

A CRITIC AT LARGE

## OTHELLO'S DAUGHTER

*The rich legacy of Ira Aldridge, the pioneering black Shakespearean.*

BY ALEX ROSS



In 1896, a thirty-six-year-old opera singer named Luranah Aldridge travelled to Germany to prepare for performances of Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelung," at the Bayreuth Festival. Dozens of young singers had made such a journey before her: thirteen years after Wagner's death, Bayreuth had become a summit of the operatic world. Aldridge, though, was of mixed race: an English native, she was the daughter of an African-American and a Swede. The casting of a nonwhite performer in Wagner's Nordic-Teutonic saga might have been expected to arouse opposition, given the notorious racism of the composer and many of his followers, yet an advance guide to the 1896 festival treats Aldridge simply as a promising novelty:

A name that may well ring strangely in the ears of even the most observant art lovers is

that of Luranah Aldridge, who will sing one of the eight Valkyries. Of Luranah Aldridge one cannot say that she did not come from far off, as she hails—from Africa. She is the daughter of the African tragedian Ira Aldridge and studied singing in Germany, England and France, and has appeared with great success in operas and concerts outside of Germany. She is praised as the possessor of a true contralto voice with a wide range. In the course of the festival there will be an opportunity to put these statements to the test.

The singer fell sick during rehearsals and did not perform that summer. Despite encouragement from Cosima Wagner, the composer's widow, Aldridge faded from view. A few reference works mention her; otherwise, she has vanished from the historical record.

Not long ago, I stumbled upon the passage quoted above, and decided that the apparition of a mixed-race singer at

Bayreuth six decades before Grace Bumbry officially broke the color barrier, in 1961, was a mystery worth exploring. I delved into archives, piecing together fragments of a forgotten life. I soon realized that I could not understand Luranah without understanding her remarkable father. Ira Aldridge, a New Yorker who moved to England when he was in his teens, achieved immense fame in mid-nineteenth-century Europe, mesmerizing kings, emperors, and, it would seem, Richard Wagner with his renditions of Shakespeare. He is now much more obscure, although a dramatization of his life, by Lolita Chakrabarti, won notice in London last year, and will come to St. Ann's Warehouse in March. In recent years, the scholar Bernth Lindfors has published a two-volume biography of the actor and compiled a book of essays about him, revealing the paradoxes of a man who falsified his biography, toyed with audiences, and undermined the racial assumptions of his age. Lindfors calls Aldridge "the most visible black man in a white world in the middle of the nineteenth century." Three of his children were musicians; music must have seemed the next world for the Aldridge clan to conquer.

The leaders of the New Negro movement of the early twentieth century took pride in the fact that a black performer had breached the citadels of European culture. Langston Hughes and James Weldon Johnson celebrated Ira; W. E. B. Du Bois inducted him into the Talented Tenth—that company of exceptional individuals who were to lead the black population to salvation. Admittedly, Aldridge's success did little to change the fundamental dynamics of racial hatred. Even if his performances of Shakespeare—or, for that matter, his daughter's singing of Wagner—momentarily caused white people to rethink their ideas about the inferiority of other races, the epiphany didn't stick. Still, such singular careers demonstrate what is possible, even if it remains improbable. Looking into the faces of Ira and Luranah, you see something more than talent: you sense an imperious disbelief in what passes for reality.

African-Americans who crossed the Atlantic in the nineteenth century found themselves in a markedly less hostile world. Racism ran through every sector of society and infected the high-

*Aldridge, circa 1865, and his daughter Luranah, a singer, in an undated image.*

est minds of the age, yet the animus against people of color lacked the state-sanctioned viciousness of its American equivalent, at least on European soil. Slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire in 1833; Prussia outlawed serfdom in 1807. In theory, one could go where one wanted and do as one wished. Black people were, for the most part, unthreatening curiosities; those who displayed intellectual distinction tended to arouse wonder rather than resentment. Du Bois, a Massachusetts native, recalled that when he went to Berlin to study political economy, in 1892, he felt, for the first time, truly free. "I began to realize that white people were human," he said.

Ira Aldridge was born in Manhattan in 1807. His family belonged to the world of the "quasi-free," to take a phrase from the historian John Hope Franklin. Slavery was gradually being abolished in New York, but the black population was hemmed in by Jim Crow-like restrictions—notably, drastic limits on voting rights. Aldridge's father, Daniel, worked as a street vender and served as a lay preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; his mother, of whom almost nothing is known, was named Luranah. Aldridge's early education took place at the African Free School, a network of schools set up by antislavery advocates to educate "the descendants of an injured race." Daniel Aldridge wanted his son to be a minister, but Ira fell in love with the theatre.

In his teens, he caught a rare opportunity. From 1821 to 1823, an impresario named William Brown ran the African Theatre, the first African-American theatre company. All-black productions of "Richard III," "Othello," and other plays were presented in downtown Manhattan. Brown did not have an easy time: neighbors complained, the police intervened, a competitor sent in gangs of thugs, and the newspaper editor Mordecai Manuel Noah, who also happened to be the sheriff of New York, mocked the effort by printing spoofs in black dialect. (Noah, at the time one of very few Jewish figures in American politics, might have known better than to indulge in racial stereotyping.) Aldridge played several roles and apparently took part in street fights that erupted in response to the venture. The violence

foreshadowed the anti-abolitionist riots of 1834, which devastated black homes, churches, and businesses. If Aldridge had remained in America, his acting career would surely have gone nowhere.

Aldridge reached England with the assistance of two acting brothers named Wallack. In May, 1825, he made his London debut, playing Othello at the Royalty Theatre, a low-profile establishment in the East End. A critic chided this "Gentleman of Colour lately arrived from America" for his unreliable delivery of the text, but concluded that "his death was certainly one of the finest physical representations of bodily anguish we ever witnessed." Aldridge was seventeen.

A curious twist boosted his rise. In the early eighteen-twenties, Charles Mathews, an English comedian known for his one-man entertainments, came into contact with James Hewlett, the star of the African Theatre. Although Mathews never saw the company in person, he burlesqued it in a wildly successful solo show, "Trip to America," in 1824. In one skit, a black actor delivered a garbled version of "To be or not to be," changing the line "by opposing end them" to "by opossum end 'em." In Mathews's telling, when the audience heard this, it began yelling for the popular song "Opossum Up a Gum Tree," which the actor then performed. As the scholar Marvin McAllister has argued, the emerging phenomenon of blackface minstrelsy, which Mathews helped inspire, was in part a "metaphorical assault" on the aspirations of black actors.

When Aldridge began performing at the more upscale Royal Coburg Theatre, patrons anticipated a replica of Mathews's malapropist bungler. One paper provided this preview: "Theatrical dogs, horses, and elephants have passed away;—those of monkeys seem to be on the decline, and now for a more monstrous exhibition than all the rest, we are to be treated with a *Black Actor*, a right earnest *African Tragedian*." Instead, audiences encountered a performer of skill and refinement. Lindfors suggests that they were "left with a chastened appreciation of black virtuosity." Aldridge enthralled his public not with a roaring voice or wild gestures but with a carefully controlled dramatic arc. His Othello evolved by degrees from a

BEAUTYBAR.COM

SAMPLE SOCIETY

with **allure**

THE THRILL OF  
**DISCOVERY.**

THE JOY OF  
**CONVENIENCE.**

THE  
**CONFIDENCE**  
OF LOOKING  
YOUR BEST.

GET IT ALL, FIRST!

Sample Society with *Allure* is the only sampling service that delivers the whole package.



ALLURE MINI-MAG



FIVE DELUXE-SIZE SAMPLES

Plus, a **\$15 monthly BeautyBar.com gift card** to redeem on a \$50 purchase when any brand from that month's box is included in your order.

SIGN UP NOW AND GET EVEN MORE  
BEAUTIFUL EVERY MONTH AT  
**BEAUTYBAR.COM/  
SAMPLESOCIETY**

façade of aristocratic composure to explosions of raw feeling.

On tour, Aldridge liked to follow "Othello" with "The Padlock," a popular late-eighteenth-century comedy that featured a bumbling, drunken, singing-and-dancing black servant named Mungo. With this juxtaposition, Lindfors proposes, Aldridge made audiences aware of the artificiality of stereotypes, while also indulging their—and his—love for low humor. He later incorporated "Opossum Up a Gum Tree" into "The Padlock," appropriating Mathews's appropriation. Lindfors believes that Aldridge was engaging in creative subversion, whereas other scholars see a mercenary capitulation to the marketplace; in any case, the effect must have been dizzying.

Aldridge took on other dark-skinned roles that were popular on European stages at the time. These included Oroonoko, an enslaved African prince who suffers in his love for a white woman ("There is no mean, but death, or liberty"); Gambia, a slave who wins freedom by defending his masters ("Liberty! give me the language of gods, to tell that I am free!"); and assorted villains bent on vengeance. The actor sometimes rewrote his parts to make them more sympathetic or complex. When, in 1849, Aldridge played Aaron the Moor in an adaptation of "Titus Andronicus," a hate-fuelled character became virtuous.

Elegant delivery aside, Aldridge did not stint on showmanship, travelling from town to town in a fancy carriage and indulging freely in public-relations hokum. He began claiming to be the descendant of a princely Fula line, and in later years spread the fiction that he had been born in Senegal. He also called himself the African Roscius, after a famous actor of ancient Rome. In 1825, he married Margaret Gill, of Yorkshire, but there were other women, all apparently white, and four of his six children—including Luranah, the future Wagner singer—were illegitimate. In America, Aldridge's private life would have been as uncommon as his public one, and far more dangerous.

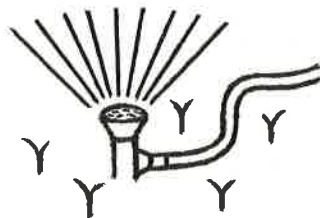
Such a flamboyant character could not avoid making enemies. In 1833, the Theatre Royal, in Covent Garden, offered Aldridge a short run in "Othello," and much of the London

press made a project of taking him down. The *Figaro in London* launched a breathtakingly vile campaign, promising to inflict on Aldridge "such a chastisement as must drive him from the stage he has dishonoured, and force him to find in the capacity of footman or street-sweeper, that level for which his colour appears to have rendered him peculiarly qualified." The *Athenaeum* was scandalized to see Ellen Tree, the Desdemona, "being pawed about" by a black man. Afterward, the *Figaro* boasted of having "hunted the Nigger from the boards."

Even those who praised Aldridge almost always framed him in racial terms, as Lindfors's citations of reviewers show. "Away flew all our pre conceived notions and prejudices," one said. Another declared, "The only real difference between an African and a European, is in the colour of the skin. The mind, the soul, the heart, are the same." In 1831, a young woman named Miss Smedley composed a poem in Aldridge's honor:

O may thy tongue indeed prophetic be,  
And England loose the chain of Slavery,  
That long hath bound the Negro's energy,  
Then shall his mind be like his body—  
"Free!"

At times, Aldridge articulated a political agenda, saying that he wished to "assert the claims of my kind to equality of intellect and right feeling with the more favoured portion of the human race." He was hardly a radical, though. As Lindfors notes, he "made a compel-



ling case for both the abolition of slavery and the advancement of the colonial enterprise." His Senegalese deception erased his American upbringing and cast him as an exotic, almost magical being.

After the Covent Garden setback, Aldridge retreated to the provinces, and in Ireland, among other places, he became a full-on star, his popularity only heightened by stories of Londoners' disdain. (In the writings of Thomas

Carlyle, among others, the Irish were considered just a step above blacks.) In a high-flown address at the end of one of his Dublin runs, Aldridge flattered his audience by characterizing them as freedom fighters: "Here the sable African was free (*cheers*)/From every bond, save those which kindness threw/Around his heart, and bound it fast to you."

In 1835, seeking to maximize his mobility, Aldridge put together a solo entertainment that mixed lectures on drama, recitations of Shakespeare, commentary on racism, and popular songs. And he kept up his meta-racial games. In the same period, the American blackface entertainer Thomas Rice toured England with his notorious "Jim Crow" act; back home, he bragged of having convinced the British of the inferiority of blacks. Aldridge promptly added a version of Rice's routine to his one-man show. He also parodied parodies of himself, reciting Shakespeare in mangled English. His most provocative move was to answer blackface by putting on whiteface. His repertory included Richard III, Rob Roy, a Russian who disguises himself as a Moor, and, in one skit, a Bavarian maid.

Aldridge might have finished his career on the provincial circuit, but in 1852 he ventured out on a Continental tour, bringing with him a troupe of British actors. In Germany, he found himself the subject of mass adulation, with full houses greeting him in each town and critics vying with one another to invent superlatives. One critic suggested that Aldridge might be "the greatest of all actors." Another said that "since the time of the ancient kings of the Athenian stage no one has seen anything like it." Friedrich Wilhelm IV, the King of Prussia, conferred on Aldridge a Gold Medal for Art and Science; Emperor Franz Josef of Austria gave him the Grand Cross of the Order of Leopold. Numerous other honors followed. His most impressive title was Chevalier Ira Aldridge, Knight of Saxony, and he did not hesitate to use it.

Richard Wagner, who idolized Shakespeare, was most likely an Aldridge admirer. In 1857, Aldridge went to Zurich, where Wagner was living, having taken refuge in the wake

## WE ALL WANT TO SEE A MAMMAL

We all want to see a mammal.  
Squirrels & snowshoe hares don't count.  
Voles don't count. Something, preferably,  
that could do us harm. There's a long list:  
bear, moose, wolf, wolverine. Even porcupine  
would do. The quills. The yellowed  
teeth & long claws.

Beautiful here. Peaks & avens.  
Meltwater running its braided course, but we want  
to see a mammal. Our day our lives incomplete  
without a mammal. The gaze of something  
unafraid, that we're afraid of, meeting ours  
before it runs off.

Linnaeus was called  
indecent when he named them. Plenty  
of other commonalities (hair, live young,  
a proclivity to plot). But no. Mammal.  
Maman. Breasted & nipped  
& warm, warm, warm.

—Elizabeth Bradfield

of the failed revolutions of 1848 and 1849. Wagner wrote to Mathilde Wesendonck, the muse of "Tristan und Isolde," "Wednesday: Othello Ira Aldridge. Tickets to be booked in a timely fashion." There is no reason to think that he did not go; several of his Zurich associates were in attendance that night, including the leftist poet Georg Herwegh, who wrote a rave review. In the period of the Harlem Renaissance, the potential link between Aldridge and Wagner drew notice; Langston Hughes, who once placed "Tristan" on a list of his favorite things, mentioned Wagner's interest in his 1954 children's book, "Famous American Negroes."

The German enthusiasm for Aldridge may seem strange, given the contemporary tendency to view nineteenth-century German culture as a continuous crescendo toward the racial hatred of the Nazi era. Indeed, the religiously based bigotry of prior eras was giving way to pseudo-scientific theories on the inequality of races, which Wagner helped to promote. Yet German thought contained other, more egalitarian strains, going back to Johann Gottfried Herder, who, in his "Negro Idylls," of 1797, adopted the point of view of

oppressed African peoples. Similar sympathies surfaced among the revolutionaries of 1848, more than a few of whom fled to America and became active in the abolitionist cause. Quentin Tarantino's depiction, in his recent film "Django Unchained," of an alliance between a German adventurer and a black American is not as absurd as audiences might assume.

Wagner's own remarks about black people, as recorded in Cosima's diaries, vacillate between disdain and a surprising sympathy. During the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, he speaks admiringly of Cetshwayo, the Zulu leader, and announces that "the Zulus are also human beings like ourselves." If only he had grasped the same about the Jews.

In 1858, Aldridge went to Russia, where, unexpectedly, his fame reached its zenith. It's difficult to judge Russian descriptions of his acting, since by this time he was performing with a troupe of Germans, who recited in German while he carried on in English. The spectacle must have been more visual than verbal. Nonetheless, Aldridge cast his usual spell, especially in progressive circles. One critic wrote, "From

Othello is torn the deep cry, 'Oh misery, misery, misery!' and in that misery of the African artist is heard the far-off groans of his own people, oppressed by unbelievable slavery and more than that—the groans of the whole of suffering mankind." When Aldridge played Shylock, he was understood to be creating a compound study in racial adversity:

Ira Aldridge is a mulatto born in America and feels deeply the insults levelled at people of another colour by people of a white colour in the New World. In Shylock he does not see particularly a Jew, but a human being in general, oppressed by the age-old hatred shown towards people like him, and expressing this feeling with wonderful power and truth. . . . His very silences speak.

Toward the end of his career, Aldridge began to escape the racial frame in which he had been confined. In the late eighteen-fifties, his *Macbeth*, which one critic described as a "terrible battle of noble-mindedness with the demon of ambition," made a strong impression on Georg, the future Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, whose acting company decisively influenced late-nineteenth-century theatre. The French poet and critic Théophile Gautier saw Aldridge in the role of King Lear, and marvelled at the actor's impersonation of old age. Errol Hill, in his 1984 book, "Shakespeare in Sable," proposes that Aldridge deserves credit for introducing greater naturalism into the Victorian theatre.

Thanks to his European sojourns, Aldridge acquired enough wealth to buy a home in London near the Crystal Palace—on Hamlet Road, no less—and other property nearby. While Margaret, his first wife, underwent a physical decline, he formed a relationship with Amanda Brandt, a Swedish-born singer who shared his habit of self-aggrandizing fictions: she claimed, falsely, to be a baroness. They were married in 1865, a year after Margaret's death.

Nearing the age of sixty, Aldridge had one more mighty gesture in mind. In the summer of 1867, while on tour in Poland, he negotiated terms for an American tour, which would have involved a hundred performances across the country, beginning at the Academy of Music, near Union Square. Sizable fees were set, although, Aldridge advised, "the expenses of the



*"Wait—which is evidence and which is lunch?"*

Baroness Aldridge would be borne by me." Performing Shakespeare in post-Civil War America would almost certainly have stirred up more opposition than Aldridge had lately been accustomed to. "A novel sensation is in store for our politicians, humanitarians, ethnologists and critics," the *Times* said, seeming to sneer in anticipation.

A week before he was to sail, Aldridge fell fatally sick, possibly as a result of a lung condition. He died in Lodz on August 7, 1867, and was buried there, amid such pomp as befitted the first and last black Knight of Saxony.

Great performers are often poor parents, and it may not be a coincidence that only one of Aldridge's children had a long and relatively happy life. Ira Daniel, his oldest, went to Australia, failed at acting, and descended into a life of crime. At the age of twenty-four, Ira Frederick, after showing promise as a pianist, composer, and conductor, flung himself from a window in a state of delirium. Amanda, a singer, composer, and teacher, was the survivor, finding a modest place in the London music scene. Her vocal students included Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, and Paul Robeson—three history-making black performers of the early twentieth century.

The story of Luranah, Ira's most

gifted child, borders on tragedy. The best evidence of her life can be found in her sister's papers, at Northwestern University. There is also a passage about her in Herbert Marshall and Mildred Stock's 1958 biography of Ira, which draws on interviews with Amanda; they call Luranah "a strong-willed, dominating and pleasure-loving woman." She was born in 1860, attended a convent school in Ghent, and studied in London, Berlin, and Paris. Her early reviews were encouraging; a Hamburg critic praised her "strong, darkly colored instrument, well developed in the lower register." Charles Gounod, the renowned composer of "Faust," recommended her effusively to Augustus Harris, the impresario of opera at Covent Garden: "Do you want to hear one of the most beautiful voices that exist? Very well! Give an audition to Mademoiselle Luranah Aldridge."

Harris featured Luranah in a Grand Wagner Orchestral Concert at St. James's Hall in 1893, and the same year cast her as one of the Valkyries in the "Ring." She sang again in "Ring" cycles in London in 1898 and 1905. Elsewhere, she evidently essayed the bigger role of Erda, the earth goddess of the "Ring," for the Aldridge collection contains a photograph of the Russian-born soprano Félia Litvinne, attired as Brünnhilde, with the inscription "à mon

Erda." In her own portraits, Luranah has no trouble adopting a grand pose, her head tilted back and her eyebrows imperiously arched.

At the end of the nineteenth century, there was no more powerful woman in music than Cosima Wagner, who had assumed the direction of Bayreuth after her husband's death, in 1883. The illegitimate daughter of Franz Liszt and the leftist historian Marie d'Agoult, the Meisterin, as she was known, was a person of monumental will and fierce intelligence. George Eliot called her a genius, adding that Richard resembled a petty grocer. Yet Cosima was no less bigoted than her husband, and considerably more rigid in her artistic thinking.

Luranah auditioned for Cosima in late 1895 or early 1896, and was cast in that summer's "Ring"—the first Bayreuth production of the cycle since the inaugural festival of 1876. Sometime in the spring, Luranah went to Bayreuth, to take part in rehearsals. When she fell ill, she repaired to a spa in Rupprechtstegen, not far from Bayreuth. It was an expensive place, for which Cosima probably paid the bill. Eva Wagner, one of Richard and Cosima's children, wrote to her on May 30th, "Mama and we all were happy to get good news from you, and we hope that every day will be a progress! Mama spoke immediately to Mr. v. Gross, who surely meanwhile will have fulfilled your wish." (Adolf von Gross was Bayreuth's business manager.) The familiar tone of Eva's note bears out Marshall and Stock's claim that the singer became close to the Wagner family—indeed, that she stayed for a time in Wahnfried, the Wagner home.

The idea of a woman of color consorting with the Wagners is disorienting. By the end of the century, Bayreuth had become a gathering place for ultranationalists and philosophers of Aryan supremacy. Cosima had befriended Houston Stewart Chamberlain, whose 1899 best-seller, "The Foundations of the Nineteenth Century," tells the story of Western civilization as the forward march of the Teutonic peoples. In early 1896, just when Luranah may have been living with the Wagners, Cosima responded to an outline of Chamberlain's

book with a string of comments, one of which said, "The Negroes have surprised me. But I am entirely prepared to be convinced." She was apparently reacting to Chamberlain's declaration that the Aryan peoples faced a "struggle for existence" with the Chinese and the Negroes, the latter being "considerably more dangerous" than the former. The presence of Luranah may have led Cosima to question, at least for a moment, one aspect of Chamberlain's grotesque theory.

Having recovered from her illness, Luranah inquired about singing at Bayreuth in 1897. In the Northwestern archive, I found a reply from Cosima herself, in the polished, slightly stilted English that she acquired in her schooling:

My dear Miss Aldridge, I am very sorry indeed to be obliged to tell you that our personelle is complete and that it is now too late to invite you to take a part in our performances. I am very sorry about it, but I was very glad to hear that you are well again and that you can use your fine voice. Only I would advise you to go to a good master in order to learn how to manage this fine voice, and not to destroy it before time. I should have been very glad to have seen you again, dear Miss Aldridge, I assure you, and with best wishes for you, my children and I send you kindest regards.

There is no other Wagner correspondence in the archive. Perhaps Luranah was offended at the notion that she needed further training. It's possible, though, that Cosima had correctly identified a problem in Luranah's technique, and that the singer had prematurely taken on heavier Wagnerian roles.

Luranah gave recitals in London until the First World War, her repertory ranging from lieder to chansons to parlor songs. Her programs were pointedly diverse, not unlike the ones that her father had created in his "Lecture in Defense of the Drama": on one occasion, Wagner's "Schmerzen," from the "Wesendonck Lieder," gave way to Amanda's "Three African Dances." But her health problems intensified, and after the war she became bedridden with rheumatism. Her sister looked after her devotedly. When, in 1921, W. E. B. Du Bois invited Amanda to attend the Second Pan-African Congress, she answered, "As you know, my sister is very helpless. . . . I cannot leave for more than a few minutes at a time."

On November 20, 1932, at the age of

seventy-two, Luranah Aldridge committed suicide by taking an overdose of aspirin. She was buried in a public section of Gunnersbury Cemetery, in London. On a recent visit there, I went in search of her grave, but could find no headstone. Watching the cemetery keeper dust off old records, I had the sense that no one had gone looking for her in a long time.

The first half of the Aldridge family saga is a triumph—a solitary, idiosyncratic triumph, but a triumph all the same. If the African Roscius did nothing to halt the radicalization of racism in the course of the nineteenth century, he provided glimpses of another world, stage fantasies of a future redistribution of power. His achievement loomed over subsequent generations of African-American performers; black acting companies in New York, Philadelphia, St. Louis, and Baltimore adopted the name Aldridge Players or Aldridge Dramatic Club. In 1930, Paul Robeson assumed Ira's mantle by playing Othello in the West End; Amanda Aldridge was in attendance, and gave Robeson the gold earrings that her father had worn as Othello. Thirteen years later, as if completing Ira's intended arc, Robeson appeared in "Othello" on Broadway.

As for Luranah, she offers a glimpse of a world that never was: one in which a black singer overcame late-nineteenth-century prejudice and established herself at the Wagner festival. What would have happened if she had sung that summer, before an audience that included George Bernard Shaw, Diaghilev, Renoir, Colette, Mahler, and Albert Schweitzer? Would there have been an outcry from right-wing factions? Would Bayreuth have earned praise from progressives? Might she have returned in bigger roles? As it was, history followed its seemingly inevitable course. In 1908, Eva Wagner, Luranah's former friend, married Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the beady-eyed Aryan philosopher. She was present when Hitler first visited Bayreuth, in 1923. When she died, in 1942, her coffin was draped in a Nazi flag, and Hitler sent a wreath.

There is a curious epilogue to the tale of the first black Wagnerian. In 1936, Du Bois travelled to Germany on a grant from the Oberlaender Trust, his

stated aim being to study industrial education, although he also wished to compare German racism with its American counterpart. A longtime Wagner fan, Du Bois included Bayreuth on his itinerary, attending performances of "Lohengrin" and the "Ring." Here is another disorienting picture: the author of "The Souls of Black Folk" visiting the Wagner temple, amid the trappings of Hitler's pseudo-Wagnerian regime.

Du Bois was treated courteously in Bayreuth, but he could not avoid the ideological stench of the place. Walking around, he made note of the house where Chamberlain had lived. (Eva Wagner was still there.) Pervasive anti-Semitism left him aghast. Even so, he insisted on the universality of the Wagner operas. "No human being, white or black, can afford not to know them, if he would know life," he wrote, in a column for the Pittsburgh *Courier*. It was the summer of the Berlin Olympics, of Jesse Owens's victory, and Du Bois's readers might have been awaiting his celebration of that feat. He was, however, suspicious of the cult of sports, and preferred to focus on achievements in science and art. Gazing at mementos of Wagner in a display case, he imagines a young black artist who will one day mesmerize the world with comparable genius. He dreams of a black Wagner, a sorcerer of myth.

Du Bois's faith in the uplifting force of so-called high culture, which mirrors the Aldridge family's striving after Shakespeare and Wagner, now has an antiquated air. Sports heroes and pop singers are the superstars of American culture. Still, the fact remains that the chief architect of the modern civil-rights movement not only enjoyed Wagner but, in some mysterious way, took direction from him. In "The Souls of Black Folk," Du Bois tells of a young black man whose spirit soars to the strains of "Lohengrin": "He felt with the music the movement of power within him." A similar rapture overcame Du Bois when he heard the opera in Bayreuth. "It is a hymn of Faith," he wrote. "Something in this world man must trust. Not everything—but Something. One cannot live and doubt everybody and everything. Somewhere in this world, and not beyond it, there is Trust, and somehow Trust leads to Joy." ♦