

John Powell: His Racial and Cultural Ideologies

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Following John Powell's death on August 15, 1963, Virginia Dabney closed his editorial comments in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* with the following encomium: "Mr. Powell's passing at 80 removes one of the genuinely great Virginians of modern times. In personality and character he was truly exceptional, and as a pianist and composer he was unique in the annals of the Old Dominion."¹ Only a dozen years earlier, on November 5, 1951, the then Governor of Virginia, John S. Battle, proclaimed a "John Powell Day," on which the National Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Howard Mitchell performed the composer's *Symphony in A major*.^{1a} The Governor went on to state that the state-wide tribute to Powell was only fitting owing to "his many contributions to the cultural life of America...."² The irregularity of such an extravagant gesture toward a musician in this country had the effect of rejuvenating interest in the artist both within the borders of Virginia and beyond. The world of academia, for example, contributed three master's theses and a doctoral dissertation³ between 1968 and 1973, and Radford College, now Radford University, named its new music building Powell Hall at dedication ceremonies held on May 13, 1968.⁴

By the 1950s and 1960s, Powell's earlier involvement in contentious issues such as race relations in general, and the incorporation of racial and ethnic elements in the formation of an identifiably American music was conveniently forgotten or, at the least, placed on a back burner.

It is instructive to press the metaphoric rewind button and examine the path that Powell trod during his early years in order to assess his thinking on the cultural issues that loomed large during his heyday. Born into a cultured Richmond family,⁵ he studied

¹ *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (August 17, 1963), p. 12.

^{1a} Note attached MP4 file. The clip contains the opening of the first movement of the *Symphony in A Major* "Virginia Symphony" (Allegro non troppo ma con brio). The performers are the Virginia Symphony Orchestra, Jo Ann Falletta, conductor.

² Quoted from the booklet, *John Powell Foundation* (no date), p. 5. This document is in the John Powell Collection in the Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

³ Sally Twedell Bagley, "John Powell: Folk Musician" (Master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1970); Mary Helen Chapman, "The Piano Works of John Powell" (Master's thesis, Indiana University, 1968); James Michael Foster, "An Audiography of and an Investigation into the Recorded Performances of John Powell" (Master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1978); Philip Lynn Williams, "Music by John Powell in the Music Collection at the University of Virginia: A Descriptive Bibliography" (Master's thesis, University of Virginia, 1968); Ronald David Ward, "The Life and Works of John Powell (1882-1963)" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1973).

⁴ Florence Robinson, President of the John Powell Foundation, presented a piano recital as part of the dedication ceremonies; her program included Powell's *Sonata noble* and three movements from his suite, *At the Fair*.

⁵ Powell's father, John H. Powell, Headmaster at the Richmond Female Seminary, was descended from the Welsh king, Ap-Howell, of King Alfred's era (ninth century). His mother, Rebecca Leigh Powell, of French Huguenot descent, was related to Nicholas Lanier (1588-1666), Master of the King's Musick during

at the private McGuire's School, took piano lessons first from his older sister, Elizabeth, and then from Frederick Charles Hahr (1843-1915), a Swedish-born musician who attended Franz Liszt's master classes in Weimar and who had settled in Richmond, and entered the University of Virginia in the fall term of 1899. He completed the normal four-year course of study in two years, enrolled in such subjects as geology, physics, astronomy,⁶ Latin, and German. After a summer of scrimping and saving money, Powell set sail from Baltimore on September 10, 1902 for what became an extended period of study in Vienna with Theodor Leschetizky (1830-1915) for piano and Karl Navrátil (1867-1936) for composition. He quickly developed friendships with various personalities from the world of arts and letters, among them the critic, Richard Specht; the poet, Karl Burger (who wrote the texts for Powell's songs, *Nein!*, and *Lenztraum*⁷); the writer, Joseph Conrad; and the sculptor, Auguste Rodin. Although Leschetizky was loath to have his students perform publicly until they were, in his view, ready to do so, Powell was given the nod to perform on November 29, 1906 at the Grosses Musikvereins-Saale. With Gustav Gutheil conducting the Vienna Konzert Verein Orchestra, the young American rendered Liszt's *Hungarian Fantasy*. Richard Specht, who was instrumental in securing recital dates for the American, arranged a performance of *Sonata Virginianesque*, Powell's first work composed during his early studies with Navrátil; on this occasion, in February 1907, the composer played the piano part while Karl Prill, concertmaster of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, served as the violinist. Given the fact that the work contains such thematic content as Negro tunes and a Virginia reel, one can only speculate on how Prill and Navrátil adjusted their European sensibilities to accommodate to what must have seemed an alien musical experience. Another piano work of this period, *Sonata noble*, bears an inscription taken from Sidney Lanier's *The Symphony*, "Vainly might Plato's head revolve it/ Plainly the heart of a child could solve it." Despite its four-movement layout, it is, by Powell's standards, a compact statement, about twenty-three minutes in duration. Utilizing traditional forms, the notion of simplicity derived from the inscription is equated with the nobility of the title. Interests in variation technique and in counterpoint are displayed powerfully in yet another piano work of 1906, *Variations and Double-Fugue on a Theme of F. C. Hahr*. The work contains seventeen variations and three fugues, the last of which is a double fugue. Powell produced also at this time his *Sonate psychologique*, a four-movement opus in which the influences of Richard Strauss, Sergei Rachmaninoff and Franz Liszt

the reigns of Charles I and Charles II of England. The American poet and musician, Sidney Lanier (1842-1881) was ancestrally related to the same family.

⁶ Powell considered himself an amateur astronomer; indeed, he has been identified as having discovered a comet although proof has not been established. According to astronomer Dr. Brian G. Marsden of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the comet concerned may well have been the one catalogued as 1907d (Daniel); it was particularly noticeable in the summer of 1907. Its discoverer is generally believed to have been Zaccheus Daniel, an assistant astronomer at Princeton University Observatory. Powell is listed as member #4685 of the Société astronomique de France, to which organization he belonged during 1908-1910. Powell's address was given by the Société as Margareten Strassen, 47, zur 7, Vienne. Astronomy professor Dr. Howard Cohen of the University of Florida Department of Astronomy, who provided extensive information about the comet under discussion, was instrumental in paving the way for the author to obtain Professor Marsden's information on this long-elusive matter. The author is grateful to both astronomers for their interest and substantial data about this intriguing subject.

⁷ These songs were published in 1927 by G. Schirmer, Inc.

merge to produce a precursor of the later *Sonata Teutonica*. Dedicated to Warrington Dawson, it bears the motto, “On the text of St. Paul: ‘The Wages of Sin is Death.’” The French title was an afterthought as the original title was rendered in German, a point of importance when one considers the movement titles: I. *Kampf*: Grave, Allegro agitato; II. Nocturne, *Hingebung*: Andante, Allegro brioso; III *Scherzo diabolique*, “*In den lauen*”; IV. Thanatopsis. The heavy overlay of post-Romantic rhetoric solidifies the Germanic tilt in the composer’s aesthetic considerations.

Powell’s interest in wrestling, which manifested itself during his college days in Virginia, led him to join a Viennese *Turnverein*, an athletic club attended by young men for the purpose of exercising their bodies and their minds, the latter by way of discussing patriotic and national issues among other subjects of mutual interest. It is of no little moment that Powell successfully argued for permitting Jews to become members of this organization. Benno Moiseiwitsch and Vernon Warner, two of Leschetizky’s other pupils, along with British pianist and composer Sidney Rosenbloom, violinist Efrem Zimbalist, and author and journalist Frank Warrington Dawson joined Powell in founding the Fresh Air Art Society in June 1913 in London. The printed and verbal utterances of this association⁸ emphasized the importance of the artist to develop both a sound mind as well as a sound body. The avant-garde in music and art, including both impressionism and expressionism, were deleterious to what they regarded as an imperative—namely continuation of the evolutionary path that led life and art to the present and which they proposed to continue for the greater good of both. To clarify and make succinct the Society’s beliefs, Powell commented that it was not its intent to stifle originality, but rather “that it is necessary for the welfare of Art that the artist, before deciding to flood the world with strange forms and original confessions, to be very sure that the substance of his creation be genuine, sanitary, and worthy.”⁹ Within a year, the Society’s membership grew to twenty-four; Auguste Rodin was among the newest initiates. Joseph Conrad, however, declined to join, but remained close to Powell until 1924, the year of his (Conrad’s) passing. Two meetings in London and one in Vienna¹⁰ represent the extent of the Society’s visible activity. The advent of World War I created something of a mockery of the ideals of reason and sanity being promoted by the small band of idealists.

The year 1913 is particularly significant in identifying Powell’s frame of mind and frame of reference, for this year saw the creation not only of Igor Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* but what might be called the Virginian’s *magnum opus*, the *Sonata Teutonica*. On February 25 of this year, Powell made his New York debut in a recital given jointly with Efrem Zimbalist; the latter had introduced his friend’s *Violin Concerto* to New York on December 14, 1912. The *Sonata Teutonica*, completed on September 21, 1913 at the home of Frau Dr. Emma Kerry, a resident of Alt-Aussee, Styria, Austria, bears the telling inscription, “*Der deutschen Jugend/insbesondere/der Jungmannschaft*

⁸ See “John Powell Tells the *Musical Courier* about the Fresh Air Society,” *Musical Courier* (May 5, 1915), p. 15; Dale B. J. Randall, *Joseph Conrad and Warrington Dawson: The Record of a Friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968), p. 16.

⁹ *Musical Courier*, *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ Karl Burger, a Viennese supporter of the Fresh Air Art Society, added cubism to the new trends found to be offensive in a statement attached to an announcement of the Society’s first and only public meeting in Vienna on March 30, 1914.

der D. W. T.”¹¹ Given that Powell was well aware of the D.W.T.’s orientation, it can be assumed that his fondness for the physical fitness classes he attended there outweighed any misgivings he may have harbored about their political inclinations.¹² It was Moiseiwitsch who gave the work’s premiere on March 7, 1914 at London’s Bechstein Hall, but the lengthy explanatory notes were written by Powell himself under the pseudonym, Richard Brockwell (the name derived from Brockenbrough, his sister’s married name, and Powell). Here, the admixture of the youthful aryanism espoused by his cohorts in Viennese health clubs and the philosophical ideas espoused in Kuno Francke’s *Social Forces in German Literature*¹³ come together in a musical representation of “a sense of Oneness, or what the Germans call ‘eine einheitliche Weltanschauung.’”¹⁴ Powell acknowledges that the word “Teutonica” is used broadly. It implies a universal mindset of the kind represented by such disparate individuals as Lao Tse, Leonardo da Vinci, Baruch Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Ludwig van Beethoven, Charles Darwin, and Richard Wagner. “But ...one observes a predominant proportion of this type among those races of Teutonic origin. Let this be the justification of the use of the word ‘Teutonica.’”¹⁵

During the long (sixty-two minutes) course of the three-movement work, whose motto, “The Ocean is in the Drop as the Drop is in the Ocean,” appears on the title page, one is struck by the formal unity, the cyclic procedures, and the quotations of or allusions to such diverse sources as the American folksong, “Shenandoah,” the Theme of Oneness that opens the first movement; the German folksong, “O alte Burschenherrlichkeit,” the last part of the second theme in the first movement and the primary material of the second movement in which it serves as the basis for a set of variations; the *ländler* style of Franz Schubert and “Dance of the Apprentices” from Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger* in movement three; and also in movement three, a choral-style theme opening with four successive F-sharps referring to the motto *Frisch* (Fresh), *Froh* (Joyous), *Fromm* (Pious), *Frei* (Free) of the *Turnverein*.

From 1914-1920 Powell activated his career in the United States, performing solo recitals and appearing with orchestra primarily in such eastern cultural centers as Boston and New York, but also with the Russian Symphony Orchestra in Chicago, Modest Altschuler, conductor.¹⁶ This same orchestra and conductor joined Powell in the premiere

¹¹ The English translation of the dedication reads “To German youth, especially the comradeship of the D. W. T.” The letters DWT refer to the German Viennese Gymnastic Society, a nationalistic organization to which Powell was admitted to membership despite its German Aryan orientation.

¹² In a letter to his sister Elizabeth Brockenbrough, Powell commented that the D.W.T “evidently didn’t know the difference between Anglo-Saxons & any other kind of Saxons.” He stated also that he “felt...like a sheep in wolf’s clothing.” This letter of 1906, seven years prior to the completion of the *Sonata Teutonica*, is in the John Powell Collection in Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

¹³ Powell read this book (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1896) as part of his German studies at the University of Virginia. Francke (1855-1930), a German-born professor of art and culture at Harvard College, established the German Museum, later named the Busch-Reisinger Museum, in 1903. During the 1890s, he wrote several influential articles for *The Atlantic Monthly*: “Bismarck as a National Type,” vol. 82, no. 492 (October 1898); “Goethe’s Message to America,” vol. 84, no. 505 (November 1899); and “The New Storm and Stress in Germany,” vol. 74, no. 443 (September 1894).

¹⁴ Richard Brockwell, Program Notes, reprinted in the abridged performance edition by Roy Hamlin Johnson, *John Powell: Sonata Teutonica* (New York, London: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. vi.

¹⁵ Brockwell, loc. cit.

¹⁶ Powell played Liszt’s *Hungarian Fantasy* with this ensemble on October 23, 1916.

of the *Rhapsodie nègre* on March 23, 1918. During this period, his rising fame brought him public recognition by way of an honorary membership in Phi Beta Kappa, University of Virginia chapter, and an invitation to perform at the White House of President Woodrow Wilson, a fellow Virginian. Powell also served as Vice President of an organization devoted to the re-establishment of the National Conservatory of Music, the institution once directed by Antonin Dvořák (the effort was not successful).

The *Rhapsodie nègre*, dedicated to Joseph Conrad, whose *Heart of Darkness* inspired its creation, was a smashing success; indeed, with the composer as pianist it was performed over the following two years by such aggregations as the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, the Cincinnati, Detroit, Boston, and San Francisco Symphony Orchestras, the Cleveland Orchestra, and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. As success bred success, Walter Damrosch programmed the work for his European tour with the New York Symphony in 1920-1921 with Powell as soloist. The tri-sectional one-movement work, with its mixture of Native American “tom-tom” rhythms and references to such spirituals as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” received performances in Paris, London, Rome, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and other capitals, thus ensuring international fame. Writing under his *nom-de-plume*, Richard Brockwell, Powell provided program notes that, in part, shed much light on what was soon to become an obsessive dimension to his character. He refers to the Negro as a “child among the peoples, and his music shows the unconscious, unbounded gaiety of the child, as well as the child’s humor; sometimes Aesopian, often, unfortunately too often, Rabelaisian.”¹⁷

Fame and, to some extent, fortune permitted Powell to devote more of his energy toward what became the *leit motifs* of his life—a preoccupation with racial purity and a conviction that Anglo-Saxon folksong serve as the primary basis for an identifiably American music. During the 1920s, Powell developed a friendship with Daniel Gregory Mason,¹⁸ a relationship that is treated in the latter’s book, *Music in My Time*.¹⁹ Both composers held an aversion to the avant-garde music of their day and both supported the idea that an Anglo-Saxon-based musical aesthetic was the best way to establish an identifiably American music. But Powell’s persona is well-illustrated by the following remarks by Mason:

Considering how insatiably social John is, it is strange how hard it is to extract a letter from him. In all our long friendship I have accumulated only about half a dozen. He will gladly sit up all night with you, if you will let him, discussing music, or just gossiping—for he has an unappeasable appetite for *personalia*, especially when spiced with a little friendly malice—or declaiming on some of his pet fanaticisms such as the horrible dangers of intermarriage between Negroes and whites, or the supreme virtues of Anglo-Saxon folk-songs . . .²⁰

¹⁷ Powell’s program notes are in the John Powell Collection at Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

¹⁸ Mason, a faculty member at Columbia University (as of 1910), wrote to Powell, who was in London in 1915, to obtain some information about him for his 14-volume series of music appreciation books, *The Art of Music* (New York: National Society of Music, 1915-1917). He did so upon the recommendation of David and Clara Mannes, who had introduced Powell’s *Sonata Virginianesque* to New York. Powell’s response, with kind remarks about Mason’s *Violin Sonata*, led to a meeting shortly after Powell’s return to the United States in December, 1915. From that point on, the two were something of a mutual admiration society.

¹⁹ Daniel Gregory Mason, *Music in My Time* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), pp. 291-309.

²⁰ Mason, op. cit., p. 301.

Sensitivity training was certainly nowhere on the American musical landscape when Mason's college friend and mentor at Harvard, Edward Burlingame Hill, later to become a professor in Harvard's music department, could say, in a letter to Mason:

I told you that I should commit all manner of loathsome musical sins this summer, you remember? Well, I hereby appoint you my father confessor. I've gone and done one silly sin. I got hold of a little tune that seemed to me to be rather 'nigger' and I have worked it into a little *Scherzino*. I can imagine your groans and other exhibitions of disgust when you receive it, but just the same I must confess it. I can see the niggers, men and women, dancing under the sway of the fascination of rhythm until the sweat fairly rolls off them, and the little singsong tune goes on and on with monotonous persistency. There, I feel better now.²¹

By 1920, Mason, too, was pontificating about the need to recognize the Anglo-Saxon virtues that he juxtaposes to the "Jewish infection in our music."²² He was no doubt expressing concern also for the fate of the more conservative musical styles, such as his own, when he made the following comments:

For how shall a public accustom by prevailing fashion to the exaggeration, the constant running to extremes, of eastern expression, divine the poignant beauty of Anglo-Saxon sobriety and restraint? How shall it pierce the Anglo-Saxon reticence, the fine reserve so polar to the garrulous self-confession, the almost indecent stripping of the soul, it witnesses in every concert hall and opera house? How, stimulated as it is to an abnormal appetite for the purely sensuous luxury of the ear by the Oriental gift for lavish ornamentation, shall it be able instantly to pitch its demands, so to speak, in another key when it listens to the plain texture, the austere sparseness of Anglo-Saxon musical speech?²³

Where Mason's biases were slanted toward Jews, Powell's were directed primarily, but not exclusively, to blacks. And these prejudices were, like Mason's, intertwined with his views on the state of American music. In September 1922, Powell and several prominent Virginians of like thinking²⁴, was a founder of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America, the purpose of which was to foster "the preservation and maintenance of Anglo-Saxon ideals and civilization in America. This purpose is to be accomplished in three ways: first, by the strengthening of Anglo-Saxon instincts, traditions, and principles among representatives of our original American stock; second, by intelligent selection and exclusion of immigrants; and third, by fundamental and final solutions of our racial problems in general, most especially of the negro (sic) problem."²⁵ The pamphlet further

²¹ Ibid., p. 36. The letter was written in the summer of 1895, a year after Hill's graduation from Harvard. Mason was then a rising senior.

²² Mason, "Is American Music Growing Up?" *Arts & Decoration*, vol. 14, no. 1 (November, 1920), p. 40B.

²³ Ibid. Mason eventually identified Ernest Bloch as the arch-Jew in his formulation against "the insidiousness of the Jewish menace" in "...And a Moral," *Tune In, America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1931; reprinted Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969). This topic is treated also in David Z. Kushner, "Ernest Bloch, Daniel Gregory Mason, and the Jewish Question," *American Music Teacher*, vol. 38, no. 6 (June-July 1989), pp. 16-19.

²⁴ Notable among Powell's cohorts were Dr. Walter Ashby Picker, Registrar of the Bureau of Vital Statistics for Virginia and Earnest Sevier Cox, a native of Tennessee who settled in Richmond and authored the book, *White America* (Richmond: White America Society, 1923).

²⁵ *Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America*, a pamphlet in the John Powell Collection, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

enunciates the specific proposals it is making to the General Assembly of Virginia to enact legislation that will ensure the preservation of the white race:

1. There shall be instituted immediately a system of registration and birth certificates showing the racial composition (white, black, brown, yellow, red) of every resident of this State.
2. No marriage license shall be granted save upon presentation and attestation under oath by both parties of said registration or birth certificates.
3. White persons may marry only whites.
4. For the purposes of this legislation, the term “white persons” shall apply only to individuals who have no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian.²⁶

Aligning himself with leaders of the burgeoning eugenics movement, Powell was instrumental in gaining political support for passage of the Racial Integrity Act, which was signed into law on March 20, 1924 by the Governor of Virginia, Elbert Lee Trinkle. This bill also forbade the marriage of Orientals and other non-whites to whites, although the compulsory registration provision was defeated.

During his dedicated work toward the implementation of his racial ideologies in his native state, Powell sallied forth to other venues to plump for his cause, combining, curiously, his polemical skills with his musical talents. On April 4, 5, and 6, 1923, for example, he presented, under the aegis of the Lectureship in Music of the Rice Institute, a piano recital,²⁷ a lecture on “Music and the Individual” and a second lecture titled “Music and the Nation.” The recital on April 4 was given at the City Auditorium of Houston while the lecture on the “Individual” explores the interaction and interrelationship between music and humanity. Citing the muse’s beneficial attributes as a therapeutic tool, as a balm to those who need surcease from societal pressures, and a tool for the cultivation of educational and moral values, Powell also cites the individual’s responsibility toward promoting music:

He can use his influence to combat the absurd idea that the study and profession of music are unworthy. This silly prejudice has deterred thousands of talented boys from becoming musicians—and girls, too—to our incalculable cultural detriment. The individual can support the musical activities in his community, the choral societies, the symphony orchestras, the musical clubs. He can attend concerts. He can encourage students. But these activities must not be indiscriminating; else they will do more harm than good. The individual must insist on having the very best music and musicians in order that his own taste and that of his community may become more and more refined. He must be relentless towards the charlatany and vulgarity that often disgrace the programs of even fine artists.²⁸

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The program consisted of Beethoven’s “Waldstein” *Sonata, Op. 53*, Chopin’s *Nocturne in D-flat major, Op. 27, No. 2*, *Scherzo in C-sharp minor, Op. 39, No. 3*, and *Polonaise in A-flat major, Op. 53*, D. G. Mason’s *Two Silhouettes (A major, F-sharp major)*, Marion Bauer’s *White Birches*, Powell’s *Elegie Nègre* and *Poème Erotique*, Beethoven’s *Three Country Dances (C major, E-flat major, C major)*, Powell’s *The Banjo-Picker*, and David Guion’s arrangement of *Turkey in the Straw*.

²⁸ John Powell, “Music and the Individual,” *The Rice Institute Pamphlet*, vol. 10, no. 3 (July 1923), p. 122.

In its positive tone and statements, which a present-day music educator might happily adopt “for the cause,” this lecture could not possibly prepare its listeners for the extended polemic, which followed. In “Music and the Nation,” Powell mixes his strongly held opinions on national issues such as immigration and race with his equally staunch beliefs about the necessity of developing an intrinsically American music. He asserts that the “melting pot” philosophy of America is sheer idiocy. The potential mixing of races and ethnically diverse people is found abhorrent, and, to make his point he avers that

Everyone knows that if he wishes to breed thoroughbred horses he cannot admix inferior breeds into the stock. The same applies to flowers, to garden vegetables. How dare we sit still and let happen to our children—bone of our bone, blood of our blood—that which we would not allow to happen to the very beasts of the field. I wish here and now to enter my protest against this insidious, this hideous doctrine with every drop of blood in my veins and every ounce of vigor in my body.²⁹

Powell makes clear the direction in which he is heading, by decrying the likelihood of miscegenation and by citing specifically “the negro (sic) problem”:

If the present ratio were to remain permanent, the inevitable product of the melting pot would be approximately an octoroon. It should not be necessary to stress the significance of this point. We know that under Mendelian law the African strain is hereditarily predominant. In other words, one drop of negro (sic) blood makes the negro (sic). We also know that no higher race has ever been able to preserve its culture, to prevent decay and eventual degeneracy when tainted, even slightly, with negro (sic) blood. Sixty centuries of history establish this rule. Since the first page of recorded fact, history can show no exception. Were the American people to become an octoroon race, it would mean their sinking to the level of Haiti and Santo Domingo.³⁰

In determining how to preserve a distinctly American nation, Powell concludes that it is essential that our cultural stock be grafted upon an already existing national root, and, after a quick process of eliminating French, German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish roots, he arrives at the inevitable *voilà* (pardon the French)-- the only possible culture upon which to engraft our own culture is that of the Anglo-Saxons. And to ensure that this process can take place, the composer, pianist, and Negrophobe advances the idea that immigration must be regulated so that “only immigrants of sufficient intelligence, those who, in blood, character, and habits of life, are capable of assimilating the American ideals, be permitted to enter this country.”³¹ Deportation is recommended for those who, after some undetermined time frame cannot or will not use the English language, and some regulation is suggested for the publication of foreign-language newspapers. For those foreigners who stay in the country, serious efforts at Americanization are regarded as necessary; this includes the study of the history, traditions, political and social values, and ideals of the country’s great men and documents, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States.

²⁹ John Powell, “Music and the Nation.” *The Rice Institute Pamphlet*, vol. 10, no. 3 (July 1923), p. 132.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 135

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

The above discussion serves as a long introduction to the subject of national music and how best to achieve the same in America. Citing Antonin Dvořák's³² call for Americans to cease their blind allegiance to Europe for compositional models and to explore such indigenous sources as Negro and Native American songs and idioms, Powell launches into a "hit list" of various movements which did not work, among them two that emerged from Dvořák's recommendations and which Powell formalized with the titles "Red Indian School" and "Negro School." While acknowledging the work of Arthur Farwell and his Wa-Wan Press as well as compositions by Edward MacDowell and Charles Wakefield Cadman to be meritorious examples of the Red Indian movement, he reaffirms his position that as a people with roots bound to European culture and psychology we are incapable of expressing ourselves "in terms of the musical idiom of an alien and primitive race."³³ As for the Negro School, he admits he made certain contributions to it himself with such works as *Sonata Virginianesque* for violin and piano, the piano suite *In the South*, and *Rhapsodie nègre*; he explains that in his case "the expression was purely objective, and was frankly intended to be character music."³⁴ He states further that much of what is referred to as Negro music is actually derived from European sources and reveals melodic and harmonic structure, which is Caucasian in origin. The part of African music that is pure "is almost as meagre (sic) and monotonous as the Indian music."³⁵ As for the "Stephen Foster School" the Virginian dismisses it as having more in common with the German folk-song than with Anglo-Saxon tradition. The "Popular Music School," while having certain charm as regards its syncopated rhythms drawn from ragtime and its Latin-American 'beat,' is, nevertheless, "a spurious product foisted off on the public by vaudeville and musical comedy magnates of Broadway. The taste for it is cultivated by professional "pluggers," and it is usually artificially manufactured by the lowest and vulgarest type of the foreign musical parasite."³⁶ As for the "Ultra-Modern School," it is accused of defying the purpose of art, namely communications; it's composers' "concoctions may be filled with meaning for themselves, but, without a common means of communication, the content must remain as securely locked as the secret of the Sphinx, in their own bosoms."³⁷ Charles Griffes's *White Peacock* and Marion Bauer's *White Birches* are recommended as exceptions among modern works. Daniel Gregory Mason, however, is singled out for special approbation for "he springs from an old New England stock, as is shown on every page of his writings, while the breadth of his culture, his master of technique, the vigor of his imagination, and his mysterious and passionate Romanticism place him in the front rank of all contemporary composers."³⁸

³² See Antonin Dvořák, "Music in America," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, vol. XC, no. 537 (December 1894-May 1895), pp. 428-434.

³³ Powell, "Music and the Nation," p. 147.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 148. Powell does not mention Daniel Gregory Mason's *String Quartet in G minor, Op. 19* based on Negro themes (1918-1919, privately published in 1920, revised in 1930 when Mason decided that its impressionistic harmonies were incongruent with the dramatic material. No mention is made either of Charles Tomlinson Griffes's *Two Sketches Based on Indian Themes* for string quartet (1918).

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

The solution to the problem of defining an American music is solved by Powell's conclusion that the "Anglo-Saxon Folk Music School" is best suited to produce a viable national art in our shores. Powell cites carefully chosen examples of national idioms in various European countries, which have resulted in successful works, although

In France, the folk-music was less rich and interesting, and this accounts for the relative inferiority of French music, the only work of supreme genius emanating from France in recent times being the "Carmen" of Bizet. But in this case Bizet based his work on the Spanish folk-music idiom. It can be safely stated that all the music, which is really alive for us today is based on folk-music, and if we wish a loving music in America we will have to provide it with a folk basis.³⁹

As it is a given that the Anglo-Saxon stock is the one chosen by Powell for the engrafting process, it is not surprising that he refers to his own setting of "Arkansas Traveler" in *Pioneer Dance* and of "Mississippi Sawyer" and "Old John Hardy" in the *Banjo-Picker* as instrumental in securing him European publishers, while the Anglo-Saxonisms in his *Violin Concerto* gained him a hearing in Vienna as well as in New York and Chicago. It follows then that the immigrants in our population "be they ever so ignorant and uncouth"⁴⁰ would do well to be exposed to our folk music as the best means of integrating them into the ways and mores of our people. As for "true blue" Americans, "familiarity with this noble inheritance would revive and confirm in ourselves those traditions and feelings which are the crown of our race, and make possible for us, not merely the inauguration of a Golden Age of National Art, but assure to us as well that supremest glory, a nationhood, unparalleled in the annals of all time."⁴¹

On the front lines of the racial divide in Virginia, Powell continued his various assaults against persons of color by supporting a resolution, passed by the state legislature in March 1926, that would request that the Congress of the United States grant assistance to blacks who wanted to be sent to Liberia, a proposal supported by the black separatist, Marcus Garvey, and his followers. In addition, with the support of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Powell wrote a series of thirteen articles, between February 16 and March 2, 1926 for the newspaper in which he mustered his best arguments in support of his racial views and those of the eugenicists. But he did not confine his public pronouncements to Richmond; indeed, he joined Earnest Sevier Cox and Walter Scott Copeland, editor of the *Newport News Daily Press*, in support of a bill introduced in the Virginia House of Delegates by George Alvin Massenburg in January 1926 which would make it a misdemeanor for the operator or patrons of a theater or motion-picture house to support integrated seating. The bill passed the House of Delegates on February 5 and the Senate on March 9. It became law on March 22 without the signature of Governor Harry F. Byrd.⁴² The Massenburg bill remained on the books until it was declared illegal by a Federal court in 1963, ironically the year of Powell's death.

³⁹ Ibid., pp. 154-155.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 163.

⁴¹ Ibid. Some of these themes were explored in Powell's interview in the *Musical Courier*, vol. 76, no. 18 (May 2, 1918), p. 10. He advocates here the formation of a National Opera based in Washington, D.C. with all works sung in English, as well as a Minister of Fine Arts.

⁴² The bill was precipitated by a visit by Copeland's wife Grace to the black Hampton Institute for the purpose of viewing a performance by the Denishawn Dancers; she was seated next to black persons. This

The Anglo-Saxon Clubs were involved in other legislative mischief having to do with clarification of some of the provisions of the 1924 law, these dealing mainly with the classification of mixed breeds with any degree of Negro blood as legally forbidden to marry a Caucasian. The Native Americans of Virginia, who were classified as black if they had only the slightest trace of Negro blood, mounted a protest so successful that this bill was defeated in 1928.

On April 25, 1928 Powell married Louise Burleigh, a New Hampshire-born, Radcliffe educated playwright, and, later in that year, returned to Europe to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of his debut there. His programs invariably included such folk-flavored selections as country-dances by Beethoven, his own *The Banjo-Picker*, and David Guion's concert arrangement of *Turkey in the Straw*. On March 7, 1930, John Powell was given perhaps the greatest ego-massage of his career, for it was then that he performed in the Hall of Delegates of his native state shortly after the General Assembly overturned their earlier decision to defeat the racial purity bill regarding mixed marriage and make it law. For Powell and the Anglo-Saxon Clubs this marked a stunning victory in their unrelenting crusade against miscegenation.

The Harlem Renaissance movement, much of which took place during the 1920s and 1930s, seems not to have made much impact on Powell's concept of black ability in the field of art music. Given the success of such figures as Robert Nathaniel Dett, William Grant Still, and Florence Price, and the earlier British composer, Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, this is quite remarkable. But then no less a historian than Cyril Scott, in commenting on modern music, felt compelled to opine:

It is regrettable that a type of 'music' which is so popular as *Jazz* should exercise an evil influence, but such is the occult truth. Jazz has been definitely 'put through' by the Black Brotherhood, known in Christian tradition as the Powers of Evil or Darkness, and put through with the intention of inflaming the sexual nature and so diverting mankind from spiritual progress...

The question may be asked: Then why have the Higher Powers permitted Jazz to 'come through'?—it is because Jazz-music makes that lesson (of sexual control) rather more difficult, and consequently renders the learning of it more deserving of merit.⁴³

From this point onward, Powell involved himself in Virginian musical affairs, with his most strenuous efforts devoted to his advocacy of Anglo-American folk music and the programming of such music at the White Top Folk Festival; the maestro served as the primary artistic consultant, lecturer, and public advocate. He insisted that only authentic material be performed, and that jazz and popular tunes be ostracized. Despite his well-known racial attitudes, the 1933 festival attracted the presence of Eleanor Roosevelt and

distressed her, and caused her husband to editorialize against mixing the races. Copeland and Powell were speakers at a protest meeting held in November 1925 under the auspices of the Anglo-Saxon Club of Hampton. In 1949 the Virginia Press Association established the W. S. Copeland Award for Journalistic Integrity and Community Service. In 2001, after Copeland's racist past was revealed in scholarly publications as well as in Peter Hardin, "Honored Editor was Equality's Enemy, He Helped Lead Fight for White Supremacy," *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (July 23, 2000), p. A-1, Copeland's name was removed from the award.

⁴³ Cyril Scott, *The Influence of Music on History and Morals, a Vindication of Plato*, Part III. London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1928, pp. 59-60.

various folk experts.⁴⁴ It was only six years later that Mrs. Roosevelt intervened on behalf of Marian Anderson, who had been denied permission by the Daughters of the American Revolution to sing at Constitution Hall on racial grounds. The First Lady was among those who sponsored a recital by Anderson at the Lincoln Memorial on April 9, 1939, which was attended by some 75,000 people. Although it was much less involved in the programming of folk-based literature, the Virginia State Choral Festivals (1931—1937) secured Powell's involvement as well, but the state of the annual performances was uneven, and financial difficulties ultimately doomed the series. In 1936, the Powells moved to their country home, "Longways," in Albemarle County, Virginia, but their ties to Richmond were ensured when a group of their friends and admirers purchased their home on 106 North Plum Street. They were thereby able to stay in familiar surroundings when they visited the city. This act marked the birth of what came to be known as the John Powell Foundation. During 1938, the twentieth-fifth anniversary of Powell's New York debut, he performed the *Rhapsodie Nègre*, on May 7, with the NBC Symphony Orchestra under Pierre Monteux, and on November 1 of that year he gave a recital in New York; the proceeds from which were designated for the purpose of acquiring for the University of Virginia a rare collection of letters of Thomas Jefferson. The program, consisting of Beethoven's *Sonata in E major, Op. 109*; Schumann's *Etudes Symphoniques, Op. 13*; Chopin's *Etudes, Op. 10, Nos. 3 and 4* and *Op. 25, No. 11*; Powell's transcriptions of *Green Willow* and *Pretty Sallye*; the Sharp—Powell Morris jig *Jockie to the Fair*; and Liszt's *Tarantella*.

The Schumann work had appeared on the program of Powell's New York debut on February 25, 1913 with Efrem Zimbalist. Powell received the following comments in Olin Downes's review of his performance in *The New York Times*:

Everything in this program was the work of a thoughtful and noble-minded artist, one who had studied and reflected profoundly, whose taste and temperament always illuminated and gave life to the music. Without hurry, frantic protestations, or superficial effects, Mr. Powell discoursed greatly great music.⁴⁵

Powell spent the last twenty-five years of his life heavily involved in the musical affairs of Virginia, such as the Virginia Music Festivals. Here, and in other venues, Powell fought for the dissemination and performance of authentic folk music, and decried the increasing commercialization of the same.⁴⁶ But the elevation of folk-purism was a battle he largely lost. A good illustration of the Virginian's creative efforts in this area may be observed in his edition of *Twelve Folk Hymns from the Old Shape Note Hymn Books and from Oral Tradition*.⁴⁷ During the 1940s, he made use of the Richmond home for the

⁴⁴ These included Martha Beckwith, president of the American Folk Lore Society; Du Bose Heyward, well-known for his collaboration with George Gershwin on *Porgy and Bess*; Arthur K. Davis, Jr., editor of *Traditional Ballads of Virginia* (Harvard University Press, 1929); and George Pullen Jackson, folklorist and author of *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1933). Jackson's Old Harp Singers performed at this festival as well as those of 1931 and 1932.

⁴⁵ Olin Downes, "Beethoven Opens Powell Recital," *The New York Times* (November 2, 1938), p. 26.

⁴⁶ As a Patron of the 1950 Virginia Festival, Powell was chagrined at the news that the featured performer was the "hillbilly" personality, Mrs. John Workman, known professionally as Sunshine Sue.

⁴⁷ J. Fischer and Bro. published this collection in New York in 1934. Powell harmonized "All is Well," "The Babe of Bethlehem," "Condescension," and "Warrenton." Hilton Ruffy and Annabel Morris

purpose of giving lectures and lecture-recitals, and teaching piano. The traditional, mostly nineteenth-century, piano repertory served as the focus of his lecture demonstrations; however, he did venture into the conservative literature of the twentieth century, in particular compositions by Daniel Gregory Mason and his own works. His own compositions were increasingly devoted to folk-tune settings and arrangements of popular hymns. His well-wrought *Symphony in A major*, commissioned by the National Federation of Music Clubs, took him thirteen years to complete. The premiere was given on April 23, 1947 by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Karl Kruger. It is in this work that Powell revealed the possibilities of employing Anglo-American folk tunes as the basis for a large-scaled orchestral work. The individual movements, for example, are exemplars of the country dance, the folk song, the ballad, and the Morris and Sword dances.⁴⁸ That this work did not receive more lasting attention was another source of disappointment.

On May 26, 1963, he gave his last public performance in Richmond; it was sponsored by the area's chapter of the Leschetizky Association, and consisted of two-piano performances of Beethoven's *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor*,⁴⁹ and Liszt's *Piano Concerto No. 1 in E-flat major*. Florence Robertson, President of the Board of Directors of the John Powell Foundation, was the second pianist.

The years following Powell's death have been marked by an ever-declining interest in his music. On the other hand, his racial obsessions, his high-profile role in the enactment of laws, which fostered a white supremacy legacy, and his friendships with eugenicists and their supporters, have, in recent times, been examined closely by Peter Hardin, a journalist with the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*.⁵⁰ As early as 1983, the musicologist Charles Hamm⁵¹, in his book *MUSIC in the New World*, discussed Powell more in terms of his promotion of Anglo-Saxon folk music as the most desirable lynchpin for developing an American musical visage than in terms of his own musical achievements. It is a sad commentary that Powell's legacy is now confined almost exclusively to his hyperbolic promotion of long-discredited theories of racial superiority. That a John Powell Day could be declared in Virginia as late as 1951, that an editorial lauding him as among the pantheon of great Virginians at the time of his passing in 1963, and that a state educational institution could name its music building after him in 1968 are stellar examples of compartmentalism. In the press releases and other published accounts of these three events, mention is tellingly not made of Powell's headline-making ventures in

Buchanan harmonized the other hymns. Powell also contributed the Introduction and Notes on the Folk Hymns.

⁴⁸ Hilton Rufty made a complete analysis of the *Symphony* for the Richmond performance on November 5, 1951 by the National Symphony under the baton of Howard Mitchell. Portions of it are quoted in Ronald David Ward's Ph.D. dissertation, *The Life and Works of John Powell (1882-1963)*, pp. 272-284.

⁴⁹ Powell had performed this work with his teacher, Frederick Charles Hahr, in one of his first important public engagements in 1897.

⁵⁰ Peter Hardin, "'Documentary Genocide,' Families' Surnames on Racial Hit List," *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (March 5, 2000), p. 1; Hardin, "Honored Editor was Equality's Enemy, He Helped Lead Fight for White Supremacy," *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (July 23, 2000), p. A-1. See also Richard B. Sherman, "The Last Stand: The Fight for Racial Integrity in Virginia in the 1920s," *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 54, no. 1 (February 1988), pp. 69-91.

⁵¹ Charles Hamm, *MUSIC in the New World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), pp. 421-422.

the arena of raw politics.⁵² The pendulum of history has now swung in another direction, and even the abbreviated entry on Powell in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*⁵³ makes mention of his racial “concerns.” Lest one garner the impression that Powell’s views are now antiquated, one need note only the activities of such organized groups as the Alabama-based League of the South, which purports to have 9000 members at present. It advocates mandatory school prayer, a ban on abortion, an end to foreign aid and the flying of the state flag above that of the American flag. Jim Lear, northeast Florida chairman of the League, declares that Abraham Lincoln is “the worst war criminal ever,”⁵⁴ and supports the idea that southerners receive war reparations. Michael Hill, the League’s president, condemns interracial marriage, and urges that southerners “intermarry with their own kind.”⁵⁵

In assessing Powell’s impact on American music, one is struck by the fact that the eminent conductors under whom he performed seem to have paid little heed to the pianist’s ideological stance, and of the fellow musicians with whom he had close contact, and who surely would have been acquainted with his racial views, the general attitude seems to have been one of benign neglect. It is clear, however, that Powell’s career as a pianist and composer was not impacted negatively as a result of his white supremacy crusade during his lifetime. It may well be that as a result of the current broader interest in Powell the man, a reawakening of interest in his music in a contextual framework may yet emerge.

⁵² See, for example, “Powell Asks Law Guarding Racial Purity,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (February 13, 1942), p. 1. See also the obituary, “John Powell, 80, Composer, Dies,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (August 16, 1963), pp. 1, 4. Even here there is no mention of Powell’s involvement in contentious racial issues.

⁵³ David Z. Kushner, “Powell, John,” *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd ed., vol. 20 (London: Macmillan, 2001), pp. 240-241.

⁵⁴ Matthew Pinzer, “League of the South pushes separatist views,” *The Florida Times-Union* (September 10, 2001), pp. A1, A7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. A7. This quote comes from an e-mail from Hill intercepted by Heidi Beirich, a spokesperson for the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Intelligence Project.

Addendum

In its meeting 15-17 September 2010, the Radford University Board of Visitors took the following action: “Approved a motion to change the name of Powell Hall, a portion of an academic building in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, and rename the entire building Porterfield Hall. The two building components were originally designed as a single building with supporting functions and sequential room numbering”.¹ This seemingly perfunctory “bullet” from Radford’s Office of University Relations received a full airing in various media outlets. The university’s student newspaper, *The Tartan*, e.g., began a story by Colin Daileida with the following attention-grabbing comments:

Radford University’s association with a white supremacist is over.

Powell Hall, named for hailed Virginia pianist and composer John Powell, no longer exists after Friday, Sept. 17. The Board of Visitors voted unanimously to call the whole building Porterfield Hall after Powell’s heavy involvement with white supremacists was brought to their attention.²

The *Tartan*’s account provides background information on how, going back to 2005, Radford officials were apprised of Powell’s involvement in the eugenics movement and how they came to the decision to abolish his name from the portion of the building that bore his name. Porterfield Hall, the other portion of the building and now the name applied to the entire structure, was named for Robert Huffard Porterfield (1905-1971), founder of the Abingdon Theatre in Abingdon, Virginia.

The ever-changing judgment of history has, at this point in time, tilted toward the negative with respect to John Powell’s place in American cultural and political history, but it is not to be denied that he had an important place in both spheres.

¹ See www.radford.edu/NewsPub/September10/0917bovwrap.html

² See <https://php.radford.edu/~tartan/wp/?p=2389>