

Lecture at the University of Michigan on Ignatz Waghalter and the Negro Symphony Orchestra

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On January 15, David Goldfarb, an independent scholar and host of “Encounters with Polish and Ukrainian Literature,” a YouTube program sponsored by the Polish Cultural Institute in New York, gave a talk at the University of Michigan entitled “Ignatz Waghalter and the Negro Symphony Orchestra (1938-40).”

The topic of the lecture was an immensely significant, but little known, episode in the history of 20th century American and world music—the establishment of an African-American symphony orchestra in Harlem, founded by and under the direction of Polish-Jewish conductor and composer Ignatz Waghalter (1881-1949). Professor Goldfarb is working as historical researcher for a documentary film about Waghalter and the orchestra.

Waghalter was a major figure on the musical scene in Germany and Europe until he and his family were forced to flee Germany in 1934 due to Hitler’s rise to power and the anti-Polish and anti-Jewish attacks that ensued. After moving first to Czechoslovakia and then Austria, the Waghalters emigrated to the United States in late 1937.

Waghalter was the principal conductor at the newly built Deutsches Opernhaus in Charlottenburg, Berlin, predecessor of the Deutsche Oper. Despite death threats from right-wing nationalists and anti-Semites, he conducted the first-ever performance at the new theater on November 7, 1912. In March 1913, he was selected to conduct, at the insistence of the composer, the German premier of Puccini’s *La Fanciulla del West* [*The Girl of the Golden West*]. Waghalter remained at the Deutsches Opernhaus until 1923.

In 1924, Waghalter was appointed general music director of the New York State Symphony Orchestra (which later merged with the New York Philharmonic). It was during his year in New York that Waghalter became acquainted with leading American musicians, including George Gershwin. He followed with great interest the development of jazz, writing in a report published in a Berlin newspaper: “Jazz is, in any case, the expression of a musical feeling that contains still-untapped development possibilities; it clearly reflects the inventive spirit of America.”

Waghalter operas include *Mandragola* (1914), *Jugend* (1917), *Sataniel* (1923) and *Ahasverus und Esther* (1937). *Jugend* was based on the play by Max Halbe, which had been praised by socialist theoretician Franz Mehring for its critique of bourgeois morality. Waghalter’s work, which adhered closely to Halbe’s play, was among the most frequently performed operas in Berlin between 1917 and 1920.

Waghalter also wrote operettas, chamber music, and a violin concerto. In America, he composed the *New World Suite* for the Negro Symphony Orchestra. The handwritten orchestral manuscript of Waghalter’s work was discovered in 2012. A recording of the *New World Suite* was released by Naxos in 2015.

Although the founding of the Negro Symphony Orchestra (NSO) was

certainly a response to institutional racism and segregation in the US, on a more profound level the story of the NSO is not about race. It is essentially about the struggle against all forms of oppression and the universalist essence of music. Waghalter was an internationalist and universalist and he saw music as an expression of these ideals.

In his lecture, Goldfarb explained:

Waghalter believed deeply that art should serve society, and said that “music, the strongest citadel of universal democracy, knows neither color, creed nor nationality.” In practice, that sense of universal democracy included women. The orchestra stated in its calls for musicians that it was open to women... Mildred Franklin was the concertmaster of the Negro Symphony Orchestra, which is a testament to Waghalter’s and the orchestra’s sense of egalitarianism.

Beginning his lecture, Goldfarb noted that in a 1939 essay, the African-American composer William Grant Still called for the establishment of a Negro symphony orchestra. W.E.B. DuBois, in *The Souls of Black Folk*, argued that classical music played a central role in the “uplift” of the race.

Goldfarb said:

His (Waghalter’s) own works tended toward late Romanticism and neo-classicism in an era when atonalism and serialism were ascendant, and this may have had something to do with Waghalter’s unfortunate descent into obscurity, having been included in the first edition of the New Grove Dictionary well after his death, but edited out of the second.

He noted that soon after Waghalter became settled in New York in early 1938, “he joined with leading figures in the Harlem Renaissance to found the Negro Symphony Orchestra. The orchestra only lasted a few years, although it was reported widely in the African-American press.”

He continued:

Waghalter may have been largely forgotten after his death, but the Negro Symphony orchestra represented a remarkable moment of African-American and Jewish collaboration and hope in the arts.

As an advocate in the German and Austrian press for black

classical performers in Europe such as Roland Hayes, whom he'd met in the '20s in the US, and Marian Anderson, Waghhalter had credibility with figures like James Weldon Johnson, arts patron and attorney Hubert T. Delany, and Judge James S. Watson, one of the first African-American judges elected in New York state. Waghhalter even composed a work for chorus and small orchestra with lyrics by Watson condemning bigotry and anti-immigrant sentiment and praising America as a shining symbol of hope for freedom.

Goldfarb explained that an orchestra of black musicians that rehearsed at the Harlem YMCA already existed prior to Waghhalter's arrival in the US. That orchestra was led by Alfred Jack Thomas under the management of Leviticus Lyon. But it was consolidated as the Negro Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Waghhalter after the latter reached America. Thomas remained as the assistant conductor and Lyon continued as the manager.

Waghhalter initiated contact with James Weldon Johnson on February 1, 1938. Johnson was a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A writer and poet, he wrote the lyrics to "Lift Every Voice and Sing," which became known as the Negro national anthem. His younger brother, composer J. Rosamond Johnson, wrote the music.

Waghhalter announced the formation of the NSO in May of 1938. Goldfarb explained:

The NSO rehearsed at both the Harlem YMCA and the Grand Street Boys' Association Auditorium, around the corner from Carnegie Hall, a Jewish athletic club that began on the Lower East Side and was headed by civil rights advocate Judge Jonah Goldstein, who surely knew Judge Watson.

Goldfarb cited Judge Watson's testimony at the orchestra's incorporation proceedings, in which he "speaks of people outside the organization who were concerned that Waghhalter and orchestra treasurer Joseph Freudenthal could somehow exploit the musicians in some way."

Goldfarb continued:

Watson recommends harmony and vouches for Waghhalter as an honest broker with the musicians' and the African-American community's interests at heart... Watson states, "I don't think that anyone who knows of the services he has rendered for so long a period of time as a labor of love without any compensation could say that is his intention."

Waghhalter and the NSO had plans for a world tour, which were undermined by the outbreak of World War II in 1939. The fate of the orchestra was determined by world politics, the ongoing economic impact of the Great Depression and racism.

The life of Waghhalter in that period reflected the tragedies of the era. His story and that of the NSO are essentially about the intersection of two very powerful, historically significant, and, in a true historical sense, tragic movements. One was the great struggle of the African-American people for civil rights and for an equal place in American society, which they were denied. One should keep in mind that 1938-39 was the era of Marian Anderson being barred from singing in Constitution Hall and having to sing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial at the initiative of

Eleanor Roosevelt. Waghhalter wrote a song dedicated to Marian Anderson.

The other was the struggle of the Jewish people to escape annihilation.

Present at the lecture was University of Michigan Professor of Music and world renowned singer George Shirley. Now 91 years old, Shirley was the first black tenor and the second black male to sing leading roles at the New York Metropolitan Opera. He sang at the Met for 11 seasons.

Shirley has also appeared at the Royal Opera, London; the Deutsche Oper, Berlin; the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires; the Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam; Opéra de Monte-Carlo; the New York City Opera; the Scottish Opera; the Lyric Opera of Chicago; the Washington National Opera; the Michigan Opera Theater; the San Francisco Opera; and the Santa Fe Opera and Glyndebourne Festival summer seasons, as well as with numerous orchestras in the United States and Europe. He has sung more than 80 roles.

Shirley held the position of director of the Vocal Arts Division of the University of Michigan School of Music, Theater and Dance, and still maintains a studio at the school.

In a powerful contribution to the discussion that followed the lecture, Shirley endorsed Waghhalter's insistence that music transcends all racial, national and ethnic divisions. He declared:

The use of the term race represents the problem, because there's only one race, the human race. Ethnic, tribal differences, yes, but one race. We are all human animals, one race biologically. And I would argue that history shows us to be the worst species of life on the face of this planet when it comes to the one thing that really is most important—that is, being humane. So I would like to argue for throwing the socially constructed term race in the garbage can. Maybe we can look at each other in a different way, because we are all the same, except for our ethnicity, for the color of our skin...

What is music? It's the original language. Neanderthals did not have words. When we're brought into this world, we don't have words.

We have sounds that issue forth from us when we're babies and brought from our mother's womb, slapped on our behind. And the parents have to translate: My stomach is full, my diaper. Neanderthals evidently did not have words. They communicated with sounds. Words did not come until Homo Sapiens.

There's a wonderful book called *The Singing Neanderthal* [: *The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body* by Steven Mithen]. But music is arguably the sounds the baby makes in trying to express itself. It is that healing power, that force that has been with us from the very beginning, which different ethnicities take hold of and shape and create, and it belongs to everyone.

Here is the Wikipedia page on Ignace Waghhalter.



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