

Sydney H. French

*Blind Tom*  
Dwight's Journal of Music  
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*Thomas Greene*  
~~Sept. 19, 1940~~

P. 143

Musical Chit-Chat

Beikune, Thomas Greene

Frederick City, Md. July 23-

" Mention was made in your paper several times of the performance of the blind negro boy "Tom", but I scarcely could give credence to them, until I was fully convinced by actual experience. "Tom" gave two concerts here last week, and an invitation being extended by his master to come upon the stage and play a duet with "Tom", in which he first would play the accompaniment and afterwards the melody, I accepted the invitation, and in both concerts was astounded to see with what correctness "Tom" would anticipate. He played both times the accompaniment perfectly when I repeated a part, and reproduced the melody to a wonderful degree of perfection.

" He plays extracts from operas, which each would fill about eleven or twelve printed pages, and these with great expression. In the right hand he lacks power, but his scales are marvelously liquid and smooth, besides he has great execution in octaves, and an almost unerring certainty in skips, which extend beyond an octave."

"His own compositions are all tending to- we Southerners call-plantation melodies, but even in these, as in his improvisations, there is a rich originality.

" "Tom" does not know the name of a note, nor of a key on the piano, and his performance would do credit to a boy with good eyes with the advantage of a teacher from almost infancy,

But how much more is due to a blind boy, reared in ignorance on a cotton plantation.

" Though I would not have you believe that he is a Mozart, No! not even an approach to him, yet could you hear him, you would be, astonished, as I have been; although I doubt if you will have an opportunity in Boston, for "Tom" is a slave."

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Dwight's Journal of Music  
Vol. 22, No. 6, Nov. 2, 1852

Page 250

(From the Atlantic Monthly)

BLIND TOM

" Sometime in the year 1850, a tobacco-planter in Southern Georgia (Perry M. Oliver by name) bought a likely negro woman with some other field-hands. She was stout, tough-muscled, willing, promised to be a remunerative servant; her baby, however, a boy a few months old, was only thrown in as a makeweight to the bargain, or rather because Mr. Oliver would not consent to separate mother and child. Charity only could have induced him to take the precaution, in fact, for he was but a lump of black flesh, born blind, and with the vacant grin of idiocy, they thought, already stamped on his face. The two slaves were purchased, I believe, from a trader: it has been impossible, therefore, for me to ascertain where Tom was born or when. Georgia field-hands are not accurate as Jews in preserving their genealogy; they do not anticipate a Messiah.

"... This idiot-boy, chosen by God to be anointed with the

holy christ, is only "Tom",-"Blind Tom", they call him in all the Southern States, with a kind cadence always, being proud of him; and yet-nothing but Tom?

"...His mother, at work to-day in the Oliver plantation, can never comprehend why her boy is famous; this gift of God to him means nothing to her: Nothing to him either, which is saddest of all; he is unconscious, wears his crown as an idiot might whose fault is that? Deeper than slavery the evil lies.

"The boy, creeping about day after day in the hot light, was as repugnant an object as the lizards in the neighboring swamp, and promised to be as little use to his master. He was one of the lowest negro type, from which only field-hands can be made-coal-black, with protruding heels, the ape-jaw, blubber-lips constantly open, the sightless eyes closed, and the head thrown far back on the shoulders, lying on the back, in fact, a habit which he still retains, and which adds to the imbecile character of his face. Until he was seven years of age, Tom was regarded on the plantation as an idiot, not unjustly; for at the present time his judgment and reason rank but as those of a child four years old. He showed a dog-like affection for some members of the household-a son of Mr. Oliver's especially,-and a keen nervous sensitiveness to the slightest blame or praise from them,-possessed, too, a low animal irritability of temper, giving way to inarticulate yelps of passion when provoked. That is all so far; we find no other outgrowth of intellect or soul from the boy; just the same record as that of thousands of imbecile negro-children.

" It was not until 1857 that those phenomenal powers latent in the boy were suddenly developed, which stamped him the

knows, he is to-day.

" One night, sometime in the summer of that year, Mr. Oliver's family were awakened by the sound of music in the drawing-room; not only the simple airs, but the most difficult exercises usually played by his daughters were repeated again and again, the touch of the musician being timid, but singularly true and delicate. Going down, they found Tom, who had been left asleep in the hall, seated at the piano in an ecstasy of delight, breaking out at the end of each successive fugue into shouts of laughter, kicking his heels and clapping his hands. This was the first time he had touched the piano.

" Naturally, Tom became a nine-days wonder on the plantation. He was brought in as an after-dinner's amusement; visitors asked for him as the show of the place. There was hardly a conception, however, in the minds of those who heard him, of how deep the cause for wonder lay.

" Mr. Oliver, as we have said, was indulgent. Tom was allowed to have constant access to the piano; in truth, he could not live without it; when deprived of music now, actual physical debility followed; the gnawing something had found its food at last. No attempt was made, however, to give him any scientific musical teaching; nor I wish it distinctly borne in mind-has he ever at any time received such instruction.

" The planter began to wonder what kind of a creature this was which he had bought, flesh and soul. In what part of the unsightly baby-carcass had been stowed away those old airs, forgotten by every one else, and some of them never heard by the child but once,

but which he now reproduced every note intact, and with whatever quirk or quiddity of style belonged to the person who had originally sung or played them? Stranger still the harmonies which he had never heard, had learned from no man. The sluggish breath of the old house, being enchanted, grew into quaint and delicate whims of music, never the same, changing every day. Never glad; uncertain, sad minor always, vexing the content of the hearer, - one inarticulate, unanswered question of pain in all, making them one. Even the vulgarest listener was troubled, hardly knowing why, - how sorry Tom's music was!

"At last the time came when the door was to be opened, when some listener, not vulgar, recognized the child as God made him, induced his master to remove him from the plantation. Something ought to be done for him; the world ought not to be cheated of this pleasure; besides the money that could be made! So Mr. Oliver, with a kindly feeling for Tom, proud, too, of this agreeable monster which his plantation had grown, and sensible that it was a more fruitful source of <sup>revenue</sup> ~~revenue~~ than tobacco-fields, set out with the boy, literally to seek their fortune.

"The first exhibition of him was given, I think, in Savannah, Georgia; thence he was taken to Charleston, Richmond, to all the principal cities and towns in the Southern States.

"This was in 1858. From that time until the present Tom has lived constantly an open life, petted, feted, his real talent befogged by exaggeration, and so pampered and coddled that one might suppose the only purpose was to corrupt and wear it out.

For these reasons this statement is purposely guarded, restricted to plain, known facts.

" No sooner had Tom been brought before the public than the pretensions put forward by his master, commanded the ~~XXXXXXXX~~ scrutiny of both scientific and musical skeptics. His capacities were subjected to rigorous tests. Fortunately for the boy; so tried, - harshly, it is true, yet skilfully, - they not only bore the trial, but acknowledged the touch as skilful; every day new powers were developed, until he reached his limit, ~~XXXXXXXX~~ beyond which it is not probable he will ever pass. That limit, however, establishes him as an anomaly in musical science.

"... His memory is so accurate that he can repeat, without the loss of a syllable, a discourse of fifteen minutes in length, of which he does not understand a word. Songs, too, in French or German, after a single hearing, he renders not only literally in words, but in notes, style, and expression. His voice, however, is discordant, and of small compass.

" In music, this boy of twelve years, born blind, utterly ignorant of a note, ignorant of every phase of so-called musical science, interprets severely classical composers with a clearness of conception in which he excels, and a skill in mechanism equal to that of our second-rate artists. His concerts usually include any themes selected by the audience from the higher grades of Italian and German opera. His comprehension of the meaning of music, as a prophetic or historical voice which few souls utter and fewer understand, is clear and vivid: he renders it thus, with whatever mastery of the mere material part he may possess; fingering dramatic effects, etc.: these are but means to him not an end, as with most

artists. One could fancy that Tom was never traitor to the intent or soul of the theme. What God or the Devil meant to say by this or that harmony, what the soul of one man cried aloud to another in it, this boy knows, and is to that a faithful witness. His deaf, uninstructed soul has never been tampered with by art-critics who know the body well enough of music, but nothing of the living creature within. The world is full of these vulgar souls that palter with eternal Nature and the eternal Arts, blind to the Word who dwells among us therein. Tom or the daemon in Tom, was not one of them.

"With regard to his command of the instrument two points have been especially noted by musicians; the unusual frequency of occurrence of tours de force in his playing, and the scientific precision of his touch. For example in a progression of augmented chords, his mode of fingering is invariably that of the schools, not that which would seem most natural to a blind child never taught to place a finger. Even when seated with his back to the piano, and made to play in that position, ( a favorite feat in his concerts) the touch is always scientifically accurate.

" The peculiar power which Tom possesses, however, is one which requires no scientific knowledge of music in his audience to appreciate. Placed at the instrument with any musician he plays a perfect bass <sup>accompaniment</sup> ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ to the treble of music heard for the first time as he plays. Then taking the seat vacated by the other performer, he instantly gives the entire piece, intact in brilliancy and symmetry, not a note lost or misplaced. The selections of music by which this power of Tom was tested, two years ago, were

sometimes fourteen and sixteen pages in length; on one occasion, at an exhibition at the White House, after a long concert, he was tried with two pieces, - one thirteen, the other twenty pages long, and was successful.

" We know of no parallel case to this in musical history. Being a slave, Tom never was taken into a free State; for the same reason his master refused advantageous offers from European managers. The highest points north at which his concerts were given were Baltimore and the upper Virginia towns. I heard him sometime in 1860. He remained a week or two in the town, playing every night.

" Some beautiful caged spirit, one could not but know, struggled for breath under that brutal form and idiotic brain. I wonder when it will be free. Not in this life; the bars are too heavy.

( See Atlantic Monthly, Vol. X, November 1862-No. LXI)  
BLIND TOM by the author of "Margret Howth" (Mrs. R.  
B. W. Davis) Boston, 1862) Page 580

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Dwight's Journal of Music  
Boston, November 8, 1862 (Page 254)

Editorial

"Blind Tom". - The story of this blind black idiotic musical or quasi-musical prodigy, by the authoress of "Margret Howth", which we copy from the Atlantic Monthly, is certainly wonderful and full of interest, alike for the strange phenomena recited and for the cleverness and beauty of the recital. "We wish to put it on record in these columns against the time when some more satisfactory light may be shed upon the puzzling and imperfectly read facts. It is seldom, in such cases of alleged musical precocity, that we get the right kind

of evidence; we certainly have not got it in the present case, with all that there is so appreciative and finely intuitive in the writer's mind. People who are unmusical, or half musical, or musical, in a very superficial sense, are far readier to go into ecstasies over some newly discovered "musical genius" than are really the musical. This slave boy's musical fame is wholly a growth of the Southern States, whose institutions certainly have never acted very favorably upon Art culture, or tended to produce any thing like Art or the love of it among a people semi-barbarous through wilful rejection of the corner stone of civilization which is Freedom. That this phenomenon should excite such admiration in the South, goes but a little way toward persuading us that it is a case of musical genius, or that it can ~~be~~ properly be brought into any comparison with such an instance as the childhood of Mozart. We need the judgment of a really musical community, or at least of those who really know what music is.

"... Surely a morbid, brainless memory, a freak of idiotism, is not a genius. -But the subject is greater than we would fain grapple with, or think to clear up without far more time and evidence. The phenomena may be full of vast significance to one who shall know how to read them truly. We dismiss the matter, thanking the reporter who has clothed it with such charming, sad romance, and hoping for more light upon it.

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Dwight's Journal of Music  
November 22, 1862. Page 267

Correspondence

"Blind Tom" Again  
(From a lady who is musical)

"... Indeed, from all that I have learned about Tom's

...from persons who have heard him, I more than doubt whether his talents merit discussion:—but it seems to me, that it would be an injustice to the black race, to let Tom pass for a mere phenomenal specimen of their musical abilities, or possibilities. But the blacks are a musical people, no one, who has known each of them, disputes. I have met with two cases, the one of musical ear and memory, as remarkable as, and certainly more pleasing than the case of Blind Tom. One was M. Léon Tschudi, a French West-Indian gentleman (ebony black, with wavy hair), retired soldier and officer of the Empire, and an esteemed professor of belles lettres and foreign languages in London... " "The other case was that of a slave girl who lived near us in New Orleans; she had a powerful and lovely contralto voice of extensive compass; she was allowed to attend the French opera with her master's family every night during the season; and poor Louise! how did she and what she had heard! what pure intonation, clear scales, rich trills! I believe that she had a genuine musical organization, for her singing was no mere imitation; its dramatic coloring sometimes elevated, in truth and beauty, that of the trained prima donna whose education had formed her musical education..."

"I think that the exaggerated opinions as to Tom's ability is only held by Southern people, who have been so long accustomed to regard the blacks as mere animals, that they are astonished at any display of intelligence among them; or by generous, but non-musical persons, like the talented authoress of the sketch in question, who are so anxious to aid the down-trodden race,—but whose enthusiasm about Tom is clouded, not clear-sighted."

Dwight's Journal of Music, Nov. 22, 1862  
Boston, November 13, 1862 (Page 263)  
(From a Spiritualist)

"My belief has been from the first, that he is one of those beings of whom there are now very many among us-subject to possession by influences from the other world."

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Dwight's Journal of Music  
November 29, 1862 Page 275

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"Black Tom"  
(From the Springfield Republican)

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"...A very strange and seemingly inexplicable case, surely. But unless we take the supernatural view of it-which we are not inclined to do-we hope we shall not be called upon to believe in impossibilities. The writer in the Atlantic lets it pass for genius. How a pianist must possess something besides genius to do what this blind black boy is said to have done."

"... The feat of playing an accompaniment to a new melody is not so remarkable as to need special mention, were it not for the statement that it was performed by a child, blind and an idiot to boot."

"To our mind the story discovers not genius but a memory- extraordinary in the highest degree and in its particular field altogether unparalleled-coupled with perhaps considerably more than the average taste for music."

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Dwight's Journal of Music  
Vol. 26 Oct. 27, 1856 Page 336

" "Blind Tom" has called forth some remarkable

testimonials in London. These for instance!

"In justice to "Blind Tom" I have much pleasure in stating that I think him marvelously gifted by nature. I happened to be present at a performance of his at Southsea, and at the request of Mrs. W.P. Howard began to test his abilities by extemporizing a short rhythmical piece, which he imitated to perfection, thus proving beyond all doubt, that he did not impose upon the public by preparation.

" I then went so far as to play him that part of my "Recollections of Ireland" in which the three melodies are blended, and even that he imitated with most of its intricacies and changes.

" Having tested his powers of analyzing chords, and found them all that I could desire, I next put my hands on the keys at random, and was surprised to hear him name every note of such flagrant discord. Tom's technical acquirements are very remarkable, and his entertainment full of interest for the musician and amateur."

Southsea, Sept. 11, 1856

" I. Moscheles."

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" I have this day, for the first time, heard Blind Tom play on the pianoforte, and I was very much astonished by his performance. His natural musical gifts seem to me quite marvelous, and the manner in which he repeated several pieces I played to him, which he had evidently never heard before, was most remarkable. Perhaps the most striking feature was the extraordinary quickness with which he named any notes struck by me on the piano, either singly or simultaneously, however, dis-

cordant they might be. I also named to him several notes, choosing the most difficult and perplexing intervals; these he instantly sang with perfect truth of intonation, although they might have puzzled a well-educated musician. Altogether, Blind Tom seems to me a most singular and inexplicable phenomenon.

Greenboys, 27th Sept. 1866

" Charles Halle "

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Music and Drama  
Vol. II, No. 9 June 3rd, 1882 (Page 6) New York

Blind Tom's Concerts

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That musical gold mine, Blind Tom, in his travels up and down the earth has reached New York again, and gave five of his concerts in Association Hall last week. Just what to make of this wonderfully gifted boy has been a puzzle to musicians for a long time. To commend his playing as artistic and valuable is to acknowledge that the sensuous charm of sounds and the emotional character of music was all there was to it, and thus to lower the position of every intelligent musician in the world; for if the work of a stupid, uneducated boy, not to say idiot, was artistically satisfactory, what has a man of brains to show for his greater abilities and harder work? But, on the other hand, to write Tom's performance down as worthless and inartistic was, in the popular judgment to fly in the face of facts.

The truth is Tom has done considerable good musical work in his travels. Many a country piano teacher could have learned from him something about the production of good tone and the proper use of the pedal if nothing else, and Tom has played

considerable classical music to people that perhaps never heard it any other way. The fact is, Tom is to be considered as a sort of animated phonograph or musical mirror. What he has caught from a good model or learned from a good teacher, he does well, and what he has picked up from inferior sources he gives just as he received it.

"Neither his idioy nor his blindness are total, although both are no doubt genuine. His musical memory is, however, something phenomenal and enables him to bring out repeatedly after long intervals, what he has taken in through the ears."

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Negro Musicians and Their Music

By  
Maude Cuney-Hare 1936 (Page 215)

"a remarkable musical prodigy of the "eighties" was the phenomenon, Thomas Greene Bethune, known as "Blind Tom". He was born without sight, in Columbus, Georgia, on May 25, 1849, and was of unmixed blood. He possessed absolute pitch, an unerring ear and marvelous memory. He was said to have a repertoire of seven thousand pieces which he had learned by having them played to him. He traveled extensively and created a stir in America and Europe. A review in "Music and Drama", New York, appearing on June 3, 1882, said, "To write Tom's performance down as worthless and inartistic, was to fly in the face of facts...Many a country piano teacher could have learned from him something about the production of good tone and the proper use of the pedals."