

The ‘Caruso of Jazz’ and a ‘Creole Benvenuto Cellini’ Verdi, ‘Miserere ... Ah, che la morte ognora’ (Leonora, Manrico), *Il trovatore*, Act IV

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Eric Hobsbawm’s epithets capture aspects of two great New Orleans musicians: the long, impassioned melodies of Sidney Bechet (‘pulsating ropes of beautiful sound’) and the picaresque story-telling of Jelly Roll Morton (‘more readable than many such works’).¹ Both jazzmen knew how to spin a yarn, in their words and in their music. As well as recording among the finest early jazz, they left accounts of their lives, in *Treat It Gentle* and *Mister Jelly Roll*, which continue to intrigue, to delight and to puzzle. One intersection of many in their stories occurs at a conspicuously operatic juncture: the prison bars separating Leonora from Manrico in the ‘Miserere’ of Verdi’s *Il trovatore* – or, as I prefer, ‘The Count’s captured my lover (who’ll turn out to be his brother) blues’.

It is no surprise that New Orleans musicians would raid the opera house for tunes.² French opera especially had been a lively presence in the city since the end of the eighteenth century. As well as hosting countless US premieres, New Orleans was first in the country to establish a permanent opera company.³ Verdi’s revision of *Trovatore* as *Le Trouvère*, for example, appeared barely three months after its Paris premiere (reopening the Théâtre d’Orléans after Holy Week in April 1857).⁴ Opera retained a strong hold on the city as the first generation of jazz musicians were growing up; the New Orleans company toured *Trouvère* to New York in 1912, alongside *Faust*, *La Favorite*, *Mignon* and *Thaïs*.⁵

Bechet and Morton both recount formative experiences at the opera, though their memories are wilfully vague. There’s no need to insist on their attendance in the house, however, to explain their recourse to opera for musical resources. Performances of works, after all, constitute only part – perhaps a small part – of the genre’s transmission and impact. In an age when public music-making, domestic performance and recordings

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¹ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Jazz Scene*, rev. edn (New York, 1993), 333, 361. His review article ‘The Caruso of Jazz’, 325–36, originally appeared in the *New York Review of Books* 35/8 (12 May 1988); the term ‘Creole Benvenuto Cellini’ occurs in the context of the ‘Guide to Further Reading’, 359–61, appended to the 1993 edition of a book that Hobsbawm had originally published pseudonymously as Frances Newton in 1959.

² See Joshua Berrett, ‘Louis Armstrong and Opera’, *Musical Quarterly* 76 (1992), 216–41.

³ John Joyce et al., ‘New Orleans’, *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/42080 (accessed 28 August 2015).

⁴ George Martin, ‘Verdi Onstage in the United States: *Le Trouvère*’, *Opera Quarterly* 21 (2005), 287; as it happened, the Italian original followed just two days later, at the city’s Gaiety Theatre.

⁵ Martin, ‘Verdi Onstage’, 289.

(either public or private) co-existed, opportunities to hear and make operatic music were many; excerpts such as *Trovatore's* 'Miserere', along with its still-more-famous 'Anvil Chorus', were versioned for everything from solo singers to military bands.⁶ At the same time, European music continued to convey social standing – especially in a city in which (whisper it) class mattered almost as much as race.

The recorded evidence of Morton's and Bechet's idiosyncratic versions of the 'Miserere' date, like a great deal of 'early jazz', not from the 1910s or 1920s but from the New Orleans revival of the late 1930s. In Morton's case, it is overtly historical, coming from his marathon oral history conducted by Alan Lomax at the Library of Congress (the source of Lomax's book *Mister Jelly Roll*). The immediate context is a tale of duels with the pianists of St Louis, Missouri, whom Morton did not find up to much. He had already discussed how, when he was a child, playing the piano risked being considered a 'sissy'.⁷ Now he asserts his masculinity by dancing rings around any music put in front of him:

He [pianist George Reynolds] asked me did I read music. I told him a little bit. So he put different difficult numbers on the piano – he thought they were difficult, but they were all simple to me ... [H]e brought me different light operas like *Humoresque*, the *Overture from* [Flotow's] *Martha*, the *Miserery from Ill Travadore* [sic] and, of course, I knowed them all ... Then I swung the *Miserery* and combined it with the *Anvil Chorus*.⁸

Morton's lack of distinction between genres suggests that he'd encountered all these old favourites first and foremost as piano music. Liszt had famously paraphrased *Trovatore*, as had a New Orleanian of an earlier generation, Louis Moreau Gottschalk. (This name didn't appear familiar to Morton when Lomax brought him up, however – and the great raconteur wasn't to be distracted from his story.) As in a number of cases on the Lomax recordings, Morton not only gives a straight(ish) rendition of the 'Miserere' but also – defending his claim to have 'invented' jazz – demonstrates how he transformed the music into a rollicking stomp.

'[P]erhaps the most famous [*tempo di mezzo*] in Italian opera', as one commentator says, 'magnificently combines three contrasting musical ideas': the chorus's prayer for Mercy, Leonora's despairing cries and Manrico's consoling farewell, which succeed one another, repeat and finally merge.⁹ Morton evokes the chorus's 'Miserere' only opaquely before setting off with a stomping ragtime bass on Leonora's distress and Manrico's resignation. He presents each theme first straighter, then more ragged (rather than alternating, as in the Verdi), and intersperses them with characteristic jazz breaks; a coda evokes the 'Anvil Chorus' to suitably hammering effect.¹⁰

⁶ See, inter alia, George W. Martin, *Opera at the Bandstand* (Lanham, MD, 2014); and Larry Hamberlin, *Tin Pan Opera: Operatic Novelty Songs in the Ragtime Era* (New York, 2011).

⁷ Alan Lomax [and Jelly Roll Morton], *Mister Jelly Roll: The Fortunes of Jelly Roll Morton, New Orleans Creole and 'Inventor of Jazz'* (New York, 1950), 6.

⁸ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 148–9.

⁹ Roger Parker, 'Trovatore, II', *New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, ed. Stanley Sadie, *Grove Music Online*, *Oxford Music Online*, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/O005793 (accessed 28 August 2015).

¹⁰ Joseph Smith, 'Three Piano *Misereres*', *Journal of the American Liszt Society* 59–60 (2008–9), 10–23.

Aside from demonstrating his virtuosity and invention, Morton's concern in this episode from his oral history seems to be with musical status. '[M]y folks', he said, 'always had it in their minds that a musician was a tramp, trying to duck work, with the exception of the French opera house players.'¹¹ As he sought to recover his position in history, this most composerly of early jazz musicians enlisted the same discourses of race, class and, indeed, gender that had held him back in an effort to unlock the respect – and the revenue – he was due. 'There is nothing finer than jazz music', he said, 'because it comes from everything of the finest class music.'¹²

A Creole like Morton, but several years his junior, Sidney Bechet also encountered opera as a child. The most vocal of instrumentalists, Bechet enjoyed visits to the opera with his mother and played Caruso records at home.¹³ In *Treat It Gentle*, he tells how an uncle with operatic ambitions was arrested for disturbing the peace with his singing, but released when the police captain turned out to be a fan.¹⁴ Although Bechet was captured in a private recording playing 'Vesti la giubba' from *Pagliacci*, no such record is known to exist of the 'Miserere'. Nevertheless, phrases from this and other arias appear regularly in his solos, which are constructed from innumerable variations on a common set of ideas. One context in particular for the 'Miserere' was consistent across two decades of recording: Bechet borrowed from it in his languid renditions of Gershwin's 'Summertime'.

In its original form, Serena's Act I song from *Porgy and Bess* consists of just two sixteen-bar verses – their elementary chords, gapped scale and limited range reminiscent of the blues. Although the second verse ('One of these mornin's') implies a narrative arc, repetition of the same simple melody restrains 'Summertime' to the emotional range of a lullaby, as which it serves. In Bechet's earliest recording, from 1938, the same year as Morton's interviews, a guitar introduction by Teddy Bunn cues the world of the blues. Bechet performs the first verse fairly straight, but to begin the second, he interpolates Leonora's opening exclamation from the 'Miserere' ('Quel suon, quelle preci'); he scoops and growls in his resonant low range as few Leonoras would dare. Meanwhile, Sid Catlett's drums hint at *Trovatore's* portentous 'death' rhythm: dum, da-da-dum, da-da-dum. In effect, Bechet transforms the two verses of 'Summertime' into a single thirty-two-bar chorus, in which this Verdian 'middle 8' contrasts in register, timbre and affect with the Gershwin.

On the face of it, Bechet's is an odd interpolation, introducing terrible omens to this easy livin', fish jumpin', good lookin' summer's day. But already in *Porgy and Bess*, Serena reprises the lullaby during the storm, as later does Bess, when daddy and mamma can no longer stand by. Indeed, there's a heavenly turn (as well as an aspirational one) in that second verse, for the child who will 'rise up singin' ... spread yo' wings ... take the sky'. Bechet was consistent in appropriating Leonora's

¹¹ Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 6.

¹² Lomax, *Mister Jelly Roll*, 66.

¹³ Or at least so Noel 'Chappie' d'Amato told John Chilton in 1956 and everyone has subsequently repeated (John Chilton, *Sidney Bechet: The Wizard of Jazz* (New York, 1987; repr. New York, 1996), 5).

¹⁴ Sidney Bechet, *Treat It Gentle: An Autobiography* (New York, 1960; repr., New York, 1978), 56–7.

impassioned line in subsequent recordings, rounding out the form of ‘Summertime’ and awarding it greater emotional depth.

Like many African Americans, then as now, Bechet was ambivalent about Gershwin’s ‘folk opera’: ‘There’s some feeling there, it’s a nice show’, he said, but it’s ‘not real Jazz’. ‘Summertime’ comes ‘just about the closest to the mood of Negro music. But listen to it, listen to it real careful ... It’s a borrowed feeling ... It still isn’t saying what the black man, he’d say.’¹⁵ Despite playing, later in life, songs like his ‘Petite fleur’ that were commonly heard as nostalgic, Bechet was not one for maudlin sentimentality.¹⁶ On the contrary, his playing throbs powerfully, even angrily, especially if – as when drawing down his reserves of air at the end of a long phrase, before a last, defiant flourish – he may sound vulnerable. This rawness of expression offers some explanation for Bechet’s intervention in ‘Summertime’. He brings the song back to the blues by stepping further away, tapping another source of finely wrought emotion. As Leonora wails away for the man she’s lost, the ‘Miserere’ oozes blues sentiment: Bechet begs us to imagine the role sung, with ardour and belligerence in tragic equal measure, by a singer such as Bessie Smith. If, in other words, Jelly Roll Morton jazzed the classics to claim their standing, Bechet in contrast has Verdi show Gershwin the extraordinary vitality of a lowdown blues.

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¹⁵ Bechet, *Treat It Gentle*, 206. See Ray Allen and George P. Cunningham, ‘Cultural Uplift and Double-Consciousness: African American Responses to the 1935 Opera *Porgy and Bess*’, *Musical Quarterly* 88 (2005), 342–69.

¹⁶ See my ‘Remembrance of Jazz Past: Sidney Bechet in France’, *Paris Blues: African-American Music and French Popular Culture, 1920–1960* (Chicago, 2014), 220–64.