

“Bach to Black: Piano Suites by Composers of African Descent”
A Lecture-Recital of Suites by J.S. Bach, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, R. Nathaniel Dett, and James Lee III

2023 Music Teachers National Association Conference, Reno, Nevada
Dr. Rochelle Sennet, piano, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

I. Why Piano Suites?

- A. Black composers contribution and Black culture’s history with dance.
From William Greaves: “Dance is an old friend of Africa. It is a river that flows from soul to soul. It is a river that brings life, joy, and love. A river that sweeps each soul into the sea of harmony...” Film: "The First World Festival of Negro Arts," 1966.
<http://www.williamgreaves.com/first-world-festival-negro-arts/>
- B. “Bach to Black” defined.

PROGRAM

Sunday, March 26, 2023

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH **English Suite no. 5 in E Minor, BWV 810**
(1685-1750) *1. Prelude*

SAMUEL COLERIDGE-TAYLOR **Four Characteristic Waltzes, Op. 22 (1903)**
(1875-1912) *1. Valse Bohémienne*
 3. Valse de la Reine
 4. Valse Mauresque

R. NATHANIEL DETT ***In the Bottoms (1913)***
(1882-1943) *1. Prelude (Night)*
 2. His Song
 4. Barcarolle (Morning)
 5. Dance (Juba)

JAMES LEE III **Souls of Alkebulan (2012)**
(b. 1975) *1. Vitality of Kemet*
 2. Memories of Axum
 4. Lost Treasures
 5. Warrior Dance

PROGRAM NOTES

ABOUT THE COMPOSERS OF AFRICAN DESCENT:

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

Born in England, Coleridge-Taylor studied at the Royal College of Music in London. With studies in violin, piano, and voice, he later served as Lecturer at Croydon Conservatoire in England, and Professor of Composition at Trinity College of Music, Crystal Palace School of Art and Music, and Guildhall School of Music. For more detailed biographical information about the composer, please visit Africlassical.com. <http://chevalierdesaintgeorges.homestead.com/Song.html>

A quick note of clarification regarding Four Characteristic Waltzes:

This work was originally composed for orchestra in 1898. The date of publication for the composer's piano transcription is 1903. See musical excerpts of first pages of Nos 1 and 3: *Valse Bohémienne* and *Valse de la Reine*.

Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943)

Dett was the first person of African descent to graduate from Oberlin Conservatory, with a double degree in piano and composition. Originally born in Canada, he also earned honorary doctorates from Howard University in 1924 and Oberlin in 1926, and he received a master's degree from Eastman School of Music in 1931. Though *In the Bottoms* Suite is among the well-known suites by a Black composer, I feel it is important to also include this popular piano work as it has not been included in this context, and I seek to showcase composers of the past who are inspired by the dance genre, despite difference in aesthetic. From the composer's original notes: "In the Bottoms is a Suite of five numbers giving pictures of moods or scenes to Black life in the river bottoms of the Southern sections of North America." Dett further states that "as it is quite possible to describe the traits, habits and customs of a people without using the vernacular, so it is similarly possible to musically portray racial peculiarities without the use of national tunes or folk songs."¹ See musical excerpt of first pages of No. 5: *Juba (Dance)*.

James Lee III (b. 1975)

Since Dr. Lee's graduation with a D.M.A. in composition from the University of Michigan, his orchestral works have been commissioned and premiered by the National Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, New World Symphony Orchestra, and the orchestras of Philadelphia, Indianapolis, Omaha, Pasadena, Memphis, Grand Rapids, Cincinnati, Atlanta, Akron, and have been conducted by such artists as Leonard Slatkin, Marin Alsop, Michael Tilson Thomas, Juanjo Mena, David Lockington, Thomas Wilkins, and others. During the 2019-2020 season, *Sukkot Through Orion's Nebula* was scheduled to be performed by the Louisiana Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, and Chicago Symphony Orchestra. James Lee III's Concert for Piano and Symphonic Band was premiered by Dr. Rochelle Sennet and the Morgan State University Symphonic Band in April 2016. His Concerto for Clarinet and Symphonic Band was premiered in Córdoba, Argentina by Nicolás Panatteri and the Symphonic Band of the Province of Córdoba. Dr. Lee is also a winner of a Charles Ives Scholarship and the Wladimir Lakond Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Chamber organizations such as the Montrose Trio, Ritz Chamber Players, and the

¹ Dett, R. Nathaniel. *In the Bottoms* Suite. Composer's Preface. Chicago: Clayton F. Summy Co, 1913, pg. 3.

Harlem Chamber Players have performed and premiered music by James Lee III. Dr. Lee cites as his major composition teachers Michael Daugherty, William Bolcom, and Bright Sheng at University of Michigan. He was also a composition fellow at the Tanglewood Music Center where he studied with Michael Gandolfi. James Lee III is a Professor of Music at Morgan State University in Baltimore, MD, and his music is published by Subito Music Corporation. www.subitomusic.com. For more information about the composer, please visit <https://www.jameslee3music.com>.

Souls of Alkebulan (2012):

From the composer, James Lee III (reprinted with permission):

"I intended that *Souls of Alkebulan* would be a set of piano pieces that would display imagined African rhythms and memories from Africa's past. Alkebulan is the indigenous name for the continent of Africa. It has been known to mean "Cradle of Civilization," "Land of the Blacks," and "Mother of Mankind." The first piece Vitality of Kemet evokes the wonderful civilization of ancient Egypt. This particular piece has a variety of rhythmic motives that are a musical commentary on some of ancient Egypt's brilliant civilization. The second piece, Memories of Axum references the ancient empire of Axum in northern Ethiopia. It was also an important trading nation. The quintal chords that are set with pleasant minor second dissonances are a salute to this kingdom of the ancient world. Heart of Kalimba² utilizes a melodic and rhythmic motive that one might hear played on a kalimba (thumb piano). These melodies eventually grow into very expressive passages of material that sing in celebration of everyday life. The opening measures of Lost Treasures are based off of the Ethiopian Ambassel scale, which is a type of hexatonic scale construct. This particular piece is a sort of lamentation that reflects on the various jewels and other valuable gems, and human beings (slaves) that were taken from Africa over the past few centuries. The final piece of this set, Warrior Dance, celebrates the storytelling of tribal leaders and others. These stories often are reenactments of various important historical events. Warrior Dance is also a commentary on musical rituals associated with victory celebrations of a defeat of an enemy or a successful hunt. This piece also alludes to cross rhythms characteristic of much of African music. Various passages also evoke a virtuoso mbira player. This work is the sum of some of my latest interests in non-musical materials as sources of inspiration. *Souls of Alkebulan* is dedicated to my wife Adnéia Alves Lee." See musical excerpt of first page of I. Vitality of Kemet.

*All website addresses listed above last accessed March 13, 2023.

SELECT ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Floyd, Samuel. *International Dictionary of Black Composers*. In Two volumes. Routledge, 1999.

Southern, Eileen. *The Music of Black Americans: A History*. 3rd edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

MUSICAL SCORES

Coleridge-Taylor, Samuel. *Four Characteristic Waltzes, op. 22*. London: Novello and Company, 1922.

Dett, R. Nathaniel. *In The Bottoms Suite*. Chicago: Clayton F. Summy Co, 1913.

Lee III, James. *Souls of Alkebulan*. Verona, N.J.: Subito Music Corporation, 2012.

² Not included in today's performance due to time constraints.

MUSICAL EXAMPLES

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: *Four Characteristic Waltzes, op. 22: I. Valse Bohémienne, mm. 1-11.*

Allegro ma non troppo. ♩ = 64.

mp

Ped.

dim.

p

mf

f

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor: *Four Characteristic Waltzes, op. 22: III. Valse de la Reine, mm. 1-14.*

Andante. Con sentimento. ♩ = 120.

mp

lusingando

Ped.

dim.

p

dim.

pp

R. Nathaniel Dett: *In the Bottoms Suite, V. Juba*, mm. 1-4.

Non troppo allegro (♩ = 120 - 144)

mf *non legato*

James Lee III: *Souls of Alkebulan, I. Vitality of Kemet*, mm. 1-14.

Con Spirito, ♩ = 96

1. Vitality of Kemet

Piano *mp*

5

9

12