

## **A Musical Dawn: African American Musicians in Charleston, 1900-1930**

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No discourse on music can be complete without mention of the part in which the Negro has played as composer and performer, and his contribution of folksongs and rhythm to the world's repertoire of music.

From a speech entitled "Music" by James R. Logan 1937, Charleston, SC

Reflecting on the history of African American musicians in the United States, one does not usually consider Charleston, SC, as an important center of activity in the early twentieth century. Charleston has, however, received recognition as an important source of African, Caribbean, and early African American culture in the U. S. As a port city with a large slave work force for most of its early history, Charleston amassed a large African American population in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. So large was the city's black population that it often outnumbered the white population between 1790 and 1860. (Powers, 10) The physical isolation of large numbers of African Americans in the sea islands surrounding Charleston, the Lowcountry, encouraged the retention of African and early African American cultures creating what is commonly known as Gullah culture. Through DuBose Heyward's novel, *Porgy*, and George Gershwin's subsequent opera, *Porgy and Bess*, America and the world became more aware of Charleston's important and unique history. The distinctive music created by Gullah culture, especially Gullah spirituals, has been recognized as an important product of the Lowcountry. Many Americans are also aware of the Jenkins Orphanage band from Charleston, which produced important jazz musicians as in Jabbo Smith and Freddie Greene. (Chilton, 1) What seems to have been overlooked is Charleston's more substantial contribution to the history of African American music through its active musical landscape. This city's African American community trained musicians that produced clubs, concerts, and successful classical musicians contributing to developments of African American music during the first three decades of the twentieth century. On first glance, we might assume that these musicians worked in isolation, but all of the major musicians in this community performed with prominent African American musicians or were connected in certain

ways to the veritable cultural “loop” during this period. After a brief discussion of the history of African American musicians in Charleston, this paper will offer a preliminary look into Charleston’s active African American musical community outside of the folk idiom. Charleston’s contributions to Jazz and African American Concert music were significant from 1900-1930. An examination of the environment that produced African American musicians with celebrated national and international careers, and numerous concerts with compositions by African American composers will reveal Charleston’s important contribution to the development of African American music history.

### **A Brief history of trained African American musicians in Charleston.**

It is not surprising that African Americans living in Charleston would contribute greatly to the musical activity associated with this city. The important role music served in African society was immediately recognized in the Africans brought to this country for slave labor. (Southern, 21) African Americans were encouraged to perform music during slavery to expedite work and they were often observed communicating and entertaining themselves with music. (Southern, 156, 167) Regarded as an important center of musical activity during the colonial period, Charleston was also home to trained African American musicians. (Southern 24-25) The career of one African American is of particular interest considering this early period of American history. John Marrant, an African American missionary born in 1755, lived in Charleston in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century where he learned to play the violin and the French horn. His success as a musician is evidenced by his invitation to play at balls in town and by the response to his playing, which was always, “...met with the general applause of the inhabitants.” (Aldridge, 9) James Trotter’s work *Music of Some Highly Musical People* documents an African American musician and his family performing for Union soldiers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Mr. Lord played the cornet and led an orchestra, by Trotter’s account, and taught music to both of his daughters. (Trotter, 331) The social status of Marrant and Lord is unclear. Marrant could have been a free person who became a slave and Lord was probably free seeing that Trotter noted that Mr. Lord conducted an orchestra. The life of the bell-ringer from St. Michael’s Church, though, is very clear. Washington McLean Gadsden was an

ex-slave who became the official bell-ringer at one of Charleston's oldest churches in 1867. Gadsden, born into slavery in 1824, maintained his position as a literally "high profile" musician until his death in 1898. (Williams, Carologue, 5-6) The work of these musicians does not diminish the importance of the music performed by African Americans in churches rooted in the Gullah tradition or the music of African American street vendors also rooted in traditional folk music idioms. The lives of these individuals do tell us that there was a long tradition of African American musicians living and working in Charleston performing outside of the folk idiom for most of the city's existence.

### **Supporting Institutions**

Three important institutions supported, promoted, and trained African American musicians who were active in the early twentieth century. The African American protestant church provided venues for many of the concerts organized in the community. After the Civil war, many protestant churches, supported by the American Missionary Association, began to educate the newly freed African Americans. (Powers. 138) It is through many of these churches, Zion Presbyterian, Plymouth Congregational, and Morris Street Baptist in particular, that most of the concerts of classical music by African Americans occurred. Morris Street Baptist Church alone hosted recitals by Roland Hayes in 1916, Sydney Woodward in 1922, and Marian Anderson in 1929 within its walls. (Logan collection box 2) Roland Hayes and Marian Anderson were internationally known as America's premiere vocalists, but Sydney Woodward, who performed at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, was also a celebrated African American vocalist in the early twentieth century. (Southern, 248) Any institution hosting these soloists during this period should be noted for its pioneering programming.

The Avery Normal Institute was the second pioneering institution in Charleston's musical community. Founded in 1865, Avery opened its doors to educate African American students in Charleston and was eventually connected to the city's Black elite. Teachers and students at Avery believed that "...culture could serve as a bridge within the Low Country black community to transcend color and class differences." (Drago, 81)

Avery used music to achieve this goal. The curriculum at the school provided musical training in the classroom and private lessons on various instruments for an extra fee. Two of Avery's music teachers, J. Donovan Moore, a graduate from Avery in 1899 and the New England Conservatory (NEC), and James R. Logan were leading Black musicians in Charleston performing as soloists and in chamber ensembles in town. (Drago, 111) Benjamin Cox, an Avery principal from 1914-1936, had been an important African American musician before leading the Avery Institute. He attended Fisk University where he performed with the famed Fisk Jubilee Singers, arguably the first touring group of African American singers not rooted in the Minstrel tradition. (Drago, 141) Starting in 1871, the Jubilee Singers gained international fame performing Concert spirituals in America and Europe to raise money for the school. (Southern, 227-229) Cox's added encouragement of musical activities at Avery must stem from his background. Under Cox, Avery began a tradition of singing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" at every graduation. (Drago, 146) The school song, "The Avery Song", was composed by Maude H. Smith an Avery graduate and teacher during Cox's tenure as principal. (Avery Memorabilia collection) The school had a "Musicale" series every year presenting performances of music and poetry readings in Avery Hall, another important venue for African American musicians. The Avery Alumni Association sponsored these concerts and concerts at local churches. (Avery Research Archives) Avery Hall and the Alumni association were very important to the classical music activity in Charleston's African American community.

If Avery became increasingly considered a school for the black elite in Charleston, then Reverend Daniel Jenkins' Orphanage worked at training African Americans from the opposite end of the economic spectrum. Organized in 1892, the Jenkins Orphanage sheltered and educated parentless and abandoned African American children. (Chilton, 2) Rev. Jenkins decided to raise money for his orphanage by creating a band with its musically inclined children. His orphanage, and reform school, heavily depended on music in its curriculum to train the young performers in order to raise money for the Orphanage in the streets of Charleston. He hired two talented African American musicians, Francis Eugene Mikell and Peter "Hatsie" Logan, James R. Logan's

brother, to teach music to the orphans and direct their band. (Chilton, 3) Jenkins, not a musician himself, made an insightful decision by creating a band with the orphans. His Orphanage became another institution that trained successful African American musicians in Charleston.

This organization had multiple bands, five by 1923 and a few vocal groups. (Chilton, 25) The Orphanage band was invited to perform for the Buffalo Exposition in 1902, the St. Louis Fair and Exposition in 1904 and President Taft's Inauguration in 1907. (Chilton, 9) The band's reputation became international when it traveled to England in 1895 and 1904. As Charleston's

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