

ELMER KEETON AND HIS  
BAY AREA NEGRO CHORUS:  
CREATING AN ARTISTIC IDENTITY  
IN DEPRESSION-ERA SAN FRANCISCO

---

LETA E. MILLER

On June 15, 1939, a vibrant show, the *Swing Mikado*, opened at the Golden Gate International Exposition on San Francisco's Treasure Island. Featuring an all-black cast, the production was a "brashly irreverent" adaptation of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Mikado* (Hobart 1939b) with the locale changed from Japan to an unidentified "coral island" in the South Seas. The *Swing Mikado* preserved Sullivan's music intact—albeit with minor changes in lyrics to omit racist references and adapt to the changed geographical setting. Added to the score, however, were a half dozen swing arrangements and "specialty dances" that were greeted with immense ovation and that accounted for the sellout, standing-room-only crowds.

The *Swing Mikado*—which had originated in Chicago a year earlier—represented one of the most successful endeavors of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP), one of four arts programs collectively called "Federal One" that were sponsored by the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the federal government's massive employment effort of the Depression era. San Francisco's version of the show featured fifteen soloists, a "singing chorus" of about fifty, and a "dancing chorus" of about twenty. John Hobart, in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, characterized the singing group as "really magnificent. . . . After the anemic voices that usually make up the ensemble in G. and S. revivals," he wrote, "it is wondrous to hear this huge crowd of singers, with full-bodied voices, pitching into the music" (Hobart 1939b).

---

LETA E. MILLER, Professor of Music at the University of California, Santa Cruz, has coauthored two books on composer Lou Harrison and edited a critical edition of his works. She has also published nearly two dozen articles on Harrison, John Cage, Henry Cowell, Charles Ives, and music in the San Francisco area in various journals, essay collections, and encyclopedias. She is currently completing a book on music and politics in San Francisco from the 1906 earthquake to World War II. Miller is the editor of the *Journal of the Society for American Music*.

---

This “singing chorus” was well-known to locals: under the inspired direction of Elmer Keeton, it had become one of the most prominent ensembles in northern California’s Federal Music Project (FMP)—another Federal One unit. (The FTP and the FMP often collaborated on musical theater productions. The other two components of Federal One were the Federal Art Project and the Federal Writers’ Project.) Keeton’s Bay Area Negro Chorus had been attracting large crowds and exceptional reviews for the previous three years.

Critics predicted that the *Swing Mikado* was in for a long run. Two weeks after its opening, however, Congress shut down the FTP, bending to conservative opposition to the WPA in general and to rumors of Communist influence within the Theatre Project in particular. “4100 Lopped Off Rolls; ‘Mikado’ Show Closed,” lamented the *Chronicle* in a page 1 story the day after the closing (“4100 Lopped” 1939). The Music Project, which felt invested in the production because of Keeton’s chorus, tried to convince WPA authorities to take it over from the defunct FTP, but to no avail (Ness 1939; “Music Project” 1939). A month later the *Swing Mikado* reopened under private sponsorship in the city and then went on tour. Thereafter, the chorus continued to perform concerts under Keeton’s leadership, and was even featured in several nationwide broadcasts.

The story of Elmer Keeton and his “Negro chorus”—pieced together here from programs, reviews, WPA documents, and recordings—is one of musical artistry and success, but also of racial exclusion and marginalization. Keeton himself walked a tenuous line between tolerating the segregation of the WPA and promoting the extraordinary musical heritage of U.S. blacks. His nonconfrontational approach cultivated positive interactions with the white population, whose responses to his programs were for the most part appreciative, but also, at times, patronizing. With the exception of a small minority of white singers directly threatened by the group’s success, Keeton and his chorus attracted well-deserved praise from the city’s arts critics.

Keeton’s quiet attitude toward racial issues stands in stark contrast to that of younger arrivals to San Francisco, among them one of the solo singers in his musical productions. Joseph James, featured in two theatrical presentations with the chorus, spearheaded a contentious legal battle that led to the integration of local labor unions. The contrasting approaches of Keeton and James to the discrimination they faced illustrates both a generational divide and a demographic realignment within the local population. Tension between blacks and whites in San Francisco before the Second World War was less virulent than in many other areas of the country, in part because of the small number of African Americans in the city, in part because the sizable Chinese population absorbed the brunt of racist sentiment. A tremendous influx of African Americans took place in the war years, however: San Francisco’s black population increased from .8 percent to 5.6 percent between

1940 and 1950. Anti-black responses followed, particularly because many of the newcomers hailed from the southern states. The reaction of many long-time African-American residents (such as Keeton) was apprehension: Would the delicate relationships they had cultivated with the white majority devolve into overt racism in reaction to the unsophisticated rural culture introduced by many of the new arrivals?<sup>1</sup> Younger and newer residents (such as James), in contrast, tended to respond with resistance; and as we will see below, two of their legal challenges were supported by the courts.

A subtext of the Keeton story involves the ambivalent relationship between African Americans and Japan (the stated locale of the original non-swung *Mikado*). Widely expressed admiration on the part of U.S. blacks in the early part of the century for the world's most powerful nonwhite nation became severely compromised in the late 1930s, and Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 placed its sympathizers in an untenable position. Keeton, like many others, responded with a virulent anti-Japanese outburst (in his case, a musical work that was broadcast nationally). Thus the tale of Keeton and his chorus represents, in many ways, a microcosm of the ambivalent position of U.S. blacks, not only in the arts, but also in the political arena, during the era leading up to World War II.

As one of many black leaders who struggled for artistic success during the late 1930s and early 1940s, Elmer Keeton managed to adjust with skill to shifts in the political winds, whether engendered by demographic reconfigurations, national cultural controversies, the impending war, or changes in musical preferences and expression. During his years in building and directing his ensemble, he adroitly enhanced his own and his chorus's musical artistry, often seeking new creative outlets for his talented singers. The result was an ensemble that left a mark of excellence and imagination on the local landscape.

### William Elmer Keeton

W. Elmer Keeton (1882–1947) was born in Rolla, Missouri, and grew up in St. Louis. In 1903 he entered Northwestern University, where he studied for three years. Keeton was awarded a Certificate in Piano and Theory in June 1906 (“Graduates” 1906; *Syllabus* 1904 and 1905); photos in the school's yearbooks show that he also played baritone horn in the band (see Fig. 1). Published statements that Keeton was awarded a B.S. or a “doctorate with honors” are untrue (Crouchett 1987–88, 2; Fried 1996, 238; “Public Spirited

1. Drummer Earl Watkins, an eyewitness to the demographic change, found these fears in part justified. During the 1930s he recalls a city relatively free of anti-black prejudice, but also one in which African-American residents were careful to preserve a “respectable” presence. During the 1940s, in contrast, he experienced considerable discrimination (Watkins 2006). See also Daniels (1980, 75, 165–170).

Figures" 1929). In fact, Northwestern did not even offer a doctoral degree in music until 1954. In the years Keeton attended the university, music students could not even earn a bachelor's degree: the school offered only diploma and certificate programs. After his time at Northwestern, Keeton served as a military bandmaster in Illinois and an organist at several churches in St. Louis.

In 1921 Keeton moved to Oakland, California, where he set up a music studio. An ad in the weekly African-American paper *The Western Outlook* on October 22 of that year stated that he offered a wide range of instruction: not only piano and organ lessons but also "complete courses in [the] theory of music, harmony, counterpoint, form, analysis, history, composition, [and] instrumentation," as well as "expert arranging and copying" (Advertisement 1921). Judging from the musical works he would later compose, his skills in harmony, counterpoint, form, and arranging must indeed have been quite exceptional.

Over the next decade Keeton taught music, directed choral and operatic groups, and published (with Harold Powell) popular songs and piano-vocal arrangements of spirituals. Example 1 shows the end of their setting of "Walk in Jerusalem Jus' Like John," which uses strategies typical of Keeton's later a cappella choral arrangements: responsorial effects (here manifest as unaccompanied solo passages answered by piano responses)

*Figure 1. The Northwestern University band; photo from the 1906 yearbook. Keeton is in the front row, second from the left. By permission of the Northwestern University Archives.*



Example 1. "Walk in Jerusalem Jus' Like John," mm. 65–82, arranged by Harold Powell and W. Elmer Keeton; Kansas City, Mo.: J. W. Jenkins Sons Music Co, 1924.

65

Oh\_ I want\_ to be ready - y I want\_ to be read - y

69

*rit.* *a tempo*

I want to be read - y Walk in Jer-u - sa - lem Jus' like John.

74

*p*

Walk in Jer - u - sa - lem

*pp*

78

*broad* *a tempo*

Jus' \_\_\_\_\_ like John \_\_\_\_\_

*ff rall.* *a tempo* *sfz*

The image shows a musical score for a song. It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The first system starts at measure 65 and ends at measure 68. The second system starts at measure 69 and ends at measure 73. The third system starts at measure 74 and ends at measure 77. The fourth system starts at measure 78 and ends at measure 82. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *rit.*, *a tempo*, *p*, *pp*, *ff rall.*, and *sfz*. The lyrics are written below the vocal line.

and idiomatic harmonic colorations including added-sixth and eleventh chords, chromatic passing/neighbor tones, modal interchange on the sub-dominant, and suspensions. "Professor" Keeton built up an avid group of students and admirers who fondly dubbed him 'Fess.

In December 1935 Keeton began to organize a "colored chorus" under the auspices of the Federal Music Project's Oakland branch. When WPA officials had set up Northern California's FMP in the fall of that year, San Francisco and Oakland were established as separate units because the absence of a bridge across the bay required slow and costly ferry travel. Two choral ensembles took shape in the Oakland unit: Keeton's Negro chorus and a (white) East Bay ensemble directed by John Fuerbringer. Such racial segregation was typical of most FMP units throughout the country. Separate Negro performing ensembles were established in areas with sizable black populations, including (in California) Los Angeles and Oakland, which in 1930 had 7,500 African-American residents (2.6 percent of the population). The two Oakland choral ensembles appeared together in a joint program on June 24, 1936. Keeton's group (Fig. 2) sang four spirituals in his own inventive arrangements, as well as other works, including a medley that used the largo from Dvořák's *New World Symphony* (called "Massa Dear") and Foster's "Swanee River." Fuerbringer's white chorus performed works by Brahms, Haydn, Liszt, Johann Strauss, Rachmaninoff, and others.

Keeton's programming was typical of his later concerts: spirituals (ar-

Figure 2. The Keeton chorus in 1936. By permission of the African American Museum and Library, Oakland.





ranged by himself) formed the centerpiece of the programs, but more standard choral fare appeared as well, including several works by Mendelssohn. A particular favorite was Keeton's *a cappella* arrangement of the quartet "Bella figlia dell' amore" from *Rigoletto*, sung by soloists along with a "murmured choral background" (Mason 1938b). In addition, the lead male singer, Marcus Hall, typically performed German lieder and/or English songs by Purcell, Quilter, and others, with Keeton accompanying at the piano. Publicity in the programs and the press repeatedly linked Hall to Roland Hayes, who, according to one source, had "sent [Hall] to London" where he studied with George Henschel ("Colored Chorus" 1938).

### Crisis in the Northern California Federal Music Project

The Federal Music Project (like many other WPA units) suffered from its share of political infighting (Miller and Smith 2009). In northern California internal conflicts became particularly heated in the spring following the Oakland choral groups' premiere performance. On May 26, 1937, after a series of increasingly unpleasant confrontations, California state director Harlé Jervis (one of the few women to hold such a prestigious position) fired San Francisco FMP supervisor Ernst Bacon, a composer of considerable repute who was highly respected in the region. Her justification: administrative inefficiency. Bacon responded with fury, writing letters to everyone from local reporters to Eleanor Roosevelt. The media, in dozens of articles, took up his cause with vehemence and the national FMP office received nearly three dozen angry letters and telegrams, most of them condemning Bacon's firing by bullies from the Southland. Jervis, who headed the largest state FMP unit in the nation from her office in Los Angeles, found herself under attack by her northern California branch. After waiting out the storm in near-silence, she fought back with a brilliant counterstroke. On June 23, 1937, she announced the appointment of a new northern California FMP leader: San Francisco Symphony conductor emeritus Alfred Hertz.<sup>2</sup>

Hertz had left the symphony in 1930 after a fifteen-year stint in which he built the orchestra from its rudimentary beginnings to a highly respected ensemble (Miller, forthcoming). He came out of retirement to accept the FMP position in an advisory capacity, not only to bring peace to the local conflict, but also to support the WPA's massive experiment in government-supported arts. He told local reporters that he could envision the FMP as the forerunner of a national conservatory, national symphonies, and a department of fine arts in the president's cabinet (Davidson 1937).

2. The protest letters, as well as a great deal of other documentation on this crisis, are found at the National Archives and Records Administration, WPA, Record Group 69. For details see Miller and Smith (2009).

Hertz began his FMP tenure with a far more sober mandate, however: he needed to reduce the number of workers, save money, and increase audience size. His first move—made possible in part by the opening of the Oakland-Bay Bridge in November 1936—was to combine the San Francisco and Oakland projects, uniting their two orchestras into a single “Bay Area Federal Symphony” and enhancing the profile of Keeton’s group by renaming it the “Bay Area Negro Chorus.” (The East Bay’s white chorus continued to function as well under the rubric “Oakland chorus” or “Oakland choral unit.”) Hertz immediately expanded the FMP’s diversity by enlisting a female orchestral conductor, Antonia Brico, and bringing Keeton’s chorus to San Francisco for high-profile engagements.

The Bay Area Negro Chorus first appeared in the city on August 16, 1937, interrupting what had become a weekly orchestral series. Attendance, at 543, was somewhat lower than for the symphonic concerts (which averaged more than 700 in the same month), but Hertz thought the programming change was well worth the effort. He brought the group back for a return engagement on September 27.

Jervis, for her part, justified the smaller attendance and lower box office receipts in her report to national FMP director Nikolai Sokoloff: “Considering that the presentation . . . marked a break in the usual type of offering at the Alcazar Theater . . . the box office receipts of \$91.50 . . . is [*sic*] quite gratifying.” She lauded the presentation as “an innovation in the Alcazar series which usually features the San Francisco Federal Symphony [FMP] Orchestra” and noted that newspaper critics were unanimous in their praise (“Narrative Report” 1937).

Indeed, (white) critics were impressed. Alfred Metzger—a discriminating musician who never hesitated to lambaste uninspired interpretation or faulty intonation—offered subdued but solid praise, particularly citing the group’s “purity of pitch as well as distinct enunciation. The singers are also discriminating in their mode of interpreting, phrasing and coloring the various musical periods” (Metzger 1937). Marjory Fisher wrote in the *San Francisco News* that it was rare to hear “such true pitch, fine tone quality, excellent balance, and impeccable enunciation—to say nothing of the inimitable rhythm achieved by these Oakland singers.” The audience at the August 16 concert apparently demanded “encore after encore, which the singers graciously gave” (Fisher 1937). After their second performance, Alfred Frankenstein noted that the ensemble’s chief virtue was “a smoothness and loveliness of silken blended tone quite unparalleled among local choirs” (Frankenstein 1937a).

Under the auspices of the Federal Music Project, the chorus appeared five more times in San Francisco the following year. On February 24, 1938, it participated in a program featuring African-American composer Wil-



liam Grant Still (in his *Lenox Avenue*). In July and August the chorus sang outdoors at Stern Grove as part of a series of “midsummer musicals” sponsored jointly by the FMP and the San Francisco Recreation Commission. The singers also appeared in July at the Federal Music Theater on Bush Street and in September, under Brico, they performed Percy Grainger’s *Tribute to Stephen Foster*, a challenging, eleven-minute work for chorus and orchestra based on Foster’s “Camptown Races.” This last occasion, one of a series of eight so-called Dime Concerts, placed the chorus in a particularly prominent spotlight. Hertz instigated the series and enlisted Brico as conductor; the stated aim was to bring “good” music to masses. Dubbed “Everybody’s Symphony Concerts,” the series was held in the cavernous Civic Auditorium and was advertised in part by a peripatetic truck bearing a picture of a dime magnified 10,000 times, promoting 10,000 seats for ten cents. The first concert packed the hall (“Dime Concert” 1938; Fisher 1938); the second, with Keeton’s chorus, nearly sold out as well. In fact, the series as a whole averaged 7,000 auditors per concert (Mason 1938a).<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, the chorus continued to perform widely in the East Bay and critics noted its increasingly expert work. Alexander Fried called their performance of the Grainger piece “delightful” and Alfred Frankenstein wrote that the group was “the only WPA choral unit that dares to sing without accompaniment, merely taking the pitch at the outset of each selection and—wonderful to relate—keeping it to the end” (Fried 1938; Frankenstein 1938).

In October 1938 Redfern Mason devoted an entire column in the Communist *People’s World* to the chorus’s performance at San Leandro High School near Oakland. “This WPA chorus,” he wrote melodramatically, “is one of the signs of the musical emancipation of the Negro people of America.” He wished that Keeton and his group could tour the United States to show “what song can be when it is the outpouring of emotions deeply felt” (Mason 1938b). The works Mason highlighted, however, were those that maintained links to the traditional classical repertoire: the largo from the *New World Symphony*, Marcus Hall’s renditions of Schubert lieder, and the quartet from *Rigoletto*. His comments on the *Rigoletto* quartet evince his admiration but also some condescension typical of the time: “Your opera audience, especially if it had been an Italian audience[,] might have been shocked at the boldness of Mr. Keeton’s arrangement. It was Verdi reconceived by the African temperament, primitive, if you like, but indubitably artistic.”

Response from supporters of Oakland’s white chorus, on the other hand,

3. The dates and locations of the 1938 San Francisco concerts are: February 24 (Scottish Rite Auditorium; W. G. Still performance); July 17 and August 7 (Stern Grove); July 28 (FMP theater); and September 13 (Civic Center; a Dime Concert). A photo of one of the Dime Concerts is included in Miller and Smith (2009, 44).

took the form of angry resentment. Philip Reilly, editor of the tiny, but virulently outspoken weekly *Free Press*, vented his anger at Hertz and company in a series of forty vituperative editorials running from January 18, 1938, to June 27, 1939. In several of these articles Reilly came to the defense of the white chorus, accusing FMP officials of dismissing or transferring many of its members, reducing its performance opportunities, and installing an incompetent director. "The Oakland WPA White chorus members are again the victims of Federal Relief employment retrenchments," claimed an editorial on August 16, 1938. "We are told that one half the members have been reduced to a second grade salary basis" ("Goats or Musicians" 1938). Despite Reilly's condemnation of the chorus's new director, Joseph Cizkovsky had strong credentials: he had graduated from the Prague conservatory, studied under Dvořák, and appeared as conductor in Russia and Mexico ("Midsummer Musicals" 1938). After Brico's Dime Concert program was repeated in Oakland the following month, another angry article appeared:

Again the White Chorus was ignored and the colored chorus given an opportunity to express its one and only style. The Negro Spirituals. Some of their numbers were given with the Symphony Orchestra, elaborating a soloist Marcus Hall who is just one of their own chorus members and thru whom Mr. Keaton [*sic*] their director is trying to boost himself into prominence. The public is getting extremely tired and fed up with having only spirituals thrown down their throats. ("Music vs. Dark Politics" 1938)

Reilly was no kinder to Brico, calling her "the dime store queen" and referring to her by the masculine "Antonio" ("Dizzy People" 1938).

The tiny *Free Press* was hardly a major journalistic voice in the Bay Area. At the same time, its hard-hitting attacks on the Keaton chorus demonstrate an attitude bordering on paranoia. The paper was Democratic (as opposed to the major San Francisco dailies, all but one of which supported Alf Landon over Franklin Roosevelt in the 1936 presidential election). Its editorials continually lobbed accusations of graft against elected officials and attacked government employees whose salaries purportedly took money away from the "common man." Indeed, in this period of high unemployment, the *Free Press* did not oppose the WPA work projects, but it also made clear who it considered the program's most appropriate beneficiaries: working-class white males. Such racist attitudes had a long history in San Francisco, dating back to the late 1870s when another (much less severe) recession spawned a Workingmen's Party of California. The party's platform—summarized in its simpleminded slogan, "The Chinese Must Go!"—consisted of aid to laborers and wholesale expulsion of the Chinese.<sup>4</sup>

4. Among the many sources on this party, see especially Sandmeyer (1991, 63–75), and McClain (1994, 79–83).

### Keeton's Choral Arrangements

Hertz's promotion of the "colored chorus" reflected not only the group's excellent vocal and ensemble skills but also the appeal of its repertoire. To judge from surviving recordings, as well as the reports of critics, Keeton was both skilled and prolific as an arranger: programs I have uncovered include thirty-six different spirituals, the Dvořák-Foster medley, and the *Rigoletto* quartet. Some sense of his imagination is evident from three recorded WPA broadcasts made around 1942 ("W.P.A. Recordings" 1942a).<sup>5</sup> Among the most moving works on them is "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child." Example 2, transcribed from the recording, presents the end of section A and all of section B. (Section A then returns to conclude the work.) Keeton enhanced the traditional somber melody, intoned in the A section by a baritone and in the B section by an alto, with wordless choral accompaniments, expressive interludes that feature the women's voices in a wailing descent on the words "True believer" (mm. 17–20), a soprano soloist crying out on a high *a*# (m. 26), and a bass sounding a dramatic low *c*# (m. 43). The soloists are not identified by the announcer, but the baritone is most likely Marcus Hall, who sang the work in several concerts. The alto is Genetta Yates, one of the most extraordinary voices in Keeton's group; her low range and lush timbre sound almost like a tenor. (Yates's voice can be identified through comparison with another recording, where the announcer names her.) As shown in Example 2, Yates descends, at the end of this section, to a spine-tingling low *d*# (m. 40), reminiscent in sound quality of the legendary timbre of Marian Anderson.

Indeed, Anderson herself appeared for the first time in San Francisco in February 1937, the same year that the Keeton choir began performing in the city. She presented recitals in San Francisco and Oakland, and appeared in the 3,300-seat opera house on a program with the San Francisco Symphony singing works by Mozart and Verdi as well as two spirituals, one of which was "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child" (see Fig. 3). Frankenstein called the spirituals the "culmination" of the program, saying that Anderson moved "the heart with a majesty and mystery and breadth of feeling such as no other artist, in my experience, has brought to Negro spirituals" (Frankenstein 1937b). Reaction on the part of the public was similarly enthusiastic and Anderson returned to San Francisco annually for the next few years. As for Keeton, he programmed his own "Motherless Child" on the second Alcazar Theater concert, seven months after Anderson's San Francisco per-

5. Although undated, the announcements on the recordings make it clear that they were broadcast shortly after the Pearl Harbor bombing. Programs from Keeton's concerts are found in the African American Museum and Library in Oakland, the California Historical Society Library in San Francisco, and the San Francisco Public Library's program scrapbooks.

Example 2. "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," arranged for a cappella chorus by Elmer Keeton, mm. 13–43. The A section is for baritone solo with (mostly wordless) choral accompaniment; the B section is for alto solo with male chorus accompaniment. Transcribed from the WPA broadcast recording, ca. 1942 (Library of Congress control number: 99470851) by Daniel Brown, Leta E. Miller, and Danny Driver. (All WPA materials are in the public domain.)

13 baritone solo:

long way from home. True be - lie - ver  
True be - lie - ver, true be -

This musical system covers measures 13 through 18. It features a baritone solo line in the bass clef and piano accompaniment in the grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#), and the time signature is 4/4. The tempo is marked 'Rit.' (Ritardando). The lyrics are: 'long way from home. True be - lie - ver True be - lie - ver, true be -'.

19

*Rit.*

True be - lie - ver a long way from  
lie - ver, true be - lie - ver Ah  
True be - lie ver, Ah

This musical system covers measures 19 through 23. It continues the baritone solo and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'True be - lie - ver a long way from lie - ver, true be - lie - ver Ah True be - lie ver, Ah'.

24

alto solo:

home. sop. solo Some-times I feel like a  
Tenors Ah  
Basses  
Fine Oo

This musical system covers measures 24 through 27. It features an alto solo line in the treble clef and piano accompaniment in the grand staff. The lyrics are: 'home. Some-times I feel like a Ah Oo'. The section ends with a 'Fine' marking.

28

moth-er-less child Some-times I feel like a moth-er-less child

This musical system covers measures 28 through 31. It continues the alto solo and piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: 'moth-er-less child Some-times I feel like a moth-er-less child'.

31

Some-times I feel like a moth-er less child a long way\_ from home\_ a

35

long way\_ from\_ home. True be -

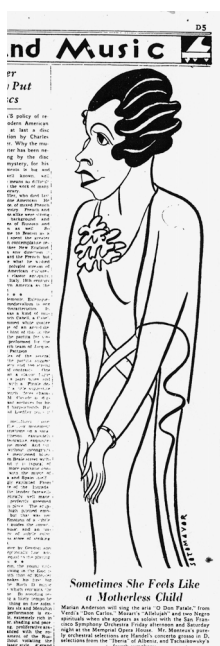
40

lie - ver. True be - lie - ver. Mmm

formance. Had he perhaps attended her recitals or the symphony concert? And did he have in mind, when creating his own version of the song, her well-known concert spiritual style, as well as the richness and extraordinary range of her voice, which he could suggest (although certainly not equal) by casting the central part of his work for Yates? Whatever the stimulus, Keeton programmed his "Motherless Child" arrangement more frequently than any of his other settings.

One of Keeton's most unusual creations—and a composition that demands considerable skill on the part of the singers—is his setting of "Go Down, Moses" (Ex. 3, also transcribed from the broadcast recording). For this emotionally charged rendition of the famous spiritual, Keeton created a dramatic musical work that includes antiphonal choral interchanges, interpolated responsorial cries, and an extended choral diversion from the song's familiar melody that features harmonies more akin to opera than

Figure 3. Drawing of Marian Anderson by Antonio Sotomayor (San Francisco Chronicle, February 28, 1937, D5). By permission of the San Francisco Chronicle.



to spiritual arrangements (mm. 17–42). Note, for instance, the chromatic melodic motion, the augmented sixth and diminished seventh chords, and the poignant mediant progression. The song’s melody—already short—is abbreviated even further, first broken into two-beat fragments that are subjected to antiphonal treatment (mm. 17–20), followed by a threefold repetition of the text “Go tell Pharoah” interspersed with dramatic rests and featuring a double chromatic line in contrary motion between the altos and basses (mm. 21–23). The passage ultimately cadences in C major, the supertonic of the original key. Keeton’s dramatic use of harmony and rhythm, phrase length extension, and reordering of the primary units of the song’s original melody make “Go Down, Moses” particularly theatrical, suggesting a possible connection to his *Rigoletto* quartet arrangement (although I have not been able to locate either a score or a recording of that work).

In the variety of his arrangements, as well as in the programming of them, Keeton seems to have intentionally drawn parallels between Verdi and Dvořák on the one hand, and the spirituals repertory on the other, perhaps in part to demonstrate to white critics (and white audiences) the “seriousness” of the spiritual. It was not enough for the critics to be impressed by the quality of the choir’s singing—its tight ensemble, excellent blend, and accurate pitch. Equally important was that the spiritual be seen as “good”



Example 3. "Go Down, Moses," arranged for a cappella chorus by Elmer Keeton, mm. 14-33. Transcribed from the WPA broadcast recording, ca. 1942 (Library of Congress control number: 99612096).

14      baritone solo:

Tell old Pha-roah Oh Let my peo ple go

Go tell Pha-roah Go tell Pha-roah Let my let my peo-ple go

Let my let my, let my peo-ple,

18

let my peo-ple go let my peo-ple go let my peo-ple go Go tell Pha-roah,

let my, let my peo-ple go, let my peo-ple go, let my peo-ple

22

Go tell Pha-roah, Go tell Pha-roah Let my peo-ple go. Go tell

*molto rit.* *f*

27

Pha-roah Go tell Pha-roah

*mf*

Let my peo-ple go Let my peo-ple go

*mp* *p*

music by the critics. Indeed, Frankenstein (perhaps the most astute of the San Francisco reviewers) wrote that Anderson, as an African American, had a repertory open to her that could surmount the quality of “the inevitable English group at the end [of a typical program]. The Negro spiritual, so often vulgarized or exploited for its purely naive and comic values, became [in her 1937 performance] a vehicle for far more authentic lyric drama than the selection from Verdi’s *Don Carlos*’ Miss Anderson had sung earlier [in the program]” (Frankenstein 1937c).

### 1939: Musical Theater—*Run Little Chillun’* and the *Swing Mikado*

Despite the theatricality of Keeton’s arrangements, their public presentation, up to the end of 1938, took the form of the traditional concert program. At the beginning of the following year, however, an opportunity arose to bring that theatrical inspiration onto the dramatic stage through a production of Hall Johnson’s *Run Little Chillun’*. This show—with text, arrangements, and some new numbers all written by Johnson—had originally opened in New York on March 1, 1933, building on Johnson’s enormous success in *Green Pastures* (1930). His own chorus was featured in both productions, performing Johnson’s well-known arrangements of spirituals. In July 1938 the Los Angeles FTP revived *Run Little Chillun’*, bringing Johnson himself to the West Coast with some of his singers, who joined with local talent. *Run Little Chillun’* became the biggest hit of L.A.’s Federal Theatre Project, running for nearly five hundred performances in 1938–39.<sup>6</sup> The Southern California success seems to have provided the stimulus for the San Francisco production, also under the auspices of the FTP, which opened on January 26, 1939, with an all-black cast of 150.

*Run Little Chillun’* recounts the story of Jim Jones, son of a minister of the New Hope Baptist church. He is seduced by Sulamai, a beautiful woman from the New Day Pilgrims, an Afro-Caribbean “cult” that (in Johnson’s words) finds God manifest through nature, defines sin as “a sense of guilt inculcated by wrong education,” and views the human body not as “an object for shame or concealment,” but as the “branches of a beautiful, fruitful tree” (*Run Little Chillun’* 1939; Simpson 2008, 189–190). Jones leaves his family and church to join the Pilgrims, but Christianity triumphs in the end: Sulamai is struck dead by lightning and Jones returns to the Baptist fold. By juxtaposing the contrasting religions Johnson was able to exploit two common tropes for black-cast shows aimed at white audiences in this period—“native” tribal scenes on the one hand and revivalist Christian

6. For discussions of the show, see Peterson (1993, 297–298); Fraden (1994, 169–170, 179–186); Hill and Hatch (2003, 310, 329); and Simpson (2008, 14, 58–63, 173–192).

spirituality in the guise of the humble, rural church on the other. His success in doing so significantly enhanced the show's box office appeal. Musically, the contrast plays out in the concluding scene of each act: a pagan ritual at the end of Act I described frequently by reviewers as "orgiastic," and the church revival at the end of Act II, which featured a dozen spirituals and hymns, as well as the title song, composed by Johnson.

Figure 4. Everett Boucré and Justitia Davis in *Run Little Chillun'* (FMP-FTP production, San Francisco, 1939). By permission of the African American Museum and Library, Oakland.



With its heavy reliance on spirituals and its inherent dramatic contrasts, *Run Little Chillun'* offered a perfect (and challenging) outlet for Keeton's by-now-renowned chorus. In practical terms, the show promised as well long-term steady exposure for his singers through an ongoing FTP-FMP collaboration. Indeed, the San Francisco production was highly successful, running for nearly five months and breaking attendance records for the previous ten years ("Swing Mikado" 1939). Reviewers praised its spirit, while also noting the inexperience of the cast. Justitia Davis (Fig. 4), a singer in Keeton's chorus with no prior dramatic training (Hobart 1939a), sang the role of Sulamai to high critical praise; later that year she would take on the leading female role in the *Swing Mikado*.

Among the other solo singers in *Run, Little Chillun'* was a recent transplant from the East Coast, Joseph James, the future labor activist mentioned at the beginning of this article. James played Brother Moses, a young priest of the Pilgrims. A native of South Carolina, he had studied at Boston University, sung in the Hall Johnson Choir in *Green Pastures*, worked as a pick-up actor in Hollywood films in typically racist roles ("mostly running around as a savage in a G-string, feeling pretty silly"),<sup>7</sup> and sung with the Eva Jessye Choir in the original 1935 Boston/New York production of *Porgy and Bess*. Three years later he came to Los Angeles for the revival of *Porgy*, again as a member of the chorus. The troupe then moved to San Francisco, where, in February–March 1938, it presented the show in a three-week run at the 1800-seat Curran Theater (*Porgy and Bess* 1938). After this production, James stayed in northern California.

The triumph of *Run Little Chillun'* provided the impetus for the *Swing Mikado*, which featured many of the same singers/actors. Justitia Davis played Yum-Yum and Jester Hairston, who had graduated cum laude from Tufts, studied at Juilliard, and been an assistant to Hall Johnson, served as codirector and Ko-ko ("Gilbert, Sullivan" 1939). Hairston had sung the part of the undertaker in *Porgy and Bess* and was supervising director for *Run Little Chillun'*. Everett Boucré (Jim in *Run Little Chillun'*, Fig. 4 above) was cast as Nanki-Poo, and Joseph James sang Pooh-Bah (Fig. 5).

The *Swing Mikado* first took shape in 1938 as a project of the Chicago FTP, where it achieved such extraordinary success that the production later moved to New York. Numerous historians have recounted the legend of show's origin: Harry Minturn, FTP director in Chicago, reportedly stopped into a rehearsal of the (original) *Mikado* by his Negro Unit only to find them swinging Sullivan's tunes. Minturn, according to this tale, was so taken

7. Edises (1945) recounts James's history from his birth in Philadelphia "34 years ago," but is unclear (or erroneous) on the chronology of his cross-country trips. It is likely that James came to Hollywood in 1932 with Johnson's choir, and then returned to the East Coast for *Porgy and Bess* in 1935.

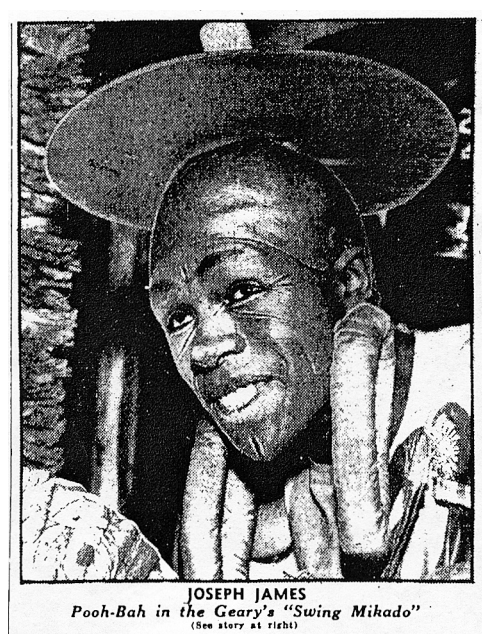


Figure 5. Joseph James as Pooh-Bah in the *Swing Mikado*, photographer unknown. (San Francisco Chronicle, September 1, 1939, p. 10) .

by the energy of the cast that he suggested creating a swing version of the show and enlisted Gentry Warden, an African-American musician in the Chicago FMP, to write arrangements of several numbers (Hill and Hatch 2003, 325).<sup>8</sup>

In the resulting Chicago production, five numbers were performed first as written, then in swing versions either as encores or for stanzas following the initial one. Four of these numbers were originally in 6/8, but the swing versions were changed to 4/4 with syncopation added. Instrumentation was also altered. Sullivan's original called for standard orchestra with pairs of flutes, clarinets, horns, cornets, and trombones; oboe, bassoon, timpani, percussion, and strings. The *Swing Mikado*'s pit orchestra retained the flutes, clarinets, (one) trombone, and strings, but otherwise substituted alto and tenor saxophones, trumpets, drum set, harp, and piano.

Harmonies were also changed to embrace typical jazz sounds such as added-sixth chords, dominants with augmented fifths, and chromatic inflections. A typical example is the chorus "His Object All Sublime," from the Mikado's song in Act 2 (Ex. 4). The five swing arrangements from the

8. Other sources on the *Swing Mikado* include Fraden (1994, 139, 169, 187–193); Peterson (1993, 342); Steen (2006, 167–187); Vallillo (1982); and Woll (1989, 178–183). None of these sources describes alterations to the music, but Jennifer Myers is currently completing a dissertation on the Chicago FTP, which will cover the music of the *Swing Mikado* in detail (Myers n.d.).

Example 4. Swing Mikado, Chicago version, "My Object all Sublime," piano/vocal reduction. ("His" in the original changed to "my" in the swing version. Federal Theatre Project [WPA] production; original score/parts in the Library of Congress.)

My ob-ject all sub-lime I shall a-chieve in time To

The first system of the musical score for 'My Object all Sublime'. It features a vocal melody in G major (one flat) and 4/4 time. The piano accompaniment consists of chords in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The lyrics are: 'My ob-ject all sub-lime I shall a-chieve in time To'.

let the pun-ish-ment fit the crime The pun-ish-ment fit the crime And

The second system of the musical score. The vocal melody continues with the lyrics: 'let the pun-ish-ment fit the crime The pun-ish-ment fit the crime And'. The piano accompaniment continues with chords and a bass line.

make each pris'-ner pent Un - will-ing-ly rep - re sent A

The third system of the musical score. The vocal melody continues with the lyrics: 'make each pris'-ner pent Un - will-ing-ly rep - re sent A'. The piano accompaniment continues with chords and a bass line.

source of in - no-cent mer-ri ment, of in-no-cent mer-ri - ment. The ment.

The fourth system of the musical score, ending with a double bar line and repeat signs. The vocal melody continues with the lyrics: 'source of in - no-cent mer-ri ment, of in-no-cent mer-ri - ment. The ment.'. The piano accompaniment continues with chords and a bass line.



Chicago production were published in piano/vocal versions by the Edward B. Marks Corporation in 1939.

The manuscript orchestral parts, as well as the published piano/vocal versions, for the Chicago *Swing Mikado* are in the Library of Congress, but no record of the San Francisco production of June 1939 is preserved there. None of San Francisco's solo singers had previously appeared either in Chicago or New York. According to news reports, as well as the program for the San Francisco show, Keeton wrote at least some new swing versions (*Swing Mikado* 1939; Hobart 1939b).<sup>9</sup> Without the music, it is impossible to determine the extent of his contributions. However, a comparison of the manuscript musical materials from Chicago with the San Francisco program and its accompanying notes reveals that the same numbers, for the most part, were subjected to alteration: "A Wandering Minstrel I," "Three Little Maids from School," "A More Humane Mikado," and "The Flowers That Bloom in the Spring." The Chicago version contained an instrumental swung encore to "Willow, Tit-Willow" that seems not to have been performed in San Francisco. On the other hand, the San Francisco program specifies a "hot cha-cha" section of "The Criminal Cried" and a blues version of "Alone and Yet Alive," neither of which seems to have been performed in Chicago. Two months before the San Francisco production opened, local FTP officials specifically requested the music from the Chicago producers (Minturn 1939). It seems likely, therefore, that the Bay Area producers adopted Warden's arrangements of "Minstrel," "Three Maids," "Humane Mikado," and "Flowers," and added new contributions by Keeton for "The Criminal Cried" and "Alone and Yet Alive."

The choice of the *Mikado* by the Federal Theatre Project is not, in itself, remarkable. The most popular Gilbert and Sullivan show in the United States, it was a tried and true box office hit that could be mounted without expensive royalties or significant risk. The *Mikado*, of course, is a romance and a clever satire on overbearing and unthinking bureaucracy, with a hilarious plot and delightful music. At the same time, its imperialist references to Japan (although clearly fictionalized as a mythical kingdom) cannot be dismissed. The characters bear foolish pseudo-Japanese-sounding names and the portrayal of the society as one in which capital punishment is meted out without a second thought and graft is a way of life plays on histori-

9. The *Swing Mikado* production at the Geary Theater, San Francisco, in August 1939 was reportedly the same as the June production on Treasure Island with minor alterations, such as a new arrangement of the overture by Foster Cope. This program lists the *Swing Mikado* as written "by W. S. Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan with swing arrangements by Elmer Keeton," but does not otherwise identify how many of these arrangements Keeton composed. Hobart (1939b) reports that the swing arrangements on Treasure Island were by Keeton and Gentry Warden (of the Chicago production) but does not specify which numbers were arranged by whom.

cally patronizing attitudes toward Asia. Michael Beckerman has shown that musical references to the (real) Japan permeate the operetta to a far greater extent than the often-cited (modified) quotation of the Meiji era military song "Miya sama." In fact, he characterizes the work as "a means to render harmless the threat of [Japanese] 'otherness'" and concludes that "the passion for Japanese authenticity [in the work] seems almost primitively sinister—authentic music, gestures, and costumes acting as a symbolic totem of what the English wished to sublimate. . . ; most importantly, it is yet another case of the West speaking for the Orient, which is unable to present itself" (Beckerman 1989, 315, 318).

Casting the *Mikado* with an all-black troupe (albeit with a white FTP directorship) thus carried a subtle subtext about the relationship between African Americans and the Japanese. Admiration for Japan among U.S. blacks had a long, and very public, history, dating back to the Japanese victory over the Russian fleet in 1905, which placed Japan in the position of the only nonwhite nation powerful enough to challenge (and defeat) a white imperialist power (Kearney 1998, 14). Some black leaders in the first half of the twentieth century had even expressed a "messianic expectation" that Japan's imperial army could potentially free U.S. blacks "from the ravages of American racism" (Allen 1994, 24). Three years before the San Francisco *Swing Mikado* production, W. E. B. Du Bois had visited Japan, where he received a hero's welcome that he described as "a tribute to all of black America." He basked openly in being "in a country of colored people run by colored people for the benefit of colored people" (Kearney 1998, 88–89; Lewis 2000, 417–418).

By 1938, however, support for Japan within the United States had become increasingly dangerous, and overt African-American sympathy for the country waned in many quarters—or at least assumed an ambivalent character. (The U.S. government was increasingly alarmed by Japan's military adventures: from its invasion of Manchuria in 1931 to the eruption of full-scale war with China in 1937.) The Federal Theatre Project, for its part, was fighting for its very existence against accusations of left-wing bias and therefore deliberately sought shows without political content. Thus the transference of the original *Mikado* to a small, generic, non-imperialist, non-threatening South Seas island not only avoided what might have been perceived as an embarrassing racist bias, but also nullified the operetta's association with a world power increasingly at odds with the United States. Japan, in effect, was made symbolically impotent.

Perhaps even more important, transference of the *Mikado* to the anonymous exotic island facilitated the insertion of swing, especially with a black cast, where producers could build on a history of stereotypical "native" themes. The addition of swing into this all-black show also reinforced the

African-American origins of the style in the face of white appropriation. By 1938 swing had become a national fad, sweeping the country by storm and, in the process, challenging historical polarities of race, ideology, and the traditional highbrow/lowbrow cultural divide. Thus U.S. blacks could symbolically overpower both white America and the world's leading non-white imperialist nation.

White audience members watching the *Swing Mikado* were unlikely to have reflected on these subtexts, however, and the African-American performers themselves might well have only dimly perceived the implications of their adaptation of the British classic. After all, whites were used to (and comfortable with) watching black actors in comedy roles, which the *Swing Mikado* amply provided, and which critics took pains to highlight. For the black actors, however, the *Swing Mikado* provided a particularly attractive opportunity: assuming a wide range of character types common to the white operetta stage. *Run Little Chillun'* and the *Swing Mikado* can thus be seen as symbolizing a more general transition in African-American theater from an older restrictive trope to a more embracing model.<sup>10</sup>

The show was also part of a national frenzy over "swinging the classics," which reached an apex in the late 1930s and became the subject of strident editorials in the national press over the purported desecration of hallowed scores of the European concert music tradition. Patrick Burke notes that black musicians found themselves in an ambivalent position by these swing arrangements: on the one hand they "demonstrated that African-American performers need not be bound to a restrictive standard of racial authenticity," but at the same time the productions accentuated racial differences (Burke 2008, 90). The *Mikado*, as musical theater, was more protected from the outrage that greeted swung versions of "high art" works, however, and the FTP directors could thus take advantage of the wide audience appeal of the swing phenomenon. (Furthermore, like the old classics, the *Mikado* was not protected from alteration in the United States by copyright laws, a major factor in the "swinging the classics" fad [Stowe 1994, 98]). White audiences responded enthusiastically to the show's high quality, manifest in the sold-out performances and the heated outcry over its closing.

Swing's reputation for celebrating productive musical collaboration between blacks and whites also took concrete form in the offerings at the Golden Gate Exposition. Two days after the *Swing Mikado* closed at the fair, the Benny Goodman band opened an extended, sold-out run there. On August 1, the *Chronicle* featured a photo of Shirley Williams, who sang the role of Peep-Bo in the *Swing Mikado*, smilingly "paying her respects" to the "King of Swing" ("To the Swing King" 1939). The caption explained: "Direct

10. I would particularly like to thank Todd Decker for this observation.

from His Royal Highness, the Swing Mikado, came Shirley Williams to pay her respects to another Royal Highness, Swing King, Benny Goodman."

A week later (on August 7), the *Swing Mikado* reopened under private sponsorship at the Geary Theater in San Francisco. Paul Posz (who had also sponsored the San Francisco production of *Porgy and Bess* in 1938) correctly assumed that the show's attraction had not waned in the slightest. The theater was packed. After a four-week run, the troupe took off on a month-long tour of the west including performances in San Jose, Sacramento, Oakland, Portland, Seattle, Vancouver, Bellingham, Tacoma, Spokane, Missoula, Helena, Great Falls, Boise, and Salt Lake City. WPA advocates pointed with pride to the fact that a relief project had become successful in the private sphere (Hobart 1939c; "Off the WPA Roll" 1939).

The Keeton chorus's activities in musical theater mark the group's significant move from the rarified concert stage to the music entertainment business—similar, in some ways, to the path traveled by Hall Johnson a decade earlier. The group's two theatrical productions offered its members both show business success and steady employment. The *Swing Mikado* played daily to sold-out houses at the Golden Gate Exposition, exposure that even high-profile and heavily attended concert appearances, such as the Dime Concerts, could hardly provide. Furthermore, the show's success led to future engagements—not only the San Francisco *Swing Mikado* production and subsequent tour, but also concert appearances. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* in September 1940 noted that the chorus was being featured weekly at the Exposition where "they have won tens of thousands of new friends among visitors from all parts of the United States." The article also touts their forthcoming appearance at the exposition's "great California Music Festival" where "they will be heard . . . in a program of spirituals, Negro folk music and a dramatic scene from a famous Negro musical drama [i.e., *Run Little Chillun*]" ("Federal Concerts" 1940).

### The War Years for Keeton and James

The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, ended the ambivalence of most African Americans toward Japan. Despite years of discriminatory treatment and segregation even within the federal government's WPA arts programs (to say nothing of the armed services), black citizens overwhelmingly expressed unmitigated patriotism.

The Federal Music Project (which had been reduced in scale and renamed the WPA Music Program in 1939) helped the war effort by putting on performances at military bases, shipyards, and hospitals, as well as making broadcasts in support of the war effort. The Bay Area Negro Chorus did its part: three recorded broadcasts of the group are held by the Library

of Congress ("W.P.A. Recordings" 1942a). In each of these fifteen-minute programs, the chorus sang four *a cappella* spirituals, interspersed with announcements, one of which constituted a three-minute propaganda plug for the WPA and the war effort. "America's unemployed are on the march," began one. "We give them a chance to earn their daily bread by building roads and public buildings and performing other necessary tasks" ("WPA Recordings" 1942a). Among those "necessary tasks" was healthful recreation for military personnel provided by the WPA arts projects.

In 1939, army and navy morale officers began to ask the WPA to establish recreation centers at army camps and nearby communities. [Such] recreation centers are now operating on a full-time basis at some two hundred military establishments and in more than twice as many nearby communities and factory towns. . . . Minstrel shows and plays produced by the soldiers with the aid of WPA leaders have proved popular at many army posts. Orchestras and bands are organized. There are dances with often as many as 1,500 or 2,000 attending. ("WPA Recordings" 1942a)

Elmer Keeton did his part as well. He composed a blatantly propagandistic unaccompanied choral march with an anti-Japanese text, which was broadcast on a joint program featuring the chorus and the Bay Area's WPA symphony ("WPA Recording" 1942b).

(*Refrain: chorus*):

We'll nip nip nip nip nip the Nipponese,  
Nip the Nipponese, nip the Nipponese,  
We'll nip nip nip nip nip the Nipponese,  
And put out the rising sun.

(*Verse 1: solo, with choral tag-line*):

There is a land across the sea

(*Chorus*: Put out the rising sun)

But it's no good for you and me

(*Chorus*: Put out the rising sun)

They call themselves the Nipponese

(*Chorus*: Put out the rising sun)

But we think they're just a hunk o' cheese.

(*Chorus*: Put out the rising sun)

Four more Japanese-bashing verses follow. This unimaginative military setting in 4/4 (Ex. 5) with no harmonic interest (so unlike Keeton's imaginative arrangements of spirituals), concludes with a soprano counterpoint to the tune of "Reveille" accompanying its last refrain. That Keeton would compose such a piece (and that the WPA would feature it in a nationwide broadcast) reflects the anti-Japanese hysteria that gripped the country in the aftermath of the bombing. Although Keeton's unmediated expression of

chauvinistic fervor matches that of many other World War II songs ridiculing the enemy, one wonders whether "Nip the Nipponese" might also reflect a perceived need to prove loyalty to the United States in the face of the historical admiration for the Japanese among U.S. blacks. Distancing himself and his chorus from this historical linkage was both prudent and preservationist particularly in California in the face of the massive deportations of Japanese residents to detention camps. (In fact, many of the blacks who came to San Francisco in this period settled into housing in the Fillmore area vacated by the Japanese. The vibrancy of the Fillmore district jazz scene after the war is directly attributable to this demographic shift.)

Meanwhile, Joseph James, the young priest in *Run Little Chillun'* and Pooh-Bah in the *Swing Mikado*, had gone to work as a welder for Marinship, one of the instant wartime shipyards created by the U.S. Maritime Commission. Nearly 70 percent of the workers in Bay Area shipyards were represented by the Boilermakers' Union, which had banned blacks entirely up to 1937. In that year the union began admitting African Americans but restricted them to "auxiliary" locals. Blacks could become union workers by paying dues to the national, but this auxiliary status gave them no independent grievance procedure, no right to hire their own business agents, no vote on local matters, and no representation at national conventions.

In addition to becoming a member of the "Flying Squadron" of expert welders, James achieved renown at the company for providing extracurricular vocal entertainment. "No one at Marinship is better known, or better liked," boasted its magazine *The Marin-er* in August 1943. "As a concert baritone Mr. James is known to musical circles from coast to coast. . . . He has been heard often at yard programs and at launchings, where he is a popular favorite" (James 1943).

James, however, was not nearly as beloved to the Marinship management as this article implies, for he became, in the words of the *Labor Citizen*, the "sparkplug" in the local fight against the union's segregationist policies ("Marinship Walkout" 1943). About half of the 1,100 African-American boilermakers in the San Francisco area refused to join the union's separate black auxiliary and by the end of November 1943, 160 black workers—including James—had been fired from their Marinship jobs. Under the auspices of the San Francisco Committee Against Segregation and Discrimination, James then spearheaded a lawsuit seeking reinstatement by the company and monetary damages from the union. Their claims were eventually supported by the Marin Superior Court whose decision was upheld on appeal by the California Supreme Court in a landmark ruling on January 2, 1945. In *James vs. Marinship* the court prohibited the union from requiring African Americans to join auxiliary units as a condition of employment and by 1948 all of the union's locals in the Bay Area were integrated (on this case, see Wol-



Example 5. Keeton, "Nip the Nipponese" for a cappella choir, refrain. Transcribed from the WPA broadcast, ca. 1942 (Library of Congress control number: 00580490).

The musical score is for a 4/4 piece in B-flat major. The piano part consists of a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the right hand and a similar pattern in the left hand. The vocal line is a cappella, with lyrics written below the notes. The score is divided into two systems. The first system contains measures 1 through 4, and the second system contains measures 5 through 8. The lyrics are: 'We'll nip nip nip nip nip the Nip - po - nese, nip the Nip-po- nese, nip the Nip-po- nese. We'll nip nip nip nip nip the Nip - po - nese, and put out the ri - sing sun.'

lenberg 1981). Ironically, the American Federation of Musicians throughout the country remained mostly segregated at this time, with separate locals for blacks in more than fifty cities. Integration of San Francisco's Local 6 did not take place until 1960, mandated by the state of California under the Fair Employment Practices Act. Local 6, which at first resisted this mandate, was only the third AFM local in the country to integrate—the first being Los Angeles in 1953 (on segregation in the musicians' union, see Miller 2007). James, in the meantime, became president of the local NAACP chapter in 1944. By 1948 he was back in New York, and in 1953 he sang the role of Jake in a revival of *Porgy and Bess* ("Joseph James" 1948; "Porgy and Bess" 1953; Atkinson 1953).

### Keeton's Legacy

Elmer Keeton died on January 1, 1947. The chorus continued under the leadership of his assistant, Arnold Baranco, for the next twenty-two years, and then under Reverend Alexander S. Jackson as director. The ensemble, however, had always been (and remained) Keeton's creation, as reflected in its new name: the Keeton Memorial Choir. As such, it embodied not only his musical style, but also his social (and even political) philosophy. One of hundreds of music teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1920s and 1930s, Keeton managed to transcend his important, but potentially anonymous, role in the region's musical history and exert significant impact on the artistic, social, and political life of the community at large. His strategies for doing so involved musical imagination and expertise, but

also a savvy understanding of the cultural scene at the time. In the tradition of the concert spiritual first pioneered by the Fisk Jubilee Singers in the 1870s, Keeton's arrangements aimed to attract a wide base of auditors. He clothed the familiar folk tunes in elegant (and sometimes ill-fitting) attire reflecting multiple influences. Characteristic jazz harmonies and textures took their place in expanded forms that drew additional inspiration from the European part-song, opera, and oratorio traditions. He programmed his own settings of spirituals side-by-side with standard European choral works, as well as nineteenth-century lieder and arrangements of English folk songs sung by Marcus Hall, and he expected his own creations to be judged by the mainstream audiences and critics he courted according to the standards of the classical repertoire. As a result, the chorus attracted a following (and critical praise) well beyond an expected core group of supporters, a fact recognized and very much resented by the *Oakland Free Press*. Keeton's goals, however, seem clear: on the one hand, he hoped to integrate musical styles and musical audiences, creating an audience of music lovers who would recognize artistic quality while also appreciating the musical heritage of black America. At the same time, the chorus reinforced racial solidarity—an all-black group performing with skill and imagination its own historical repertoire.

Although Keeton's arrangements quite deliberately adopted the language and organizational strategies of European classical models (as did many other examples of the concert spiritual in this period), the result of his inclusive approach to creativity was wide dissemination of his work and broad-based respect for his singers. This strategy worked brilliantly at the time, not only for Keeton, but also for artists who achieved far greater renown (such as Marian Anderson). Keeton, like many others of his era, tried to balance contradictory aims, heralding ethnic pride while seeking the approbation of a majority culture that widely espoused essentialized characterizations of racial temperament and stratified value assessments of various musical genres. As but one case among many, Fisher, in her highly complimentary review of the chorus's first concert, wrote that black musical expression needed to be "disciplined" to high standards: "No one sings Negro Spirituals as convincingly as the darkies do," she wrote. "Even when their natural racial exuberance has been disciplined to conform to high musical and choral standards, the racial flavor remains" (Fisher 1937).

Many of the white players in this story sought their own solutions to the problems of racial and gender exclusion and the country's seemingly intractable history of social conflict. Alfred Hertz walked his own tightrope for fifteen years as conductor of the symphony, balancing his desire to reach a wider and more diverse audience against the conservative tastes

of his core white and wealthy subscribers, who controlled the board of directors (and the purse strings). Once he retired from this position, he was free to exercise his inclusive inclinations, featuring a female conductor and a black chorus in prominent roles. Keeton's artistic arrangements of spirituals, which drew on classical models, made their programming on an FMP series otherwise devoted to orchestral music seem perfectly natural to Hertz. Unlike the reviews of Fisher and Mason (cited earlier), Hertz's actions were not patronizing; he recognized, and rewarded, both diversity (in terms of gender and race) and musical quality. Brico was an inspired leader, if relatively inexperienced at this point in her career. The chorus, for its part, was artistically excellent, able to perform its leader's arrangements as well as highly challenging works of the choral literature.

The reviewers—Metzger, Mason, and others—were left-wing sympathizers, but their political inclinations do not seem to have affected their musical judgment. Metzger's praise for the chorus was considerable, but not unbridled, and neither he nor Mason (nor Frankenstein, for that matter) hesitated to describe shortcomings, as well as artistic successes. Frankenstein, in fact, criticized the choir in September 1937 for "a certain lack of spirit," deplored the arrangements of Arnold Baranco that appeared on several concerts in 1938 as "abound[ing] in barber shop stuff," and characterized Marcus Hall as "far from a robust singer, but . . . an excellent artist none the less" (Frankenstein 1937a and 1938). This balance in the reviews enhances the credibility of the critics' praise, which dominates their assessments of the chorus's artistic quality.

At the other extreme, of course, is the *Free Press's* unbridled fear of Keeton's success, which may well reflect the intense competition between black and white musical groups seeking work in San Francisco's clubs and theaters in this period. After the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, the city's night spots featured black musicians in large numbers. In addition to their artistic attraction, the black musicians were economically competitive: the forced separation of black musicians into a segregated AFM local meant that they could offer their services at a lower cost. (Each local sets its own pay scales.) The scramble for work in San Francisco during the Depression thus became highly competitive, with racially distinct groups vying for engagements at the same establishments. White pressure on club owners and theater managers in response to lower-priced and musically dynamic black competition resulted in the exclusion of African-American bands in several cases, prompting a 1934 lawsuit by members of the black local against the powerful (white) AFM Local 6. The court was sympathetic, but the union definitely was not, and the ultimate result was the subjugation of the black musicians—by the national AFM—to white union control in the

following year. Black union members were forced into a “subsidiary” local, similar to the auxiliary units of the boilermakers (Miller 2007, 185–186). White performers in San Francisco during the FMP years (beginning in 1935) were still reeling from this confrontation, and blacks justifiably felt an overwhelming sense of discouragement after their failed combat with the powerful AFM. In this context, Joseph James’s move against the boilermakers takes on much wider implications. A newcomer to San Francisco politics, he felt no need to bow to discriminatory practices.

Taken together, then, the work of Keeton and other local figures embodies the stresses, but also the successes, in countering racial tensions in the U.S. musical community during the late 1930s. Keeton did not live to see the blossoming of the Fillmore jazz scene in the late 1940s, the mushrooming of mixed-race bands during the 1950s, the integration of Local 6 in 1960, or the civil rights advances of the 1960s and beyond. But his astute musicianship, his exacting demands for excellence, his inventive arrangements, and his successful and productive interactions with leaders of the local and national musical communities helped pave the way for broader recognition in the decades to come.

The following people kindly offered valuable feedback on various aspects of this article: Todd Decker, Samuel Floyd, Tammy Kernodle, Patrice Maginnis, Paul Nauert, Brian Stauffenbiel, and Graham Wood. Others assisted in the transcriptions of the recordings: Daniel Brown, Danny Driver, and Jessica Loranger. Elizabeth Yackley kindly photographed the score and parts of the *Swing Mikado* for me at the Library of Congress. Janet Olson at the Northwestern University Archives provided photographs of the university’s band as well as catalog information on the music program. Howard Pollack provided information on the chorus personnel in the 1935 Boston production of *Porgy and Bess*. In addition, I am indebted to the library staffs at the African American Museum and Library in Oakland (Shannon McQueen), the San Francisco Public Library (Jason Gibbs), the Library of Congress, and the University of California, Santa Cruz.

---

#### DISCOGRAPHY

---

- W.P.A. Recordings. ca. 1942a. Bay Area Negro Chorus. Three broadcast recordings, Library of Congress Control Numbers 9961209, 99470851, and 00580471 (undated but announcements suggest a date shortly after the Pearl Harbor bombing).
- W.P.A. Recordings. ca. 1942b. Bay Area WPA orchestra and Negro Chorus. Broadcast recording, Library of Congress Control Number 00580490 (undated but announcements suggest a date shortly after the Pearl Harbor bombing).

## REFERENCES

- 4100 lopped off rolls; "Mikado" show closed. 1939. *San Francisco Chronicle* July 1: 1.
- Advertisement. 1921. *Western Outlook* October 22: 2.
- Allen, Ernest Jr. 1994. When Japan was "champion of the darker races": Satokata Takahashi and the flowering of black messianic nationalism. *The Black Scholar* 24 (Winter): 23–46.
- Atkinson, Brooks. 1953. At the theatre. *New York Times* March 10: 25.
- Beckerman, Michael. 1989. The sword on the wall: Japanese elements and their significance in *The Mikado*. *Musical Quarterly* 73, no. 3:303–319.
- Burke, Patrick. 2008. *Come in and hear the truth: Jazz and race on 52nd Street*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Colored chorus to give grove concert. 1938. *San Francisco News* July 16, 6.
- Crouchett, Lorraine J. 1987–88. William Elmer Keeton and the Oakland Colored Chorus: Musical pioneers of the WPA era. *Oakland Heritage Alliance News* 7, no. 4:1–6.
- Daniels, Douglas Henry. 1980. *Pioneer urbanites: A social and cultural history of black San Francisco*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Davidson, Marie Hicks. 1937. Hertz hails federal music plan as big. *San Francisco Call Bulletin* July 8: 24.
- Dime concert series opens: Big success. 1938. *San Francisco News* August 31: 24.
- Dizzy people vs. music. 1938. [Oakland] *Free Press* November 1: 4.
- Edises, Pele. 1945. Joseph James is a busy guy. *People's World* January 6: 5.
- Federal concerts offered at Golden Gate Exposition. 1940. *Los Angeles Times* September 15: C5.
- Fisher, Marjory. 1937. Negro choral of WPA sings appealingly: Oakland aggregation gives A-1 concert at Alcazar; showing balanced. *San Francisco News* August 17: 22.
- . 1938. "SRO" crowd hears first 10c symphony. *San Francisco News* August 31: 24.
- Fraden, Rena. 1994. *Blueprints for a black federal theatre, 1935–1939*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Frankenstein, Alfred. 1937a. Colored chorus pleases with second concert. *San Francisco Chronicle* September 28: 12.
- . 1937b. Crowd stirred by singing of Negro artist. *San Francisco Chronicle* March 6: 11.
- . 1937c. S.F. hears new contralto star in local debut. *San Francisco Chronicle* February 25: 13.
- . 1938. WPA chorus gives recital. *San Francisco Chronicle* August 8 (copy, without page number, at the California Historical Library, San Francisco; the article does not appear in the microfilmed *Chronicle* for this date).
- Fried, Alexander. 1938. Federal symphony lures throng. *San Francisco Examiner* September 14: 22.

- Fried, Michael. 1996. W. Elmer Keeton and his WPA chorus: Oakland's musical civil rights pioneers of the New Deal era. *California History* 75, no. 3:236–49.
- Gilbert, Sullivan's "Mikado" swings open at the Geary. 1939. *San Francisco Chronicle* August 8: 10.
- Goats or musicians. 1938. [Oakland] *Free Press* August 16: 4.
- Graduates from the certificate program. 1906–07. Northwestern University catalogue, 70–71.
- Hill, Errol G., and James V. Hatch. 2003. *A history of African American theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobart, John. 1939a. "Little chillun" look ahead to a long run. *San Francisco Chronicle* January 29: "This World" section, 22.
- . 1939b. "The Swing Mikado" makes hit: "De punishment fits de crime." *San Francisco Chronicle* June 16: 6.
- . 1939c. "Swing Mikado": S.F. cast goes on road. *San Francisco Chronicle* September 16: 24.
- James, Joseph. 1943. Marinship Negroes speak to fellow workmen. *Marin-er*, August 21: 5.
- Joseph James in debut. 1948. *New York Times* September 20: 21.
- Kearney, Reginald. 1998. *African American views of the Japanese: Solidarity or sedition?* Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Lewis, David Levering. 2000. *W. E. B. Du Bois: The fight for equality and the American century, 1919–1963*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Marinship walkout not demonstration by majority group. 1943. *Labor Citizen* 4, no. 42:1, 4.
- Mason, Redfern. 1938a. Give us music for the multitudes! *People's World* October 24: 5.
- . 1938b. The music-makers: Instinctive artistry makes performance by federal Negro chorus a memorable event. *People's World* October 31: 5.
- McClain, Charles J. 1994. *In search of equality: The Chinese struggle against discrimination in nineteenth-century America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Metzger, Alfred. 1937. Oakland Negro group gives song concert. *San Francisco Chronicle* August 17: 23.
- Midsummer musicals: Colored chorus*. 1938. Program for the seventh concert in a series sponsored by the San Francisco Recreation Commission and the Federal Music Project, Sigmund Stern Recreation Grove. August 21. Stern Grove scrapbook, California Historical Society Library, San Francisco.
- Miller, Leta E. 2007. Segregation and the San Francisco musicians' union. *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1, no. 2:161–206.
- . Forthcoming. "The multitude listens with the heart": Orchestras, urban culture, and the early years of the San Francisco Symphony. In *Music, American made: Essays in honor of John Graziano*, edited by John Koegel. Warren, Mich.: Harmonie Park Press.
- Miller, Leta E., and Catherine Parsons Smith. 2009. Playing with politics: Crisis in the San Francisco Federal Music Project. *California History* 86, no. 2:26–47, 68–71.



- Minturn, Harry. 1939. Letter to Ole Ness, April 21. National Archives and Records Administration, WPA Record Group 69, 651.312, Box 936, FTP correspondence.
- Music project may take plays. 1939. *San Francisco Chronicle* July 3: 2.
- Music vs. dark politics. 1938. [Oakland] *Free Press* September 20: 4.
- Myers, Jennifer. n.d. Staging black cultural modernism and black political radicalism: The dissemination of a broader conception of "Negro drama" in the repertoire of the Chicago Negro Unit (1936–1938). Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University. In progress.
- Narrative Report, Federal Music Project, State of California. 1937. National Archives (NARA), Federal Music Project, Record Group 69, box 2 (August).
- Ness, Ole. 1939. Letter to George Creel, July 7. National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 69, correspondence 651.312 California [Theater].
- Off the WPA roll and onto a pay roll. 1939. *San Francisco Chronicle* September 2: 12.
- Peterson, Bernard L., Jr. 1993. *A century of musicals in black and white: An encyclopedia of musical stage works by, about, or involving African Americans*. Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Porgy and Bess*. 1938. Program for the San Francisco production that opened at the Curran Theater February 14. San Francisco Public Library program scrapbooks.
- "Porgy and Bess" returning today. 1953. *New York Times* March 9: 25.
- Public spirited figures in eastbay community life. 1929. *Oakland Independent* December 14: 5, 1ff. African American Museum and Library, Oakland, Calif.
- Run Little Chillun'*. 1939. Program for the FTP production at the Alcazar Theater, San Francisco. California Historical Library, San Francisco.
- Sandmeyer, Elmer Clarence. 1991. *The anti-Chinese movement in California*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Simpson, Eugene Thamon. 2008. *Hall Johnson: His life, his spirit, and his music*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press.
- Steen, Shannon. 2006. Racing American modernity: Black Atlantic negotiations of Asia and the "swing" Mikados. In *AfroAsian Encounters: Culture, History, Politics*, edited by Heike Raphael-Hernandez and Shannon Steen, 167–187. New York: New York University Press.
- Stowe, David. 1994. *Swing changes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Swing Mikado*. 1939. Program for the production at the Geary Theater, San Francisco. August. African American Museum and Library of Oakland.
- "Swing Mikado": Play director student of Negro culture. 1939. *San Francisco Chronicle* August 2: 6.
- Syllabus* (Northwestern University Yearbook, Class of 1905). 1904. Vol. 20. Menasha, Wisc.: Press of the George Banta Publishing Company.
- Syllabus* (Northwestern University Yearbook, Class of 1906). 1905. Vol. 21. Evanston, Ill.: Press of the Evanston Index Company.
- To the swing king. 1939. *San Francisco Chronicle* August 1: 24.

- Vallillo, Stephen M. 1982. The battle of the black Mikados. *Black American Literature Forum* 16, no. 4:153–157.
- Watkins, Earl. 2006. Interview with the author and follow-up telephone conversation. Oakland, Calif., August 14 and August 27.
- Woll, Allen. 1989. *Black musical theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Wollenberg, Charles. 1981. James vs. Marinship: Trouble on the new black frontier. *California History* 60, no. 3: 262–279.