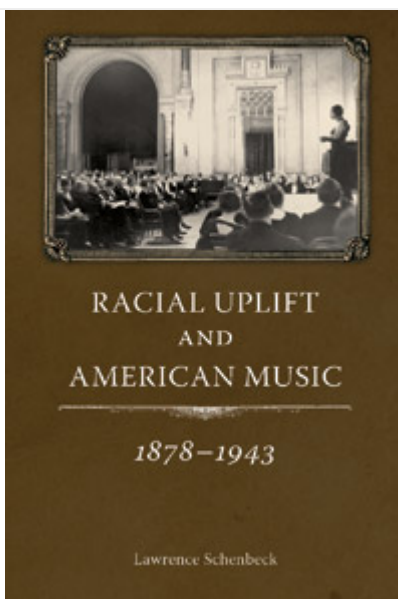


# {essays in history}

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## Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943



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### Reviewed Work(s)

*Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943*. By Lawrence Schenbeck (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). Pp. 317. Cloth, \$60.00.

The notion that “culture matters” emerges as both a recurrent theme and melodic refrain in *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943* by

Lawrence Schenbeck (11). When referring to African American musicians who embraced the politics of respectability, the author states, “[a] measured reevaluation of that generation’s ideals and accomplishments would surely be useful at this point in time” (10). With this mandate, Schenbeck draws on the work of Kevin Gaines and August Meier to inform his seminal treatment of the linkages between black classical musicians and the racial uplift ideologies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In this volume Schenbeck argues that “[u]plift marked out self-help as its territory, hoping to rehabilitate the race’s image by stressing visible class distinctions, respectable middle-class behavior, and an ethos of service to the masses” (5-6). The central aim of this text is to trace “the rise, survival, and significance of the ideology of racial uplift among African American musicians between 1878 and 1943” (3), and the book is chronologically organized around a series of case studies of important and influential African American musicians.

The first chapter of *Racial Uplift and American Music* focuses on the life and experiences of James Trotter, an African-American former slave who served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Trotter’s personal success epitomized the attitude and achievements of black “uplifters” during the late-nineteenth century (8). For Schenbeck, racial uplift entailed a Faustian bargain for its black adherents. The ideology of racial uplift celebrated a particular, representative race in order to suggest how changes could be made to the existing racial order of society. . However, these displays of race pride oftentimes eschewed candid discussions of the repressive state of the African American community. Schenbeck deftly illustrates this paradox in the musical literature produced by Trotter. In 1878, Trotter published *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, a historical treatment of African American musicians and their accomplishments, and compares Trotter’s piece on Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield” to the grim reality of her short career (54). Describing Trotter’s volume, Schenbeck asserts, “[i]n adopting a genial tone that masked many of his true feelings about race and personal identity, James Trotter can be seen as one of the earlier literary agents of ... a culture of dissemblance”(56). The concept of a “culture of dissemblance” gained currency in the academy after Darlene Clark Hine’s scholarship on African-American clubwomen. In *Racial Uplift and American Music*, Schenbeck appropriates this theoretical concept to illustrate the contradictory positions of black advocates of racial uplift and its

influence on African American musical practices. In Trotter's case, Schenbeck notes that the author of *Music and Some Highly Musical People* purposely discussed specific instances of white appreciation of African-American classical musicians while tactfully avoiding the subject of the racism and discrimination these performers endured on a daily basis.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach to African American musical history, Schenbeck uses the notion of a culture of dissemblance to analyze the artistic and creative productions of noted African-American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois and classical musician R. Nathaniel Dett. *Racial Uplift and American Music* included a chapter on Du Bois's literary classic, *The Souls of Black Folk* and his production of an African themed pageant, *The Star of Ethiopia*. Unlike previous generations of literary historians, Schenbeck's study of *The Souls of Black Folk* does not focus on Du Bois' notion of double consciousness. Moreover, Schenbeck provides new insight into the textual composition of *The Souls of Black Folk* by noting the author's selective incorporation of musical notations from slave spirituals. Schenbeck persuasively demonstrates that Du Bois' incorporation of African themes in both his literary work and in the production of *The Star of Ethiopia* reflected his appreciation of cultural plurality and its centrality in changing racial values in American society.

Similarly, Schenbeck examines the creative productions of Dett as representative of the constraints of uplift ideology in the early twentieth century. In *Racial Uplift and American Music*, Dett embraced racial uplift by producing compositions, musical arrangements, and choir tours that integrated slave spirituals with European musical elements. Utilizing Dett's life and experiences, Schenbeck provides compelling evidence to demonstrate the precarious circumstances African American elites confronted by insisting on positive representations of black musical traditions while witnessing the growing white fascination with "racial tropes" associated with both jazz and African primitivism (143).

*Racial Uplift and American Music* makes an important contribution to the scholarly literature on African American musical history. By illustrating the various musical idioms that expressed the central tenets of uplift ideology, Schenbeck expands the complexity of the relationship between culture and agency. One of the singular assets of this book is the diversity of musical mediums and productions Schenbeck analyzes to

illustrate African-American musicians' fidelity to uplift ideals. *Racial Uplift and American Music* provides an effective historical narrative of black musical history that seamlessly connects the literary work of Du Bois to the musical journalism of Nora Holt and the struggle of white philanthropy to evaluate black musical talent and performance. Aside from these strengths, Schenbeck only tangentially addresses the issue of cultural authenticity in *Racial Uplift and American Music*. This represents a drawback to the volume because Schenbeck discussed these problems in the context of conflicts between Nathaniel Dett and white music critics and preservationists. These debates suggest the shifting social and cultural use of classical music from leisurely pursuit to commercial commodity changed the expectations between black musicians and white patronage.

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