

Program Notes, *Pilgrim Overture* (c. 1867)
John Thomas Douglass (1847–1886)
Orchestration by Philip Ewell (2022)
March 8, 2023

Born of a slave mother in 1847, John Thomas Douglass showed enormous musical talent early in life. Once freed, Douglass and his mother moved north to Philadelphia and, upon learning of his musical talents, his mother's employers paid for the teenage Douglass to travel to Europe to study violin and composition, first in Dresden, Germany, with the violin virtuoso and composer Eduard Rapoldi, and then to Paris, where it is unclear where or with whom he studied.

When Douglass arrived back in the United States, right here in New York City in the mid to late 1860s, he was walking along in Manhattan and heard a young violinist practicing. He knocked on the door and introduced himself to the young violinist's mother. The young violinist was none other than David Mannes, who would go on to establish the David Mannes Music School in 1916 in New York City, a school now known as the Mannes School of Music, part of the College of Performing Arts of The New School. John Thomas Douglass would go on to teach David Mannes violin for several years. Douglass spoke only German with Mannes's parents, whose English was not great since they had only arrived from Europe themselves recently, and he never took payment for his lessons with David. If you're interested, all this information I get from David Mannes's 1938 autobiography entitled *Music Is My Faith*.

Douglass was a prolific composer, virtuoso violinist, and also competent on the piano, cello, and guitar. Douglass wrote and staged a three-act opera, *Virginia's Ball*, in 1868, an opera that was likely the first written by an African American. The premiere took place at the Stuyvesant Institute, which was a library, museum, and lecture hall located at 659 Broadway, not far from Washington Square Park in New York City.

In 1878, eight years before Douglass's death, the black music historian James Monroe Trotter published a monograph entitled *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, which exclusively featured the music of African Americans up until 1878. As an appendix to the book, Monroe included scores of thirteen compositions by thirteen different black composers, and this is where the *Pilgrim Overture* appears. Trotter says that it was written when Douglass was about "twenty years of age," which would put the year of composition at about 1867, one year before the premiere of *Virginia's Ball*. Though it appears in piano reduction in the appendix, *Pilgrim Overture* was clearly intended to be performed by a symphony orchestra.

I decided to orchestrate *Pilgrim Overture*, and because the piano reduction sounded quite like the Italian opera composer Gioachino Rossini, I dialed up his *Barber of Seville* overture and worked with the same size orchestra, with strings, a small complement of winds, and tympani and minimal percussion. In *Music and Some Highly Musical People*, James Monroe Trotter comments that the seven-minute version of *Pilgrim Overture* you'll hear tonight represented only about one third of the actual composition, which is why it ends in a different key from the beginning, E minor to A minor, and without a typical fanfare triumphant ending.

According to David Mannes, John Thomas Douglass took to drinking later in life, despondent that he could not become part of mainstream classical music in the United States because he was African American. Mannes writes that "Douglass tried to enter a symphony orchestra in this country, but those doors were closed to a colored man." Closed to a colored man indeed! It took the New York Philharmonic, founded in 1842, 120 years to hire its first fulltime African American musician, violinist Sanford Allen, in 1962. (Side note: it took the New York Phil 80 years to hire its first woman, harpist Stephanie Goldner, in 1922.) Imagine how hard it must have been for Douglass, knowing that he was no less a violinist than any of the white men in the Philharmonic, and that only because of his blackness he could not participate in the orchestra.

In performing *Pilgrim Overture* we honor not only Douglass's legacy and memory, but the legacy and memory of all those forgotten black classical composers and musicians who were erased from history simply because of who they were. We hope you enjoy this performance of *Pilgrim Overture*.