

From the Boston Concert Program

by Dennis Speed

[My great-grandfather] was dying, when I was baptized; and his daughter, my grandmother, present at my birth, requested that I might receive his name. The fact, recorded by my father at the time, has connected with that portion of my name, a charm of mingled sensibility and devotion. It was filial tenderness that gave the name. It was the name of one passing from earth to immortality. These have been among the strongest links of my attachment to the name of Quincy, and have been to me, through life, a perpetual admonition to do nothing unworthy of it.

—John Quincy Adams

Today's commemoration of John Quincy Adams (1767-1848), John F. Kennedy (1917-1963), and Sylvia Olden Lee (1917-2004), whose respective 250th and 100th birthdays we recall on this occasion, is now also dedicated to Mr. Robert Honeysucker (1943-2017), baritone, who had intended to sing on this very program. At the last moment, feeling himself unable to actually perform, he provided the written tribute to vocal coach Sylvia Olden Lee contained in this program. His tragic, unexpected, and sudden death has shocked and saddened us all. In a larger sense,



John Quincy Adams
(1767-1848)

nonetheless, he participates today with us, as does Sylvia Lee.

Every great Classical music composition is “the name of one passing from Earth to immortality.” Bach, Beethoven, Handel, and Haydn all remind us of this. Mozart’s *Ave Verum Corpus*, as much as his *Requiem*, state this. Classical music is Classical by virtue of this. Its subject need not be religious. *Von Ewiger Liebe* as set by Johannes Brahms comes to mind. *Mit Myrthen und Rosen*, Heine’s poem set by his friend, Robert Schumann, is another instance.

Textless instrumental composi-



John F. Kennedy
(1917-1963)



Sylvia Olden Lee
(1917-2004)



Robert Honeysucker
(1943-2017)

tions, while they have no words, are also sung. The immediacy of the human voice, mediated through the “ventriloquism” of the violin, in something like Bach’s *Chaconne*, the concluding movement of his D-minor violin sonata, will not be denied. “The trembling, living wire of those unusual strings” Poe said, in his eponymous poem of the angel Israfel, “whose heart-strings are a lute”; so human, and therefore, divine.

“It is in music that the soul most clearly attains the great end for which, when inspired by the poetic sentiment, it struggles—the creation of supernal beauty. It may be, indeed, that here this sublime end is, now and then, attained in fact. We are often made to feel, with a shivering delight, that from an earthly harp are stricken notes which cannot have been unfamiliar to the angels,” Poe tells us. “We find ourselves melted into tears, . . . through a certain, petulant, impatient sorrow at our inability to grasp now, wholly, here on earth, at once and forever, those divine and rapturous joys, of which through the poem or through the music, we attain to but brief and indeterminate glimpses.”

Unheard Melodies

“Divine” is not merely an adjective; it is also a verb. “To divine” is cheated of its deeper meaning when we say it merely means to discover, to unravel, or to solve. To divine is to name that which has no name, to make accessible the inaccessible. Music intends to connect us to that which has no name, but we confidently know must exist: It can be heard. It is our immortality exposed to us through the aperture of the auditory sense, which transmits, as well as receives. “Passive listening” is a contradiction. Is our hearing of music, an audition to our immortality?

The Classical musician of African-American descent has never enjoyed the luxury of divorcing the mission to recreate a truthful and unique Classical musical performance from a deep reflection upon his or her own immortality. Such musicians often recount the experience of an “extra-musical,” involuntarily imposed daily fight for, not their own humanity, but the humanity of all others—just in order to properly perform their music. The peculiar conceits of racialism are refuted by their very existence. Their living embodiment of Clas-



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Marian Anderson in her April 9, 1939 concert at the Lincoln Memorial.

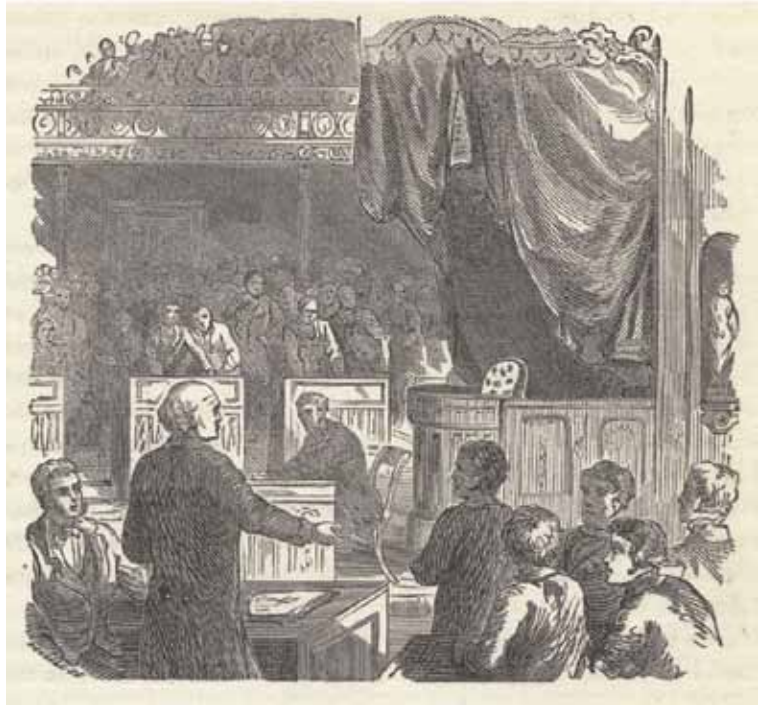
sical music is a cultural *au contraire* that has been witnessed by them on occasion to have caused wild consternation in others. The famous appearance by Roland Hayes in front of a German audience in 1927, who first jeered him for merely being on the stage, and then fervently acclaimed him as “finally an American who can sing our music,” illustrates, not a political act, but rather the power of an aesthetic act to transform humanity, an act whose inner truth becomes redolent of broader social implications.

Often, as they have achieved true mastery of their artistry, African-American Classical musicians have found that their discovery of their immortality—not talent, but immortality—has more likely than not confirmed something they truly knew even prior to their careers in Classical music—careers which are often more a vocation, than a financially lucrative profession. The deep relationship between the African-American church, and the Classical performer of African-American descent, is almost a prerequisite for the performer to be rooted in the actual mission to which they are called, despite its accompanying adversity. They may joyfully accept the artist’s life, and joyfully experience it, but that doesn’t change what it is. “The artist, however faithful to his personal vision of reality, becomes the last champion of the individual mind and sensibility against an intrusive society and an officious state. In pursuing his perceptions of reality, he must often sail against the currents of his time. This is not a popular role.” Marian Anderson’s 1939 Easter Sunday concert comes to mind.

This intimate connection between poetry, music, and statecraft was famously summarized by Percy Bysshe Shelley in the concluding sentence of his *A Defence of Poetry*: “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.” The application of this was spoken of by President John F. Kennedy in his Oct. 26, 1963 eulogy for poet Robert Frost, previously quoted just above. “Robert Frost coupled poetry and power, for he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself. When power leads men towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations. When power narrows the areas of man’s concern, poetry reminds him of the richness and diversity of his existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses. For art establishes the basic human truth which must serve as the touchstone of our judgment.”

Sylvia Olden Lee’s appearance in 1933 at the White House at the age of sixteen, her later appearances with singer Paul Robeson, and her even later encouragement of Minister Louis Farrakhan to take up the playing of the violin again in the 1990s, demonstrate, beyond her consummate artistry, why a year-long commemoration of her birthday is in order. Sylvia’s critical musical eye withered mediocrity, ridiculed self-absorption, and disdained artifice. When she saw authenticity, she championed it, no matter the controversy that might surround the individual. She once found herself deeply engrossed in a music discussion with economist and statesman Lyndon LaRouche, and demanded to stay overnight, saying, “I want to see what he sounds like in the morning in his pajamas!”

Sylvia was a member of the cultural advisory board of the Schiller Institute and a collaborator with its musicians for eleven years (1993-2004). She was one of the great pedagogues of the Twentieth Century. She is memorialized by Robert Honeysucker in a tribute that appears elsewhere in this program. His representation of Sylvia captures everything that need be said about her otherwise. Boston was an area she sometimes visited in her collaboration with the great Roland Hayes. As a practitioner of the mission of Classical music, especially as advocated in the field of the “AfroAmerican Spiritual,” Hayes had few equals, and Sylvia assimilated everything he thought, said, and did musically,



Collection of the U.S. House of Representatives
An early print depicts Massachusetts Representative John Quincy Adams addressing the House of Representatives in the Hall of the House.

pertaining to these songs, weighing it against her own experience from her father’s Tennessee Church.

Presiding Over the Republic of the Self

John Quincy Adams, or “John Q. Citizen” as he was once known in history, died on the floor of the United States Congress, fighting the battle against slavery at a time that it was most unpopular to do so. Sylvia Lee would have understood him immediately. John Kennedy wrote about him in *Profiles In Courage*. He represents the continuity of the American Revolution’s true self. Abraham Lincoln was one of his pallbearers.

His was “the name of one passing from earth to immortality”—into the mind of the Lincoln who would write what is arguably America’s greatest poem, the *Gettysburg Address*. When poetry and music legislate, they do not order—they inspire. That is why we are compelled to serve them; they govern us from the throne of our own souls. In our time, and in each moment of our brief time, now, let us strive to be the musicians, the name of that immortality whose shadow of our forgotten ancestors, and of our mortally inaccessible but knowable future, we are.