

Music History and Cosmopolitanism / abstract & bio
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Paul Robeson's Gifted Voice, or Listening in Friendship

The art, life, and especially politics of Paul Robeson would seem obvious subjects for a study of cosmopolitanism. During his lifetime, from already quite early in his career, Robeson bore the epithet “citizen of the world”; one which according to at least one biography – Shirley Graham’s *Paul Robeson: Citizen of the World* (1946) – would define his identity. His cosmopolitics would also inform his aesthetics: his thinking about a universal music history and his own song practice. And recent scholarship has explored these relationships according to several frameworks: international labour, “colored cosmopolitanism” (Slate, 2012), black internationalism. The premise of that work, however, is that Robeson’s cosmopolitanism resided first and foremost on the level of the political. In this paper I approach Robeson’s cosmopolitanism from the other side.

Through an analysis of the discourse of several thousand fan letters I explore how the singer’s global audiences listened to him; how in particular they construed their relationship to Robeson in the terms of friendship. In other words, from this epistolary evidence of “ordinary” people I focus on what some theorists of cosmopolitanism have termed everyday or banal cosmopolitanism. What one of Robeson’s correspondents called “our musical friendship” was, I argue, an effect of affect. And so I consider, following the now commonplace that it is through affect that cosmopolitan ethics may be transformed into action, also how Robeson’s voice functioned as a gift within a global economy of affect; how Robeson envoiced a genoristy that interpellated his listeners as response-able/responsible subjects.

Grant Olwage is a lecturer in the Wits School of Arts, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He is editor of *Composing Apartheid*, and is working on a monograph on Paul Robeson’s voice. His writing on Robeson appears in the *Journal of Musicology*, *Journal of Singing*, *Journal of the Society for American Music*, and is forthcoming in *The Musical Quarterly*.