
What Is Music Capable Of: The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man

The Power of Music in Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man

In Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, the narrator is able to marry the two halves of his musical identity in a way that he is unable to do with his racial identity. Whether it is the black and white keys of the piano, classical vs. popular music, or high art vs. low art, dichotomous musical relationships co-exist harmoniously in the novel. This is evidenced by the narrator's successful performance of his "ragtime transcription of Mendelssohn's Wedding March" (118). Ragtime music is rooted in African rhythms while Mendelssohn's piece comes from classical European traditions, and the narrator's successful combination of both black and white music earns him a "round of generous applause" (119). The power of art, and more specifically, the power of music are evidenced by the narrator's musical talent and success. Johnson uses music to create a world that sees past one's race, ethnicity, class, and gender. As readers, we are deeply in tune with the narrator's musical endeavors; it is the kind of outlet he finds from "all the little tragedies of [his] life" (3). As stated by the millionaire friend, "Music is a universal art; anybody's music belongs to everybody; you can't limit it to race or country" (144). The idealization of art and music provides relief from the novel's melodramatic tendencies and the tragic mullatta-like aspects it contains. Music is more than a commentary on the narrator's life; rather, it is the glue that holds together the fragments of his shattered identity.

The narrator's musical identity presents an interesting juxtaposition to his racial identity. During his musical training, he chooses not to be "hampered" by notes and tries to "reproduce the required sounds without the slightest recourse to the written characters" (9). The ease in which the narrator can manipulate music to cater to his tastes is evidenced by the way he "involuntarily clos[es] Chopin's 13th nocturne with [a] major triad" (209) and forces accelerandos and rubatos into a piece as he sees fit. The ex-colored man chooses to "break" the rules when it comes to music but chooses to "follow" the rules when he feels that his racial identity is being compromised. With music, the narrator never feels like he has to choose between being white and black. He is often "lost to all other thoughts in the delights of music and love" and unconsciously plays with strong musical feeling and fervor (37). These unconscious thoughts often oppose the narrator's intense consciousness on his physiognomy, being the "ivory whiteness of [his] skin, the beauty of [his] mouth, or "the size and liquid darkness in [his] eyes" (17). The simplicity of constructing a musical identity versus the complexity of constructing a racial one is apparent in Johnson's novel, where the author uses

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music to transcend one's identity and further magnify music's potency.

The ex-colored man attempts to cross many lines both literally and metaphorically, but only through music can he successfully break through boundaries. Since music gives the narrator the potential to complete his identity, it is important to examine the point at which he chooses to abandon his roots in the first place. The lynching scene is a pivotal moment in the novel; not only does it cause the narrator to deny his black heritage but it also leads him to completely abandon his musical aspirations. In this scene, Johnson portrays the "cruel and ludicrous" (190) actions of the Southern whites, but more importantly, he illustrates the dehumanization of blacks, who were "treated worse than animals" (191). This lynching scene is the ultimate turning point of the novel and transforms the narrator from hopeful to cynical. Society acknowledges and embraces musical hybridity during this violent episode, the public quickly draws the line between the narrator's dual identity. The narrator is torn between his love for black music and the convenience of being a white man. The narrator's constant failure can be frustrating to contemporary readers, but it is important to remember that there was no society that embraced both black and white the way there is today. In the novel, society forces the narrator to be either black or white, something music never does.

The novel contains several melodramatic episodes, and the narrator's abandonment of his musical aspirations conveniently makes his life more tragic. By the end of the novel, music becomes "tangible remnants of "a vanished dream, a dead ambition, and a sacrificed talent" (211). It becomes nothing more than a distant memory that the narrator can idealize through his memories. But despite the tragic outcome of his life, the ex-colored man's musical intuitions never leave him. Even by the end of the novel, it still provides the man with a promise of hope. This is evidenced in the scene with the white woman, as the narrator manipulates Chopin's 13th nocturne by ending it on a major triad instead of a minor triad. The narrator re-writes the ending of the piece with a happy sounding chord in hopes of washing away the sadness that has occurred in his life. The original end of Chopin's piece sounded menacing in a minor key, inspiring a darker mood. This proves that for the narrator, music provides the means for hope, as he states how the "few years of [his] married life were supremely happy" (209). Music offers the narrator the kind of reality he wishes to see. Music's presence draws him to his wife and is the fuel for happiness in their marriage.

In comparing the narrator's life to his music, Johnson shows that it is life that fails him, not music. For example, he considers the evenings when his mother opened the piano as the "happiest hours of [his] childhood" (9) and wins the adoration of his father when he plays a Chopin waltz. The narrator also used music to express his boyhood feelings of love, remembering, "when I played the piano, it was to her" (30). In a benefit concert to honor his mother's passing, it is his stirring performance of Beethoven's Pathetique that allows him to raise enough money to attend college. Moreover, the narrator finds economic success by

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teaching a couple of music pupils at night and finds greater opportunities by playing privately for his millionaire friend while traveling throughout Europe. The narrator's musical endeavors allow him to receive love and adoration from his parents and to express his passionate love for others. It also provides him with a stable income for the greater part of his life. Unfortunately, it is the circumstances of his life that negates all of the narrator's musical success, from having his money stolen for college to the tragedy of his wife's early passing. In this respect, Johnson leads the reader to sympathize with his protagonist's bad luck. Although music cannot change the downward trajectory of the ex-colored man's life, it does help him cope with many of his misfortunes. Music is the simple, unobjective outlet for the narrator; he can easily change the outcome of a piece like Chopin's nocturne to suit his sentiments, even if he can't change the events that caused them.

Tragedy is an inevitable part of life. Whether or not a person is as musically inclined as the narrator, music still provides the kind of escape that human beings look for from the harsh realities of life. For the narrator, it allows society's hard-lined stance on race to merge into shades of grey. Only through music can the narrator "go back into the very heart of the South" to revive "the old slave songs" (142-143) and play Beethoven's Pathetique in a manner as he "could never play it again" (51). The idealization of art as a way for one to come to terms with his or her identity is of supreme importance in Johnson's novel. The failed promise of the narrator's life opposes music's promise of hope. Music comprises the essence of the narrator's identity and hope for the kind of life he wishes to live. The ex-colored man personally interprets a piece of music as it caters to his thoughts and always "play[s] [it] with feeling" (26). Music allows him to play so passionately that he cannot "keep the tears which form[s] in [his] eyes from rolling down [his] cheeks (27). As Walter Pater once wrote, "All art aspires to the condition of music." If there were no musical instances in the novel, it would become clear how important it really is to the narrator's trajectory.

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