
‘How does a shadow shine?’ Bridgetower and the Reappearance of the Mulatto

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Abstract

The paper addresses an anecdotal incident that reaches back to the late 18th and early 19th century, covering at least three distinct cultural spaces: the Caribbean, England and Austria. It centers a young celebrity, the child prodigy George Augustus Polgreen Bridgetower, a famous violinist of Caribbean-Polish ancestry, who in the spring of 1803 met Ludwig van Beethoven in Vienna, a meeting that could have changed not only the history of classical music in general, but that of black American music history in particular. But as histories often proceed, Bridgetower did not enter the musical hall of fame, but remained in its shadows. Several writers have recently taken up Bridgetower’s fate, some with an effort to ‘correct’ history by unearthing hidden facts, others with a vision to ‘rewrite’ history by speculating about ‘what ifs’. Amongst the latter are two contemporary American women writers who in different literary genres speculate about what could have happened, if Bridgetower had not been erased from history: Rita Dove’s poetic composition *Sonata Mulattica* (2009) and Francee Greer Williams’ novel *The Abyssinian Prince* (2001) use vastly different techniques to bring the forgotten celebrity back into the spotlight as this paper aims to outline. Questions of transatlantic migration, artistic originality, racial identity, sexual attraction and genealogical history will be pertinent when dealing with Bridgetower’s shadowy biography as seen through today’s gendered perspective.

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