



# Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878-1943 (American Made Music Series)

*Lawrence Schenbeck*

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*Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878–1943* traces the career of racial uplift ideology as a factor in elite African Americans’ embrace of classical music around the turn of the previous century, from the collapse of Reconstruction to the death of composer/conductor R. Nathaniel Dett, whose music epitomized “uplift.”

After Reconstruction many black leaders had retreated from emphasizing “inalienable rights” to a narrower rationale for equality and inclusion: they now sought to rehabilitate the race’s image by stressing class distinctions, respectable middle-class behavior, and service to the masses. Musically, the black intelligentsia resorted to European models as vehicles for cultural vindication. Their response to racism was to create and promote morally positive, politically inoffensive art that idealized the race.

By incorporating black folk elements into the dignified genres of art song, symphony, and opera, “uplifters” demonstrated worthiness through high achievement in acknowledged arenas. Their efforts were variously opposed, tolerated, or supported by a range of white elites with their own notions about African American culture. The resulting conversation?more a stew of arguments than a dialogue?occupied the pages of black newspapers and informed the work of white philanthropists. Women also played crucial roles. *Racial Uplift and American Music, 1878–1943* examines the lives and thought of personalities central to musical uplift?Dett, Sears CEO Julius Rosenwald, author James Monroe Trotter, sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois, journalist Nora Douglas Holt, and others?with an eye to recognizing their contributions and restoring their stature.

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