

lessons of our generation about the function of vibrato, portamento and even of rhythm itself. Only time will tell whether Philip's insightful analyses and commentary will have any long-term effect on future performances of late-romantic and early twentieth century music. At least anyone venturing to carry forward into that period that pioneering work of Norrington, Gardiner and others beyond their self-imposed limits will now be fully warned of the numberless pitfalls to be encountered in any such attempt. *Reviewed by Christopher Dymant*

### Endnote

1. Space precludes discussion of reference in the literature but see in particular Fifield *True Artist and True Friend* (Hans Richter) pp. 463-464; Scholes *The Mirror of Music* Vol. 1 p.392 (Weingartner); Haslick *Music Criticisms 1846-99* ed. Pleasants pp.104-06 (on Wagner's performances of the *Eroica*

Symphony in 1872); and those cited in the *ARSC Journal* (1986;18[1-3]:154-155). It may be noted that Hanslick's praise for Mahler's *Eroica* cited by Philip (p.8) went to its clarity and power; he did not mention tempo manipulation: see de la Grange *Mahler*, pp.489-90.

### ***Bert Williams: a biography of the pioneer black comedian.***

*By Eric Ledell Smith. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Co., 1993. 301 pp., notes, appendices, index, bibliography.*

Though this book isn't without problems, it provides at least a fragmentary biography and some useful insights into the life, career and feelings of one of America's greatest theatric figures. With long-time partner George Walker, Williams managed to break through formidable color barriers and eventually elevate himself to the top of his profession.

Following their successful appearance at Koster and Bial's Music Hall in New York City in 1896, the Williams and Walker team proceeded to star in a series of all-black musical comedies, beginning with "A lucky coon" and "The policy players" in 1899. Later shows, like "In Dahomey" (1903), "Abyssinnia" (1906) and "Bandanna Land" (1907), were each long running shows on Broadway and on the road, due in no small part to the talents of Walker's wife, Ada (later Aida) Overton Walker, the skilled actress, dancer and choreographer.

Following the onset of George Walker's terminal illness in 1908, Williams eventually abandoned the musical comedy format to star, nearly annually, in the Ziegfeld Follies extravaganzas of the 1910s. His own death came prematurely in 1922 at the age of 46.

Smith is not the first to contribute a book-length treatise on Bert Williams. Mabel Rowland's 1923 *Bert Williams: son of laughter* was a postmortem tribute which contained stories and anecdotes from friends and professional colleagues. Ann Charters' 1970 biography *Nobody: the story of Bert Williams* discussed his career against the backdrop of the racially restricted social climate of his time.

Smith necessarily covers much of the same ground, though his work contributes new insights by way of his extensive research into contemporary resources, like performance reviews, newspaper articles and interviews, and various scholarly works. At least a few sources contain direct quotes from Williams (and Walker too, on occasion) which provide important insight into his own feelings and intellect. Quotes from oth-

ers reveal a variety of assessments and attitudes, from the sensitive support of George M. Cohan to the antagonism of Grace Kelly's uncle Walter C. Kelly, whose best-selling Victor records of "The Virginia judge" turn out to reveal an uncomfortably close portrait of his own racial attitudes.

Unfortunately, there are enough errors and omissions in this book to make one wary of relying on it as the last word. Poet Paul Laurence Dunbar's birthdate is given as 1892 instead of 1872, which suggests that he must have been quite the prodigy when he contributed the libretto to *Clorindy, or the origin of the cakewalk* in 1898. Then there's composer Joe Jordan's intriguing life span, from 1882 to 1871, and the misspelling of names like John Steel, Wilbur Sweatman, Anton Heindl and Tim Brymn. On page 216, Smith states that *Under the bamboo tree*, which starred Williams, began an engagement in Cincinnati on December 4, 1922; Williams had died in March.

Steel, Sweatman, Heindl and Brymn were figures of consequence in early recording-making, an area where Smith's knowledge is clearly deficient. On page 168, he states that "Williams (sic) Sweatman...and his band [in 1903] had become the first to make a recording." So much for Sousa, Gilmore and Charlie Prince! On page 48, we learn that "Williams was the first black recording artist," a statement which likewise dismisses George W. Johnson, Cousins & De Moss, and the Standard Quartette.

A Folkways/RBF 33, which followed the release of Ann Charters' book two decades ago, is the only modern reissue of Bert Williams' records. Astonishingly, Smith seems only to be familiar with the cuts chosen for inclusion on the LP. Had he chosen to consult and audition more of the impressive number of songs recorded between 1901 and 1922, he could have learned a great deal about just what it was that made Bert Williams such a towering presence. The records abundantly reveal his performing and composing techniques and normally provide clues, via composer credits, to the origins of the many songs to which Smith inexcusably pleads ignorance. In one place, he cites Williams' 1917 recording of the superb musical monologue, "Twenty Years," unaware that the "Judge Grimes" piece mentioned subsequently is the same.

Nowhere does the author explain why there is no discography, which should be a fundamental component of a work about a performer whose work survives primarily on records. Films too are cited, but no listing is provided. Smith states that at least some have not survived, but what of those which have? And why did Smith apparently make no attempt to see them?

Despite my unhappiness with elements which should have been researched – and proofed! – more thoroughly, I like this book for the positive things it does provide. The extensive quotes from newspaper columnists and reviewers go quite a ways to show how Bert Williams was perceived in his own time, and how the down-at-the-heels and down-at-the-mouth tramp image he perfected became a universalized figure who transcended racial appeal. Smith doesn't say so, but I'm sure it could be argued that Williams at least partially paved the way for the successful films of Charlie Chaplin, in which the actor portrayed a comparable character.

Smith does note that a 1908 parody of the medieval morality play *Everyman* (which didn't include Williams) did include a chorus figure called Nobody, suggesting that it may have been based on the Williams signature song of the same name from 1906. Certainly, bracketing *Everyman* with *Nobody* implies the serious nature of the best comedy and helps place Williams in proper perspective, especially since his black-faced, shuffling persona would otherwise be hard to accept and understand today.

*Reviewed by Dick Spottswood*