

I am Tania

As a living composer of prolific operas, Anthony Davis is in an important position of reflection and influence over the identities of the cultures in his operas as well as the societal identity of his audiences. He introduced and shaped for himself the notion of the documentary opera. Almost by definition, this genre is a vehicle for commentary and development of identity, both of the opera's subjects, who are often still living, and of the audience and the culture in which his operas are performed. Davis is significant because, by redefining American opera in the context of a diverse racial heritage, he seeks to command attention to greater issues of American identity.

Born in 1951 in New Jersey, Anthony Davis grew up with many musical influences that led him down a path of self discovery and exploration of various means of expression. While in high school, Davis spent a year in Italy as a result of his father's receiving a Fulbright. According to Davis, this trip "coincide[d] with my self-discovery as a black person."<sup>1</sup> In this time, as Davis formed his own character, he developed ideas about the importance of identity. While in the United States, Davis went to a predominantly white school, but it seems, rather than intimidating him, this situation motivated him to achieve greater success. He mentions that "I didn't feel at all inferior or in any way inadequate because I was different."<sup>2</sup> Through his experiences, he molded his ideas about how race affects American culture and how it should be reflected in music. Davis's observations led him to believe that, when it came to music, "black people don't feel they are supposed to participate."<sup>3</sup> He says that black culture experiences "a form of self-denial and self-destruction."<sup>4</sup> After first realizing this, a concerned Davis was inspired to become a prominent figure in the musical world, incorporating various facets of his character into his music in order to motivate reflection in others.

Davis bemoans the notion that the "opportunities of black history month are isolated,"<sup>5</sup> which, in his words, ghettoizes the music, making it almost a spectacle. It becomes set aside from American culture, rather than being embraced as an integral part of our musical identity. Davis resents the "colonialism of traditional

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<sup>1</sup> William C. Banfield, (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2003), 313.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 313.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 314.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 314.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 314.

black materials” by composers such as Charles Ives and Aaron Copland. Although it is not intentionally patronizing, their use of Afro-American musical motifs and rhythms in an effort incorporate an exotic and interesting sound into high art is inherently offensive to Davis. He insists “we are not here as tokens to relieve the political pressures on white cultural institutions.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, Davis proposes that African American music is already an essential influence on American music. “I think the basis of American classical music is Afro-American, I really do. I think that it is what makes our music unique, that makes it different, what differentiates us from the European concepts”<sup>7</sup> Rather than making an exhibition of the exotic black ‘other,’ recognition of a common identity would be a much greater tribute to true American musical identity. According to Davis, there is no American music without the influence of African American identity.

Using his ideas about an integrated aesthetic, Anthony Davis shapes how American musical identity is defined and preserved. Davis enjoys complexity and communication on levels that might not be immediately obvious to an audience, but through exploration, can be discovered.<sup>8</sup> I see this technique as representing the individual and communal journey of self-discovery, through which we understand who we are. Davis insists “we are in a cultural war to define an American aesthetic.”<sup>9</sup> The United States has been known as a melting pot and Davis believes that the metaphor is particularly relevant when comes to the music of the States.<sup>10</sup> By challenging the assumptions of traditional classical music, Davis asks his audiences to reexamine what they hold to be American. He feels that “America will always have this self-destructive way of denying the richness of our own musical heritage. I think part of it is racism; when you get to see innovation in American music, a lot of it comes from African Americans.”<sup>11</sup>

Davis embraces the musical richness that he feels is currently lacking in American music and transforms the stage through his ideas. He uses complex rhythms, in 11 and 13 beats, for example, to recall the early drum influences that are at the root of jazz and spiritual beats. Although his intentions are not initially obvious, by creating music that is so intensely rhythmic, I believe Davis intend to draw the attention of

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 314.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, 315.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 314.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>10</sup> Anthony Davis, *From Malcolm X to Patty Hearst: The Politics of Staging Politics on the Contemporary American Stage*, February 7th, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> James Reel, "A Conversation with Anthony Davis," *Fanfare - the Magazine for Serious Record Collectors* 25, no. 2 (November-December, 2001), 30.

Americans to the rhythmic void that American classical music has experienced as it attempts to ignore the African influences on its music. Davis is “making connections to things that are not on the surface, not necessarily metaphoric, but something that reinforces memory and how we deal with history”<sup>12</sup> Davis shapes American music as he composes and through this means shapes American distinctiveness. Davis feels that his goal is “be the American composer who helps to define opera for the next century, to give opera its unique American voice, and leave a legacy of works that do that.”<sup>13</sup> By perusing this dream, Davis shapes his identity and legacy at the same time that he is shaping the identity of American opera.

Anthony Davis collapses the boundaries between jazz and classical music, between high art and improvisation. Davis claims that “in my opera we’ll see a transformation of the traditional orchestra over time.”<sup>14</sup> By requiring skilled improvisers in City Opera’s orchestra pit, I feel he changes the identity of that orchestra and expands, not only their abilities and repertoire, but also how they are perceived by the audience and the world. By actively creating live music, through improvisation, the performers are able to reclaim the music as their own, which gives them status and credibility to their listeners. We are no longer bound to the Romantic concept of an infallible composer. At the same time, however, Davis incorporates electronic media into his music. For example, in *Tania*, he uses prerecorded tracks quoting Patty Hearst’s answering machine voice recording. By these means, Davis takes some of the improvisational liberty back from the performers. They have no control of the tape and are at the mercy of a click track. I see this dichotomy as intentionally emblematic of a modern society. For example, in today’s world, technological innovations lead to freedom of information. Yet, people’s identities are more consistently intertwined with those of technology in the form of screen names, blogs, email addresses and facebook accounts, all of which act as musical click tracks, confining identity into pre-made algorithms of expression.

Anthony Davis dances with concepts of identity on many different levels. In addition to wrestling American musical identity, he also challenges the identity of Americans themselves. Davis feels that “there are a lot of unanswered questions and things to be address in our history and I believe part of my function as a

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<sup>12</sup> Arlo McKinnon, "History in the Making," *Opera News* 71, no. 3 (September, 2006), 51.

<sup>13</sup> Banfield, 315.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*, 314.

composer is to make people think these things.”<sup>15</sup> I think that all forms of art are expressions of cultural and personal identity. Art conveys a concept of self that is often difficult to express in words. For this reason, composers “have to be involved in transforming our society....there has to be an awareness, a realization, that we do necessarily have a leadership role in all this.”<sup>16</sup> It is important to pay careful attention to the composers of our time because they serve as leaders in both reflecting and further shaping modern cultural identities. History is not simple nor one sided and “opera takes you out of the historical realm into a different realm.... [The audience] can come in with their own baggage, and we can weave our way through that and deconstruct it.”<sup>17</sup> By choosing modern American biographical topics for his opera, creates an environment for shaping living personal identities. Davis believes “the American experience is rich with stories that can be translated into music-theater”<sup>18</sup> This is why operas like *X* and *Tania* are so effective. Davis takes stories that are relevant and well-reported and can then break them down to examine how they reflect American culture both then and now.

By playing with the identity of historical characters and events on stage, Anthony Davis manipulates the identities of the real-life persons, the individuals in the audience, and the nation as a whole. To have such an impact on so many concepts of reality, the music that Davis writes must have an element “that interests you and makes you look further, makes you look underneath.”<sup>19</sup> Anthony Davis succeeds in facilitating that introspection through his emphasis on essential musical ideas from African American culture and his representation of current stories. Through these means, he becomes significant as we try to understand who we are. True events, having been first transformed by media analysis, is adapted by composers, like Davis, and are then interpreted by actors, deciphered by audiences and incorporated into a larger cultural identity. His interpretations of events need not be perfectly factual, they need only add to the complexity that is the construct of American history. It is this influence on so many different identities that makes Anthony Davis noteworthy.

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<sup>15</sup> McKinnon, *History in the Making*, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Banfield, 314

<sup>17</sup> Reel, *A Conversation with Anthony Davis*, 26, 30.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Banfield, 315.

## Bibliography

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Does my paper have a strong thesis that is both interesting and clearly articulated? Is this thesis appropriate to the essay assignment? And is my paper organized in such a way as to clearly respond to this central idea or thesis? Just as importantly, will my reader be able to understand the main aims of my paper by the time she reaches the end of the first paragraph? And does each paragraph that follows add some element to the thesis I have set out for my reader?

Musical examples

Go back through and add

Connect music to broader world movements

Go back through and add

Ability to draw incisive conclusions based on original observations and research

Avoidance of digressions, overly **broad generalizations**, unnecessary details, and passive constructions

Careful proofreading for spelling and punctuation errors

Clear connections, transitions, introductions, and conclusions

Why, as a musicologist, should I care about Anthony Davis?

But it should especially consider Davis's music and his own ideas and words about his music.

MORE NARROW?

Concise writing

Thesis top and bottom

Dunn every sentence

Starting every paragraph with Anthony Davis,

Use appositives

We all have Plural identities

There is a theme like that [running] through my work...how one deals with expectations and who you are, how you [confront] the limitations of your environment to try and determine your path or identity to free yourself and then feel how exciting it is. —ON 51

“I think art reflects society”

IN THIS WAY DAVIS IS SIMILY TO GUTHRIE Ramsey

Accomplishes in lines of identity

What do you learn from this book about music and the expression of identity that you can extend to a study of Anthony Davis?

Positive self identification after WWII

Signify(n)

Create meaning and identity

Writes himself into history, thus shaping his society's identity as he shapes his own—so too Davis (he wants to make impact on orchestra)

DTRT—identity hip-hop and Latin representing—cite Ramsey's opinion

True Malcolm vs. actors interpretation

Two different identities

So that audience can identify with him

Malcolm's wife disagreeing

MLK's identity already formed too strong

X more meat and controversy

Tania—a play about changing someone's identity

In closet—in our memory

Miss identifying Betty Ford as mom etc

Davis could indeed explore modern identity with subjects from different cultures, but he would be doing so through the lens of comparison rather than that of direct analysis. This technique can often be beneficial and can lead to excellent discussion of identity, as seen with Mozart's *Der Zauberflöte*. Through the setting of a non-existent world, Mozart explores issues of race and gender identity, religion. By creating so many strange scenarios in the opera world, Mozart can highlight those elements of the opera, like the values of thought and wisdom, which are similar in both worlds. It makes a stronger point, however, to use stories and events that are familiar to the culture that is being commented on. This is why Mozart's *Le Nozze di Figaro* is so poignant as it reflects and shapes societal identity. To place Figaro, a manservant, on stage with Count Almaviva and to give Figaro the leading role, expresses a change in the perception of the identity of both of these characters. The same can be said, of course for Susanna's relationship with Countess Almaviva. In addition to being able to explore the complexities of changing identities on the stage, the audience is given the opportunity to take part in the discovery. By using the genre of opera buffa, Mozart can call questions of identity to the minds of his audience without the full frontal confrontation of such complexities in the context of opera seria.

In the same way that Mozart uses opera buffa, so too does Anthony Davis use comedy in *Tania*. He uses the satire available through a black comedy to explore the complexities of Patty Hearst's crisis of self. He uses musical allusions to represent cultures and groups of people. He has themes around which the SLA can rally and he incorporates Cuban local color to represent the way in which the SLA identifies with Fidel Castro. This is similar to the musical identification that Guthrie Ramsey notices in Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* as Latin beats represent one culture battling against the rhythms of 'Fight the Power.' In this way, Davis develops the personality of the characters portrayed in his opera by signify their identity through musical representation.