



Black Classical artists tour Germany to spread beauty, combat racism

by Stephan Marienfeld and John Sigerson

During the second week of September, the German political party Civil Rights Movement Solidarity and the Schiller Institute jointly held six concerts—in Munich, Oberursel, Düsseldorf, Potsdam, Eisenach, and Hanstedt, in commemoration of the great black American singer Marian Anderson, who passed away in April of last year. The concert series was convincing proof of how a cultural policy based on reason can promote an urgently needed cultural renaissance. Artists from the American civil rights movement played and sang Classical arias, songs, and spirituals, and brought to life Marian Anderson's spirit and soul.

But just as the American civil rights movement was born in struggle against evil and ignorance, so, too, this concert series had to triumph against forces in the drug-rock-sex counterculture who actively sought to cancel it, using a stockpot of old slanders cooked up by the former East German security police, the Stasi. The assaults were successfully beaten back, thanks to the dignity and beauty radiated by the performers and organizers of the concert tour. It is this aspect of the tour which perhaps gives it a significance ranging far beyond Germany's own borders.

"What made up that incomparable magic which Marian Anderson radiated? She was what the poet Friedrich Schiller described as a 'beautiful soul,'" wrote Helga Zepp-LaRouche, the lead candidate of the Civil Rights Movement Solidarity slate, in her greetings to the concert-goers. Marian Anderson was indeed a beautiful soul: She radiated morality, and with her extraordinary voice, she expressed both beauty and truth.

Dennis Speed, coordinator of the movement to establish a Marian Anderson Music Conservatory, emphasized that Marian Anderson's struggle against the cultural pessimism upon which all racism feeds, must be continued worldwide. He called for the employment of Classical music as the most appropriate tool in this fight against injustice, since, if beauty is implanted in the hearts of men, ugliness will disappear from the soul of its own accord. In this spirit, Rev. James Cokley from New York City opened the concert by singing "The Lord's Prayer" in his big tenor voice with baritone shades; and from then on, joy was the order of the evening. The lyric soprano Detra Battle, with her beautiful, youthfully light voice, which also has a round, dark core in the high register; the powerful, dramatic mezzo-soprano Elvira Green;

the sonorous, warm bass voice of Aaron Gooding, who has a clean mastery of all dynamic shadings; and their piano accompanists Sylvia Olden Lee and Dr. Raymond Jackson—were all rewarded with storms of applause.

With Mozart's "Porgi amor" from his opera *Le Nozze di Figaro* (Battle), Donizetti's "O mio Fernando" from *La Favorita* (Green), Verdi's "Ella giammai m'amò" from *Don Carlo* (Gooding), and the delightful duet "La ci darem la mano" from Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* (Battle, Gooding), the artists demonstrated great ability to portray characters, and the most beautiful Italian bel canto singing blossomed forth. They also adorned the first part of the concert with lieder by Johannes Brahms, such as the Cologne-dialect joke "Och Moder, ich well en Ding han" (Battle); the passionate lied "Meine Liebe ist grün," the sad "Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer," the perky "Wie froh und frisch" from the "Schöne Magelone" cycle (Green); and the introspective paintings "Der Tod, das ist die kühle Nacht" and "Mainacht" (Gooding). All these lieder appeared as cast from one mold, despite, or rather, precisely because of the pianistically and vocally freer treatment of the transitional passages. With insightful poetic shaping and singing phrasing—not mere fidelity to textual clarity—the artists successfully conveyed the musical metaphors of each lied, and stirred the listeners' hearts.

The pianist Dr. Raymond Jackson, professor at Howard University and an expert on the piano compositions of black composers, performed an Adagio in F minor by Chevalier de St. Georges (1739-1799), who was the son of the French governor of Guadeloupe by his native mother, and who had enjoyed all the advantages of an education at the court of Louis XVI. Chevalier de St. Georges played violin, composed symphonies, string quartets, and piano pieces which are considered to be in the style of Haydn and Mozart.

Jackson also included Franz Schubert's Impromptu in G-flat major, because it is such a song-like piano piece, in which the piano functions both as a singing voice and its own accompaniment.

Spirituals and the American art-song

The second portion of the concert was exclusively dedicated to American Negro spirituals. A special spotlight was put on the two spirituals "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" (Green) and "Deep River" (Gooding), each of which

was followed by a piano composition containing the same musical material, by Samuel Coleridge Taylor (1875-1912). As Dr. Jackson explained, Taylor, the son of an African father and an English mother, was moved by his great love for Negro spirituals and African folk music, to rework these melodies as piano pieces—just as Brahms and other leading European composers did with their own folk melodies.

With such spirituals as “I Want Jesus to Walk With Me,” “Ride on Jesus” (Battle), “There Is a Balm in Gilead” (Cokley), “Oh, What a Beautiful City” (Green), “Come On Board” (Gooding), and “He’s Got the Whole World in His Hands” (all), the audience was put on intimate terms with America’s musical tradition, of which Antonin Dvořak said: “These beautiful and varied songs are the products of the land. They are American. In the Negro songs, I find all that is necessary for a significant and excellent musical school. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, risqué, funny, happy.”

The artists from the American civil rights movement brought the great, successful, heart-to-heart movement of Dr. Martin Luther King into the realm of everyone’s personal experience, and in doing so, they showed the connection between real politics and Classical culture. Schiller’s admonition to artists—“Man’s dignity is given into your hand. Keep it well! It sinks with you, and with you it will rise up,” was heeded with great dignity by these African-American artists.

Counterculture is beaten back

The concert series caused a marked shift in some German establishment layers’ public estimation of the work of the Schiller Institute, whose chairman, Helga Zepp-LaRouche, is currently running in the elections to replace Helmut Kohl as federal chancellor. The Munich-based *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, which up to now has heaped nothing but scorn upon anyone and anything associated with Mrs. Zepp-LaRouche or her husband Lyndon LaRouche, gave prominent coverage to the artists. The following day, the *Taunus Zeitung* gave similar laudatory coverage of the Oberursel concert.

But the situation was quite different in Eisenach, a former East German city which also happens to be the birthplace of Johann Sebastian Bach. Here, a front consisting of two counterculture parties—Alliance 90 and the Green party—mounted a public effort to force the concert’s cancellation, peddling worn-out slanders about the Schiller Institute being “right-wing radicals” and a “youth cult,” and directly pressuring the mayor of Eisenach to intervene and shut the concert down. Fortunately, the mayor, reflecting the growing public sense of frustration and disgust with the whole environmentalist gaggle, not only refused to bend to the pressure, but sent his own delegate to the concert.

The Eisenach concert was a success—but one would have never known it from the next day’s press reports! The *Mitteldeutsche Allgemeine* ran a short item entitled “Concert Provokes Protests,” which did not even mention what kind of



Rev. James Cokley, American operatic tenor and civil rights leader, has been traveling to the German East to support the cause of freedom and human rights there, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

concert it was, much less who the performers were. The *Thüringer Allgemeine*, while giving a more accurate report, made sure to also quote a Green member of parliament terming the Schiller Institute’s stand against racism “misleading propaganda.” And when a reporter from the *Eisenacher Presse* submitted a laudatory article on the concert to his editor, the editor peremptorily threw it out and substituted a slander-filled note.

Undaunted, the organizers of the concert put into motion a wave of protest letters to these newspapers. Organizer Lynne Speed confronted the editor of the *Eisenacher Presse*, telling him, “Just imagine you come to the United States, and an American paper writes that you’re a Nazi Skinhead, and you can’t defend yourself. How would you feel? Don’t you think the artists will get the impression that black people aren’t welcome in Eisenach?”

The editors of the *Eisenacher Presse* must have been sorely stung by her rebuke, because the very next day, not one, but two articles appeared, one titled “Institute Rejects Extremism Slander,” and the other the suppressed review of the concert itself. The first article contained a remarkable passage about the newspaper’s call to the Verfassungsschutz, the German agency responsible for protecting the Constitution. The Verfassungsschutz “has no evidence that the Schiller Institute or the Civil Rights Movement Solidarity are against the Constitution,” the paper reports. “Since the mid-1970s, the organization and its successor organizations have no longer appeared in the Verfassungsschutz report [on extremism]. At that time, the organization was considered not right-wing extremist, but rather left-wing extremist. A spokesman said: If you are politically exotic, it does not mean that you are an enemy of the Constitution.”