⁶⁹ Thus, Marian Anderson’s broadcast debut was surrounded by print and photographic reminders of other Ulricas in blackface, all-white broadcast commentary that marginalized her fame and racial identity, and readily adjacent radio minstrelsy.

December 1955 was Anderson’s sole appearance on the Met broadcasts. Despite more than thirty intervening stage performances by four different Black singers, it took almost two years until a second Met *broadcast* featured a Black operatic voice, that of soprano Gloria Davy. Upon signing a Met contract in 1957, Davy debuted onstage in February 1958 as the first Black Aida at the house.⁷⁰

Yet Davy’s first Met broadcast occurred not as Aida, but on December 6, 1958 as Pamina in *The Magic Flute* (in English). Again, spoken broadcast segments included only minimal references to Davy: after describing Pamina as a “beautiful princess,” Milton Cross introduced Davy merely as a member of a “first-rank” cast, without even noting her broadcast debut.⁷¹ That week’s *Opera News* did include a short biographical sketch, interview, and photograph of the three broadcast newcomers: Mignon Dunn, William Olvis, and Davy (who is exoticized as speaking with a “calypso lilt”).⁷² While Pamina was a different type of role than Ulrica, *The*

⁶⁸ As another example, Anderson appeared on the nationwide broadcast of Bell Telephone Hour on January 1, 1955, less than a week before her stage debut at the Met.

⁶⁹ “Radio,” *The Sacramento Bee*, December 9, 1955. Uncle Remus aired at 10 am PST, followed by two other brief children’s programs, then the Met broadcast at 11 am.

⁷⁰ See “There’s No Color Problem at the Metropolitan Opera,” *The New York Age*, November 8, 1958.

⁷¹ Cross often prepared optional filler materials (for potential timing delays). His unused material on Davy noted her Marian Anderson award and performances as Bess. See Milton Cross Papers, New York Public Library, New York.

⁷² “New Voices on the Air,” *Opera News*, December 1, 1958, 8.

Magic Flute itself is structured by racist tropes, particularly in the character of the “villainous Moor” (Monostatos). Giving context for the broadcast audience in December 1958, *Opera News* described the lurid stage costumes as:

Oriental flavor, with here and there a slight touch of Egypt and Assyria....Three filmy gowns are assigned to Pamina, who lends a Hindu effect to the proceedings with her wrapped, pleated sari costumes...Monostatos is costumed almost as an Ubangi, with a “bare” blue horse covered with rows of heavy red tassels. He has rings around his neck and on his scalp lock, which crowns his shaved head with a tuft of feathers. Yellow oriental pantaloons cover his legs.⁷³

Indeed, Davy’s broadcast premiere occurred alongside a Monostatos (Paul Franke) in crude exoticist costuming and makeup. For audiences following along with *Opera News*, this certainly added a racial frame to the December 1958 broadcast of *The Magic Flute*. For listeners attending to the broadcast spoken commentary alone, perhaps such issues slipped by unnoticed.

Davy appeared onstage with the Metropolitan Opera fifteen times from 1958-61, as Aida, Pamina, Nedda, and *Il Trovatore*’s Leonora. But like Anderson, Davy only appeared on a single Met broadcast, illustrating the piecemeal nature of integrating Black voices in the late 1950s. In fact, only one other Black singer would appear in a major broadcast role this decade, coloratura soprano Mattiwilda Dobbs. Widely covered in the Black press since the early 1950s and heralded as the first Black singer at La Scala, Dobbs followed Anderson and McFerrin as the third Black singer on the Met stage, starring as Gilda in *Rigoletto* in November 1956.

It took over two years for Dobbs to make her broadcast debut, as Olympia in Offenbach’s *Les Contes d’Hoffman* on February 7, 1959 (about two months after Davy’s Pamina). Spoken broadcast commentary again only mentioned Dobbs’s name in passing.⁷⁴ *Opera News* did not run a biographical feature, yet Dobbs in her blond doll’s ringlets and light-hued makeup became

⁷³ “Opera of the Week: *The Magic Flute*, Settings and Costumes,” *Opera News*, December 1, 1958, 20. Harry Horner’s costumes dated back to the mid-1930s.

⁷⁴ See *Les Contes d’Hoffman*, Broadcast Intermission Scripts, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

only the second Black musician ever featured on the magazine's cover.⁷⁵ These photographs of Dobbs-as-Olympia circulated widely, including the cover of *Ebony Magazine* in November 1959. This was part of a complex mid-century discussion about race and stage makeup, but it is important to consider how this ubiquitous single image shaped listening audiences' reception of Dobbs.⁷⁶ Like Anderson and Davy, Dobbs's broadcast career was circumscribed: she appeared on only two Met broadcasts, the 1959 *Hoffman* and a 1962 *Un Ballo*.

Listening to the Stars: Leontyne Price and George Shirley in the 1960s

Leontyne Price noted the significance of the Met broadcasts in her early life, recalling that "as a child, one of my greatest pleasures was listening to the Texaco Metropolitan Opera matinee broadcasts. Later, in music school, they meant even more to me as a student."⁷⁷ She made her own Met broadcast debut on February 4, 1961 in *Il Trovatore*. Announcer Milton Cross paid unusual attention to the joint broadcast debuts of Price and Franco Corelli, including a full biographical paragraph on each singer (**Figure 3**). He incorporated rave reviews from Price and Corelli's joint stage debut at the Met only one week earlier, a performance which had culminated in a "wild" thirty-five minute ovation.⁷⁸ For once the radio audience didn't have to wait long for opera's newest phenom to appear on a broadcast. Such singularity was the norm for Price, who became the decade's most prominent Black operatic star. She alone accounted for nearly 30% of Met broadcasts featuring a Black singer from 1955-65 (and more than 25%

⁷⁵ Only four Black musicians appeared on the cover of *Opera News* from 1936-67: Marian Anderson with Bing on November 15, 1954; Dobbs on February 2, 1959; Duke Ellington on June 4, 1966; and Leontyne Price on February 25, 1967.

⁷⁶ The caption for Dobbs' *Ebony* cover noted "recent advances in the art of makeup have enabled Miss Dobbs and other singers to play all roles in major operas." *Ebony Magazine*, November 1959. For more on stage makeup, see George Shirley, "Il Rodolfo Nero, or The Masque of Blackness," in *Blackness in Opera*, ed. Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Eric Saylor (University of Illinois, 2012), 260-274.

⁷⁷ See "Leontyne Price Says," *Opera News*, February 11, 1961, 33.

⁷⁸ See William Glover's widespread AP coverage on January 28, 1961.

through the end of Bing's tenure in 1972). American listeners for the first time *repetitively* listened to a Black singer on the broadcasts, experiencing Price as Leonora, Tosca, Elvira, Donna Anna, Aida, Tatiana, and Fiordiligi. As the foremost Black diva of the 1960s, opera audiences could come to "know" Price (and savor her voice) throughout repeated radio encounters.

Price's listeners contextualized her in a deeply intermedial space, a dense loam of live performances, television, radio, recordings, and photographs.⁷⁹ In January 1955, Price catapulted to nationwide attention via the NBC television broadcast of *Tosca*.⁸⁰ She appeared as Floria Tosca with an all-white cast including David Poleri as her lover Cavaradossi; while sixty-two networks carried the broadcasts, some refused, and NBC received letters of complaint.⁸¹ Dianne Brooks notes Price's television work opened up an "alternative narrative space for black women," yet was "always complex, a plethora of shifting representations."⁸² I would argue these television appearances by Price were informed by tensions over sight, race, genre, and sound, but always existed in partnership with other media such as radio. While on tour in 1961, Price noted that before and after concert performances, "I was deeply touched by the many people who told me they were looking forward to my appearances on the air."⁸³ Clearly live performances were shaped by radio encounters—and no Black opera singer was as acousmatically omnipresent in the 1960s as Leontyne Price.

⁷⁹ See Danielle Ward-Griffin, "As Seen on TV: Putting the NBC Opera on Stage," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 3 (2018): 595-654.

⁸⁰ For readings of the TV *Tosca*, see Brooks, "They Dig Her Message" and Ward-Griffin, "Reality TV?"

⁸¹ See "Mississippi Station Raps Negro TV Roles," *Jet Magazine*, October 27, 1955. The *Des Moines Register* published reader views on both sides of the issue, see Ogden G. Dwight, "On Television," *Des Moines Register*, January 31, 1955.

⁸² Brooks, "They Dig Her Message," 301.

⁸³ "Leontyne Price Says."

Leontyne Price's only peer in broadcast airtime was tenor George Shirley, who won his spot at the Met through a contest.⁸⁴ In the 1940s and '50s, radio audition programs like the "Metropolitan Auditions of the Air" seemed like a stepping stone towards desegregation.⁸⁵ Indeed, a generation of Black Met audition winners began with baritone Fred Thomas in 1951, followed by Robert McFerrin (1953), Felicia Weathers (1957), Robert Mosley (1957), Grace Bumbry (1957), Martina Arroyo (1958), LaVergne Monette (1960), Billie Lynn Daniel (1961), and Shirley Verrett (1961).⁸⁶ George Shirley won the Met Auditions in April 1961; his win was widely publicized in the Black press and announced *on* the Met radio broadcasts as a post-curtain feature on April 6, 1961. The auditions seemed to have great potential for integrating Black operatic voices on the radio and onstage, and did help establish Shirley's career, as well as those of several other Black singers. Yet like many contests judged on subjective "artistic merit," the auditions were fraught with bias (and ultimately the Met had significant latitude in contractual offers).⁸⁷

George Shirley made his stage debut on October 24, 1961 as Ferrando in *Così fan Tutte*, with a broadcast debut in this same role in April 1962.⁸⁸ Subsequently, Shirley became the first

⁸⁴ Shirley noted of his childhood that "in our household, we didn't listen to opera, only a Grand Ole Opry on Saturday afternoons because both of my parents were from the south." See George Shirley, "An Oral History with George Shirley," interview by Marc A. Scorca, *Opera America*, April 26, 2022, <https://www.operaamerica.org/industry-resources/2022/oral-history-project/an-oral-history-with-george-shirley/>

⁸⁵ Beginning in 1935, this half-hour program underwritten by Sherwin Williams aired on Sundays for fifteen weeks. Performers auditioned on-air for Met personnel, hoping to win prize money and a Met contract. Activists targeted the auditions: in 1942 *The Detroit Tribune* queried the auditions committee about accepting Black contestants, receiving the response that "anyone who thinks he or she can qualify may enter regardless of race, creed, or color." "Touring the Radio World," *Detroit Tribune*, Nov 28, 1942. In 1948 Neil Scott submitted three singer's names to the Auditions in an attempt to break through the Met's "Jim Crow" policies.

⁸⁶ In the early 1950s, internal memos sometimes included marginal annotations identifying Black singers, since at that point it was implausible those contestants would appear onstage at the Met. See Auditions of the Air, Metropolitan Opera Archive, New York.

⁸⁷ Archival documents testify to many issues with the "Auditions of the Air." Eventually the Met reorganized its pipeline, creating the National Council Auditions of the Air in 1954, then cutting the radio competition entirely in 1958.

⁸⁸ This broadcast from Boston's Metropolitan Theater, not New York. Broadcast commentary merely mentioned Shirley's role debut.

prominent Black tenor at the Met, singing a broad range of *leggiero*, light-lyric, and *spinto* roles. Statistically, Shirley's prominence closely paralleled Price's: he alone accounted for more than 30% of broadcasts featuring a Black singer from 1955-65 (and more than 25% through 1972). Together, Shirley and Price represent over 50% of all Metropolitan performances (stage or broadcast) featuring Black voices from 1955-72. Black operatic voices were becoming more commonplace on broadcasts, but just a *few* voices.

Yet Shirley faced an intersection of prejudices as the Met's first Black tenor.⁸⁹ Andrew Frierson explained contemporary prejudices that believed "to have a black male wooing and pursuing a white female is totally unacceptable."⁹⁰ George Shirley at times confounded this sidelining, appearing in many interracial duets with white sopranos. Yet this hypervisibility about romantic plots, casting, gender, and race persisted. Conversely, being a Black male opera singer seemed less visible in other ways: Shirley's intermedial presence was less high-profile than that of Price and other Black divas. Shirley explains Black men were often marketable as superstars in "areas where white society expects them to excel" (sports and popular music genres), but less so amongst the power structures of classical music.⁹¹ Despite his ubiquitous presence in both leading and *comprimario* roles—in eleven years he sang nearly 200 performances of almost thirty different roles onstage at the Met—it's intriguing what kinds of answers radio listeners formed to the acousmatic question. Did listeners recognize Shirley's voice as the first prisoner in *Fidelio* or the steersman in *Der Fliegende Holländer*?⁹² Or did this

⁸⁹ See George Shirley, "The Black Performer," *Opera News* January 30, 1971 and Shirley, "Il Rodolfo Nero," also Wallace McClain Cheatham, "Black Male Singers at the Metropolitan Opera," *The Black Perspective in Music* 16, no. 1 (1988): 3–20.

⁹⁰ Andrew Frierson, "Andrew Frierson: A Singer Speaks Out on Racism and Other Issues," interview by Wallace McClain Cheatham, in *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience* (Scarecrow Press, 1997), 9.

⁹¹ George Shirley, "George Shirley, a Renowned Divo Speaks," interview by Wallace McClain Cheatham, in *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience* (Scarecrow Press, 1997), 100.

⁹² Broadcasts of January 26, 1963 and February 16, 1963.

complex relationship with stardom render his voice less recognizable to at least some radio listeners? In the case of Shirley and other Black singers, the intersection of fame, media, roles, voice type, and gender seem to inflect mere numerical broadcast representation.

Listening closely to these mid-century Saturday afternoons corrects a number of historical gaps. It shifts our attention from work or composer—or even solely performers—to the manifold audiences for opera. *This* was how millions consumed opera, not via in-person attendance in Manhattan. The broadcasts existed in a complex dialectic with stage productions, neither fully distinct nor precisely aligned. The radio programs emerged from a dizzying network of sponsors, institutions, non-profits, producers, artistic staff, performers, and media personalities, eliciting questions about capitalism, intent, and process. And finally, “integration” at the Met did not proceed exponentially after Marian Anderson’s 1955 stage debut, but unfolded in uneven, complex ways, crucially shaped by the radio broadcasts. As Black singers sang to millions in the 1950s and ‘60s, they negotiated a difficult terrain of possibility and exclusion, from minstrelsy to activism. More work remains to be done, from analyses of a single singer’s entire radio corpus to continued readings against the archival silences of Black radio listenership. Yet this study implores us to attend closely to the ties between race, opera, and radio, not only in these mid-century broadcasts, but also in their echoes in twenty-first media.

References

- André, Naomi, Karen M. Bryan. and Eric Saylor, editors. *Blackness in Opera*. University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- André, Naomi. *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*. University of Illinois Press, 2018.
- Brooks, Dianne. "“They Dig Her Message”: Opera, Television, and the Black Diva.” In *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, edited by Henry Jenkins III, Jane Shattuc and Tara McPherson. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Cheatham, Wallace McClain. “Black Male Singers at the Metropolitan Opera.” *The Black Perspective in Music* 16, no. 1 (1988): 3–20.
- Citron, Marcia. *Gender and the Musical Canon*. University of Illinois Press, 2000.
- Duffett, Mark and Peter Beate, eds. *Popular Music and Automobiles*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.
- Eidsheim, Nina Sun. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. Duke University Press, 2019.
- Forman, Murray. “Employment and Blue Pencils: NBC, Race, and Representation, 1926-55.” In *NBC: America’s Network*. Edited by Michele Hilmes. University of California Press, 2007.
- Frierson, Andrew. “Andrew Frierson: A Singer Speaks Out on Racism and Other Issues.” Interview by Wallace McClain Cheatham. In *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience*. Edited by Wallace McClain Cheatham. Scarecrow Press, 1997.
- Gautier, Ana María Ochoa. *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia*. Duke University Press, 2014.
- Guthrie, Kate. *The Art of Appreciation: Music and Middlebrow Culture in Modern Britain*. University of California Press, 2021.
- Hamilton, David. *The Sound of the Met*. Museum of Broadcasting, 1986.
- Hilmes, Michele. *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Hochschild, Adam. “In Many Ways, Author Says, Spanish Civil War Was 'The First Battle Of WWII'.” Interview by David Biancolli. *Fresh Air*, NPR, March 28, 2016. Audio, 38:00. <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/10/519462137/in-many-ways-author-says-spanish-civil-war-was-the-first-battle-of-wwii>

- King, Jr., Martin Luther. *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*. Ballantine Books, 1960.
- Jackson, Paul. *Saturday Afternoons at the Old Met: The Metropolitan Opera Broadcasts, 1931-1950*. Amadeus Press, 1992.
- Lockley, Tim. "'Our American Way of Living': Lucy Richardson Milligan and American Radio on the Eve of World War II." *Media History* 26, no. 4 (2020): 457-471.
- Madrid, Alejandro. "American Music in Times of Postnationality." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 64, no. 3 (2011): 699-703, 747.
- Miller, Kiri. *Playing Along: Digital Games, Youtube, and Virtual Performance*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Morrison, Matthew. "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re) making of Musicological Discourse." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72, no. 3 (2019): 781-823.
- Newman, Kathy M. "The Forgotten Fifteen Million: Black Radio, Radicalism, and the Construction of the 'Negro Market'." In *Communities of the Air: Radio Century, Radio Culture*. Edited by Susan Merrill Squier. Duke University Press, 2003.
- Norman, Jessye. *Stand Up Straight and Sing!* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014.
- Oja, Carol. "Marian Anderson and the Desegregation of the American Concert Stage." 2016-2017 Fellows' Presentation Series at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Cambridge, MA, October 20, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHB98VcB7So>
- Patterson, Willis. Introduction to *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience*. Edited by Wallace McClain Cheatham. Scarecrow Press, 1997.
- Pitcher, Kyla Dean Pitcher. "The Musical Journey of Opera Singer Lenora Lafayette: A Louisiana Treasure." PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2006. https://repository.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/2936
- Shirley, George. "An Oral History with George Shirley." Interview by Marc A. Scorca. *Opera America*, April 26, 2022. <https://www.operaamerica.org/industry-resources/2022/oral-history-project/an-oral-history-with-george-shirley/>
- Shirley, George. "The Black Performer." *Opera News*, January 30, 1971.
- Shirley, George. "George Shirley, a Renowned Divo Speaks." Interview by Wallace McClain Cheatham. In *Dialogues on Opera and the African-American Experience*. Edited by Wallace McClain Cheatham. Scarecrow Press, 1997.

- Shirley, George. "Il Rodolfo Nero, or the Masque of Blackness." In *Blackness in Opera*. Edited by Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan. and Eric Saylor. University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- Stoever, Jennifer. "Black Radio Listeners in America's 'Golden Age'." *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 26, no. 1 (2019): 119-33.
- Stoever, Jennifer. *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. NYU Press, 2016.
- Taylor, Timothy. "The Role of Opera in the Rise of Radio in the US." In *Music In the World: Selected Essays*. University of Chicago Press, 2017.
- Tsioulcas, Anastasia. "N.C. Radio Station Reverses Decision to Withhold Broadcast of Contemporary Met Operas." *National Public Radio*. September 29, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/2023/09/29/1202425600/met-opera-wcpe-north-carolina> .
- Thurman, Kira. *Singing Like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms*. Cornell University Press, 2021.
- Ward-Griffin, Danielle. "As Seen on TV: Putting the NBC Opera on Stage." *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, no. 3 (2018): 595–654.
- Ward-Griffin, Danielle. "Reality TV? Leontyne Price, the NBC *Tosca*, and the Civil Rights Movement." *Journal of Musicology* 71, no. 3 (2024): 367-401.
- Warwick, Jacqueline. *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s*. Routledge, 2007.
- Wheeler, Maurice B. "An Unlikely Champion: Rudolf Bing and the Demise of Jim Crow at the Metropolitan Opera." *Notes* 75, no. 2 (2018): 207-36.
- Woods, Lonel. "Serendipity and Divine Providence." Interview by Jason Hunter, <https://www.potsdam.edu/academics/crane-school-music/LonelWoods>