Introduction

Patricia Allmer and John Sears

> Well anyway we all went away and as we came down-stairs there was an elderly colored man and he came up to me and said Miss Gertrude Stein and I said yes and he said I am (I have forgotten the name), I was the first music teacher of Mr Matthews who sang Saint Ignatius and I wanted to say how do you do to you and I was very touched.[1]

4 Saints in 3 Acts: A Snapshot of the American Avant-Garde explores photography's roles in representing, recording, and contributing to the social and aesthetic impact of the remarkably popular 1934 American opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Many books and essays (some of them discussed below and in the following chapters) have examined the history of this opera and its contexts, from a variety of critical perspectives, and focused in different ways on the multiple collaborations, innovations, impacts, and legacies that *Four Saints* mobilised and bequeathed. The event sustains readings attuned to ethnic identities (like the review in *The Theatre*, 25 April 1934, which notes the prominent Jewish contribution to the show),[2] and offers a

1 Gertrude Stein, *Everybody's Autobiography* (London: Virago Press, 1985), pp. xxv–xxvi.

2 See www.jta.org/1934/04/25/archive/the-theatre-18.

HARRY MOSES
presents

4 SAINTS IN 3 ACTS

WORDS BY GERTRUDE STEIN MUSIC BY VIRGIL THOMSON

SCENARIO BY MAURICE GROSSER

CONDUCTED BY ALEXANDER SMALLENS
(Courtesy of Philadelphia Orchestra)

SCENERY AND COSTUMES
CREATED BY — Florine Stettheimer
DESIGNED BY — Kate Drain Lawson
CHOREOGRAPHY BY — Frederick Ashton
PRODUCTION BY — John Houseman
LIGHTING BY — Feder

Press Representative — Nathan Zatkin
Business Manager — Saul Abraham
Chorus Trained by — Eva Jessye
Stage Manager — Edward G. Perry

The portrait photographs used in the programme were taken especially by Lee Miller of New York with the exception of that of Gertrude Stein which is by Man Ray. This has been used by courtesy of James Thrall Soby, and is taken from the album of Man Ray's work which will shortly be published by Mr. Soby. Scene photographs by White. Mr. Moses photograph by Alfredo Valente.

Cellophane from the Dupont Cellophane Co. and the Dobekmun Co.
Cellophane Cyclorama by Joe Hansen
Costumes executed by Madame Pulliche.
Draperies by Weiss
Scenery constructed by Cleon Throckmorton

PRELUDE

A Narrative of Prepare for Saints.

ACT I

Avila: St. Teresa half indoors and half out out of doors.

FIRST ENTR'ACTE

ACT II

Might it be mountains if it were not Barcelona.

SECOND ENTR'ACTE

ACT III

Barcelona: St. Ignatius and One of Two literally.

ACT IV

The Saints and Sisters reassembled and reenacting why they went away to stay.

CAST

COMPERE — Abner Dorsey
COMMERE — Altonell Hines
ST. IGNATIUS — Edward Matthews
ST. TERESA I — Beatrice Robinson Wayne
ST. TERESA II — Bruce Howard
ST. CHAVEZ — John Diggs

St. Settlement — Bertha Fitzhugh Baker
St. Ferdinand — Leonard Franklyn
St. Plan — Randolph Robinson
St. Stephen — David Bethé
St. Cecilia — Kitty Mason
St. Giuseppe — Thomas Anderson
St. Anselmo — Charles Spinnard
St. Sara — Marguerite Perry
St. Bernardine — Flossie Roberts
St. Absalon — Edward Batten
St. Answers — Forace Hester
St. Eustace — George Timber

MALE SAINTS

William Holland — Andrew Taylor
Cecil Murray — Harold Slappy
William O'Neill — Benjamin Parks
Paul Smellie — Thomas Bolden
Leo Jenkins — Albert Moss

FEMALE SAINTS

Charlotte Alford — Olga Maillard
Dorothy Bronson — Cordelia Patterson
Josephine Gray — Jessie Swan
Lena Halsey — Eva Vaughn
Sadie McGill — Alma Dickson
Assotta Marshall — Helen Dorody Moore

DANCERS

Caro Lynn Baker — Floyd Miller
Elizabeth Dickerson — Maxwell Baird
Mable Hart — Billie Smith

This presentation by special arrangement with THE FRIENDS AND ENEMIES OF MODERN MUSIC.

Figure 5 Cast list from *Four Saints in Three Acts* programme, 44th St Theatre, New York, 1934. In the Hartford performance St Chavez was played by Embry Bonner, St Plan by George Timber, St Eustace by Randolph Robinson. The New York male saints differed, numbering ten, rather than the original six from which Harold Des Verney dropped out. Helen Dorody Moore joined the New York cast as an additional female saint

productive text for queer theoretical readings like that proposed by Nadine Hubbs, exploiting the opera's "blank screen quality, subject to viewers' projections".[3]

A key group of photographers was involved in its documentation and recording. This involvement has received little critical attention. These photographers include Lee Miller ("the most stylish photographer in town"),[4] Carl Van Vechten, George Platt Lynes, and the (often anonymous) press photographers working for the White Studio. They portrayed several of the cast, crew, and production team members for programmes and other promotional material, photographed performances and stage settings, and recorded some of the ways *Four Saints* impacted on and was reflected in the wider culture of New York in 1934. Miller was contracted (through her relationship with stage director John Houseman) to photograph the cast. Van Vechten, renowned for his photography of prominent African Americans, also produced a series of cast portraits.

Four Saints in Three Acts

Written by Gertrude Stein (1874–1946) and composed by Virgil Thomson (1896–1989) in Paris, between May and December 1927, *Four Saints in Three Acts* premiered with an all-African American cast on 7 February 1934, at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, marking the opening there of the first exhibition in the USA of works by Stein's close friend Pablo Picasso. Thomson engaged his lover, the painter Maurice Grosser (1903–86), to write the opera's scenario. The cast members were largely gathered from the nightclubs, music halls, and choirs of Harlem under the guidance of journalist Edward Perry (1908–55), who would lead the United Services Organisations touring unit of *Porgy and Bess* during the Second World War, and Jimmy Daniels (1908–84), an entrepreneur and nightclub performer who would later MC at Bon Soir, which famously hosted Barbra Streisand's first New York performance in 1960. The cast was directed by Romanian-born actor John Houseman (1902–88), choreographed by future Royal Ballet director Frederick Ashton (1904–88), and trained and conducted by the only

3 Nadine Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound: Gay Modernists, American Music, and National Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), p. 20.

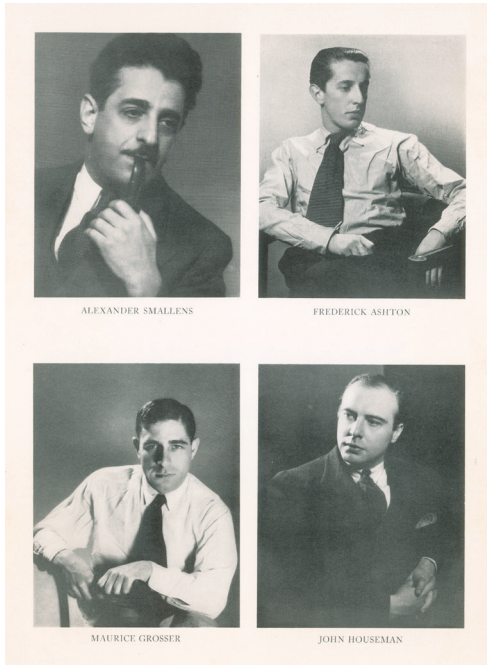
4 Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* (New York: Da Capo, 1967), p. 238.

Figure 6 Record sleeve with White Studio photograph of 1934 performance, Virgil Thomson (conducts) *Four Saints in Three Acts*, recorded June 1947 (RCA)

African American involved organisationally, choir-leader Eva Jessye (1895–1992), whose choir supported the performers, and, like several of them, would go on to appear in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in 1935.

Jessye, born in Coffeyville, Kansas, and a graduate of Western University in Kansas City and of Langston University in Oklahoma, was a major figure in African American musical history, with a distinguished teaching, performing, and conducting career – "the first black woman in America to succeed as a choral director", Steven Watson notes in his definitive history of the opera, *Prepare for Saints*.[5]

5 Steven Watson, *Prepare for Saints: Gertrude Stein, Virgil Thomson, and the Mainstreaming of American Modernism* (New York and Toronto: Random House, 1998), p. 244.



Figures 7–8 44th St Theatre programme, crew photographs (all by Lee Miller, except Gertrude Stein, by Man Ray)

Figure 9 Lee Miller, John Houseman, New York Studio, New York, ca. 1933

She taught music in Oklahoma and Baltimore, before moving to New York in 1926 and establishing the Dixie Jubilee Singers, later renamed the Eva Jessye Choir. She acted in stage productions of *Porgy and Bess* and *Showboat*, and appeared in several films including Carl Lerner's *Black Like Me* (1964). Recounting the experience of working on *Four Saints* to Watson, she emphasised the opera's strange and estranging difference, and her and her choir's accommodation of it:

> With this opera we had to step on fresh ground, something foreign to our nature completely. Not like *Porgy and Bess* that came the next

Figure 10 Lee Miller, Eva Jessye, Choir Director of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, New York Studio, New York, ca. 1933

> year – that was our inheritance, our own lives. But what did we know about the minds of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson? We really went abroad on that.[6]

The surrealist artist Florine Stettheimer (1871–1944) designed, with the assistance of designer and actor Kate Drain Lawson (1894–1977), the stage settings and costumes (discussed in Christopher Breward's essay), famously making extensive use of lace and sky-blue cellophane for both, causing problems with New York City fire

6 Quoted in Watson, *Prepare for Saints*, p. 245.

safety rules. Stettheimer also worried that her colour-schemes would clash with the black skins of the performers, who, she seriously proposed, might be painted white or silver to mitigate this.[7]

Critical consensus sees the opera as an event that combined in a unique configuration a key set of aesthetic, social, cultural, and political dimensions, producing a powerfully syncretic, if "putatively nonsensical", work.[8] Most critics, and the published commentary of many of those who worked on the opera, agree about this syncretic dimension, drawing attention to the productive dynamisms and tensions resulting from sometimes difficult collaborations across media and disciplinary, as well as national, class, racial, and sexual, boundaries. Various largely complementary critical perspectives emerge in these writings. Barbara Webb, for example, reads the racial politics of the opera's staging as an "intersection of Steinian modernism and black performance", and begins with an assertion of the syncretic distortion in *Four Saints* of the conventional operatic relation between words and music – it is, she argues, "a work in which words served the usual function of music, not telling a story or communicating meaning in a traditional fashion, but primarily *sounding*".[9] Webb goes on to describe the opera's form as "a series of tableaux in which characters identified as Spanish saints were seen chatting, picnicking, marching in a processional, and painting giant Easter eggs [offering] snapshots of existence rather than traditional scenes of action".[10] Dramatic action, she suggests, is replaced by serial presentation of "snapshots". Her evocation of photography as metaphor affirms its importance for grasping the aesthetic and cultural significance of the moment of *Four Saints*.

Four Saints developed out of meetings between Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson in Paris that probably began in January 1926. Their correspondence, archived at Yale's Beinecke Library and edited and published by Susan Holbrook and Thomas Dilworth, records an extraordinary and sometimes stormy relationship of collaboration and friendship. Stein agreed, in the early summer of 1927, to collaborate with Thomson on an opera, a genre new to her. Thomson's theory of the opera, he later recollected, grounded it in

7 See Watson, *Prepare for Saints*, pp. 206–8.

8 Hubbs, *The Queer Composition of America's Sound*, p. 23.

9 Barbara Webb, "The Centrality of Race to the Modernist Aesthetics of Gertrude Stein's *Four Saints in Three Acts*", *Modernism/Modernity*, Vol. 7 No. 3 (2000): 447–69; 447.

10 Webb, "The Centrality of Race", 449.

European musical traditions couched explicitly in terms evoking a specifically modernist interest in the serial and "primitive":

> I thought that to do anything serious about the opera in a new language, one needed to go back to the more primitive and strong forms. I thought Italian opera seria of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was exactly the sort of form one could do something with.[11]

This aesthetic and ideological matrix of "new language" and "going back" to "more primitive and strong forms" characterised the productively contradictory dynamics of the forms of modernism with which Stein and Thomson, in different but complementary ways, engaged.

Stein wrote in her 1934 lecture "Plays" of two formative influences on her *Four Saints* libretto (which was first published in Eugéne Jolas's journal *transition* in late 1928). Both derive from commerce on Parisian streets: a shop window on the Rue de Rennes featuring "a rather large porcelain group" depicting "a young soldier taking his helmet off and giving alms to a beggar", and a photography "place" on the Boulevard Raspail where

> They take a photograph of a young girl dressed in the costume of her ordinary life and little by little in successive photographs they change it into a nun. These photographs are small and the thing takes four or five changes but at the end it is a nun […]. For years I stood and looked at these when I was walking and finally when I was writing Saint Theresa in looking at these photographs I saw how Saint Theresa existed from the life of an ordinary young lady to that of the nun.[12]

A particular form of serial commercial photography, closely tied to practices of mourning and memorialisation, is thus an important source of the completed text Stein sent to Thomson in June 1927. "By mid-December", Thomson wrote in his autobiography, "I had a score consisting of the vocal lines and a figured bass, a score from which I could perform."[13] This score worked productively with

11 Thomson to Thomas Dilworth, 3 February 1981; quoted in *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson: Composition as Conversation* (ed. Susan Holbrook and Thomas Dilworth) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 9.

12 Gertrude Stein, "Plays", in Patricia Meyerowitz (ed.) *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures 1911–1945* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 59–83: p. 82.

13 Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, p. 104.

Stein's text, famously interpreting her stage instructions so literally as to incorporate them unchanged into the sung libretto. Thomson's decision to use African American singers defines the importance of *Four Saints*. Alan Rich cites a conversation with him in 1965:

> During the Thirties we liked to end our evenings up at one of the night clubs in Harlem; it was the thing to do in those days. More and more it struck me as inevitable that the way Negro singers produced their words, and the complete naturalness of their style, was what we wanted for *Four Saints*. We had the idea that professional white singers might make fun of the verses, and we were probably right. The Negroes we got together for the first performance not only accepted everything; by the end of a week's rehearsals they were actually talking like Stein when they were off the stage.[14]

Four Saints was not the first major artwork to employ an all-African American cast. Numerous minstrel shows and black theatrical productions precede it. Harry Lawrence Freeman's (1869–1954) opera *Voodoo*, written in 1914, eventually premiered with an all-African American cast at Palm Garden on West 52nd St in New York in September 1928, with a performance broadcast on WGBS radio on 28 May.[15] Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* was performed as a read-through with its composer on piano at Harlem's Lincoln Theatre in 1915. Langston Hughes recollected seeing *Shuffle Along*, a Broadway musical review, in 1921, and Emily Bernard notes two 1898 productions, *Clorindy: The Origin of the Cakewalk* and *A Trip to Coontown*.[16] In cinema, King Vidor's *Hallelujah* (1929), an early talkie, had been filmed in and around Memphis with an all-black cast including Daniel Haynes, who had understudied for Paul Robeson, and Eva Jessye's Dixie Jubilee Singers. Jessye later recounted how Vidor's cast "put in little touches, Negro mannerisms, phrases that could be written by no white man".[17] What made *Four Saints* unique in this

14 Alan Rich, "*Four Saints*: Humanity is the Key Word", *Hi-Fidelity* (February 1965): 70–1.

15 See Elise Kuhl Kirk, *American Opera* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), pp. 186–8. *Voodoo* was revived in 2015 at Columbia University's Miller Theatre by the Harlem Opera Theatre with Morningside Opera and The Harlem Chamber Players.

16 Emily Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten & The Harlem Renaissance: A Portrait in Black and White* (Hew Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 29.

17 Greg Akers, "King Vidor's *Hallelujah*", *Memphis: The City Magazine* (28 August 2014), at http://memphismagazine.com/culture/arts/king-vidors-hallelujah/ (accessed 29 February 2016).

tradition of African American performance was its thematic concern with the lives of Spanish saints, a topic wholly distinct from the conventional use (as in *Voodoo* and *Hallelujah*) of African Americans to perform stereotypically black American narratives.

The cast

The African American cast, mainly comprising (Steven Watson asserts) "anonymous singers in choruses and church choirs",[18] included performers gleaned from the classical music world of the Harlem Renaissance. Biographical details of many of them are scarce.

Baritone Edward Matthews, born in Ossining, New York, in 1904, played St Ignatius of Loyola, and had the greatest subsequent success of the cast members. A graduate of Fisk University, where he later taught, he had toured Europe with the Fisk Jubilee Singers in 1927–28, and would play Jake in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in 1935. He performed "St Ignatius' Vision" from *Four Saints* at a recital at West 43rd St's Town Hall in December 1934, with Virgil Thomson accompanying on piano.[19] Frances Moss Mann notes his performance at the climax of the 16th annual convention of the National Association of Negro Musicians at the Wadleigh High School Annex in August 1935.[20] He gave his first Harlem recital at Salem Church in December 1936, and was at that time a regular feature of WABC's Capitol Radio Family.[21] In 1938–39 he toured Latin America for five months of concert and radio performances.[22] He sang "Ballad for Americans" at the New York World's Fair in 1940 and at the Negro Song Festival in 1941.[23] In December 1945 he gave a recital of lieder and "Afro-American folksongs – work and religious" – again at Town Hall.[24] His sister Inez Matthews (1917–2004) sang with him as

18 Watson, *Prepare for Saints*, p. 315.

19 Anon., "To Give Recital", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (1 December 1934): 4.

20 Frances Moss Mann, "Music Notes: 200 Delegates at Convention", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (31 August 1934): 4.

21 Anon., "Edward Matthews in First Harlem Recital", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (28 November 1936): 6.

22 Anon., "Edward Matthews Is Tops in Tropics", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (26 November 1938): 20.

23 Anon., "Ed Matthews in Song Fete", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (10 May 1941): 17.

24 Anon., "In Rental", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (15 December 1945): 27.

Figures 11–12 44th St Theatre programme, cast photographs (all by Lee Miller)

Figure 13 Lee Miller, Edward Matthews as St Ignatius in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, New York Studio, New York, ca. 1933

St Theresa I in the 1952 Broadway Theatre revival of *Four Saints*, and was the performance double for Ruth Attaway (and sang Serena) in Otto Preminger's 1959 film of *Porgy and Bess*. Edward Matthews was killed in a car accident in Woodbridge, Virginia, in 1954 (a report in the *New York Amsterdam News* of 28 July 1934 notes, strangely, that

Figure 14 Carl Van Vechten, Altonell Hines as Commère in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 9 March 1934

"it was erroneously rumored two weeks ago that Mr Matthews was killed in an accident").[25]

25 Frances Moss Mann, "Mwalimu School Gets New Teacher", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (28 July 1934): 7.

Figure 15 Carl Van Vechten, Altonell Hines as Commère in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 9 March 1934

Matthews married Altonell Hines, who played the Commère. Hines was born in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1904, and graduated from Livingstone College and with a Master's in Music Education from Columbia Teaching College. She too would sing in the first stage production of *Porgy and Bess* in 1935, and in the 1952 Broadway Theatre revival of *Four Saints*. In January 1941 she was noted by Dan

Figure 16 Lee Miller, Altonell Hines in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, New York Studios, New York, ca. 1933.

Burley as "getting plenty radio work" [*sic*] but "rehearsing with a quintet" and wanting "to return to singing again".[26] The quintet was the Sophistichords, who played "Salon Swing" coffee concerts at

26 Dan Burley, "Back Door Stuff: Round Harlem for the Lowdown", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (18 January 1941): 20.

Figure 17 Carl Van Vechten, Beatrice Robinson-Wayne as St Theresa I in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, New York, 9 March 1934

MoMA, the second of which included a performance of *Four Saints*.[27] Hines died in New York in 1977.

27 Anon., "Coffee Concerts at Modern Art Museum", *The New York Amsterdam-Star News* (26 April 1941): 20; anon., "Sophisticated Sophistichords", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (10 May 1941): 17.

Figure 18 Lee Miller, unidentified performer, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, New York Studio, New York, ca. 1933

Soprano and former radio performer Beatrice Robinson Wayne, who was (Watson notes) 33 at the time of her audition in December 1933, played St Theresa I. She sang with Virgil Thomson on piano in a recital at the West 135th St YMCA in February 1935, and later performed (along with Edward Matthews and Charles Holland from the original cast) in the 1947 recording of *Four Saints* released by

Figure 19 Lee Miller, Abner Dorsey, Compère in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, New York Studio, New York, ca. 1933

RCA and conducted by Virgil Thomson, "slightly past her prime", according to reviewer Jed Distler.[28]

28 Anon., "Arrange Program", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (23 February 1935): 6; "Thomson: Four Saints" review by Jed Distler, *Classics Today* (undated) at www.classicstoday.com/review/review-14621/ (accessed 1 March 2016).

The Compère was played by Abner Dorsey (1900–56), a bass-baritone and former vaudevillean performer. He appeared in three further Broadway musicals between 1936 and 1938, and then in performances by the New York Philharmonic of William Grant Still's *And They Lynched Him on a Tree* in 1940 and 1941. Of Bruce Howard, the contralto who played St Theresa II, little is known – Watson records that, after *Four Saints*, she "found more musical opportunities abroad where, she declared, 'I'm a black princess!'"[29] She appeared subsequently in Broadway revues and musicals including *Virginia* (1937), *The Hot Mikado* (1939, again with an all-black cast), and *Call Me Mister* (1946–48). She gave a performance of *Four Saints* for the Bethesda Missionary Society at New Rochelle, Westchester, in June 1942.[30]

Tenor Embry Bonner, who played St Chavez in the Hartford performances (to be replaced by the more suitably Jewish Leonard Franklyn in the New York performances), appears in a 1964 photograph by Bill Anderson of the Harold Jackman Memorial Committee, at the Playboy Club in New York.[31] Prior to appearing in *Four Saints*, he "gave a superlative performance" of songs by Wagner and Schubert at a recital at Grace Congregational Church in January 1934.[32] Franklyn appeared, in November 1939, as guest soloist alongside Dorothy Maynor with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall.[33]

Little is known of the rest of the Hartford performers. Bertha Fitzhugh Baker, who had appeared with Paul Robeson in *Showboat* at the Casino Theatre in 1932, is amongst those honoured at the 2009 Carnegie Hall "Celebration of the African American Cultural Legacy", curated by Jessye Norman. She sang accompanying Elizabeth Giddings "with fervor, fullness, depth and passion" at a recital in Yonkers in January 1934,[34] and, in 1942, was teaching "voice and piano at her 41 Convent Avenue studio" and gave a recital at Bethel AME Church.[35] Thomas Anderson (St Giuseppe), who was born in Pasadena in 1905 and died on 12 January 1996

29 Watson, *Prepare for Saints*, p. 315.
30 Anon., "Westchester", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (13 June 1942): 20.
31 The photograph is reproduced in Dorothy West, *Where the Wild Grape Grows: Selected Writings 1930–1950* (ed. Verner D. Mitchell and Cynthia Davis) (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).
32 Frances Moss Mann, "Music News: Casks Bonds Presents Commendable Program", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (31 January 1934): 16.
33 Bill Chase, "All Ears", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (25 November 1939): 21.
34 Ibid.
35 Anon., "Music Notes", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (9 May 1942): 10.

Figure 20 Lee Miller, Bruce Howard as St Theresa II in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, New York Studio, New York, ca. 1933

in New Jersey, appeared in later Broadway productions including an adaptation of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1942). He worked in radio in New York and Chicago during the War, and was assistant director of Orson Welles's all-black production of *Macbeth* in 1936; he managed a United Service Organisations USO touring troupe in Japan and the Philippines in 1946.[36] Of Kitty Mason (interviewed in 1984 by Steven Watson), Charles Spinnard, Marguerite Perry

36 Anon., "Thomas Charles Anderson", *Variety* (11 March 1996): 60.

Figure 21 Lee Miller, Bertha Fitzhugh Baker as St Settlement in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, New York Studio, New York, ca. 1933

(who was born in Denver in 1913 and died in Hartsel, 2007), Flossie Roberts, Edward Batten, Florence Hester, and George Timber, few traces remain. The Negro Art Singers, including some members of the *Four Saints* and *Porgy and Bess* casts, gave several publicly noted performances in late 1938, including one at New York's New School for Social Research on 12 November.[37] Paul Smellie, a male saint in the Hartford production, was commissioned in the US Army Air Forces Officers Candidate School at Miami Beach in 1944, having previously studied at the College of the City of New York and travelled extensively as a Boy Scout in Latin America and Europe.[38]

37 Anon., "Music Notes", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (12 November 1938): 23.
38 Anon., "Commissioned", *The New York Amsterdam News* (27 May 1944): 4A.

The dancers included three women from the Grace Giles Dancing School. Marble Hart subsequently played Dawn in a City College production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in April 1935, and danced in a charity event at the Lido Ballroom in Harlem in June 1936.[39] Melba Love, a graduate of Wadleigh High School, died in West Palm Beach, Florida, August 1934. The male dancers, Floyd Miller, Billie Smith, and Maxwell Baird, appear in George Platt Lynes's photograph, with Frederick Ashton.

After the opening shows in Hartford, the ensemble moved to the 44th St Theatre in New York,[40] making *Four Saints* the first opera to be staged on Broadway, and then in April 1934 to the Empire Theatre on 40th and Broadway. Later in 1934 it was performed at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago, in the attendance of Stein, who was beginning her immensely successful American lecture tour with her partner Alice B. Toklas. African American reviewer George W. Streater described *Four Saints* as "a strange mixture of sacred and vulgar sequences. At times one feels 'churchy', and at times one wants to guffaw. But at no time is one quite certain what it is all about."[41] An earlier attempt to stage the opera in 1930, in German (and presumably not with an African American cast), initiated by the poet Edwin Denby at the Hessisches Landestheater in Darmstadt, had fallen through – Thomson records a letter from Denby of 1 May 1930, stating that "The chances are pretty black".[42]

Image/voice

Reviewers of the original performances noted the quality of the singing. Robert Garland, writing in the *New York World* on 21 February 1934, commented, for example, that *Four Saints* "is sung as it should be sung, by an all-Negro cast that distinguishes itself by its clear enunciation, its full-throated singing, its evident enjoyment".[43] Marvel

39 Anon., "Shakespearean Comedy is Slated for April 6th", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (30 March 1935): 10; anon., "500 Present at Club's Formal", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (6 June 1936): 7.

40 The subsequent show at the 44th St Theatre was George Sklar and Albert Maltz's *Peace on Earth*, starring Walter Vonnegut, uncle of the novelist Kurt Vonnegut.

41 George W. Streator, review of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, *Crisis*, 4 (1934): 103.

42 Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* , pp. 147–8.

43 Robert Garland, "Offering at 44th St, Though Unintelligible, Is Dignified by Singing of Its Negro Cast", *New York World* (21 February 1934) (cutting in Carl Van Vechten Scrapbooks).

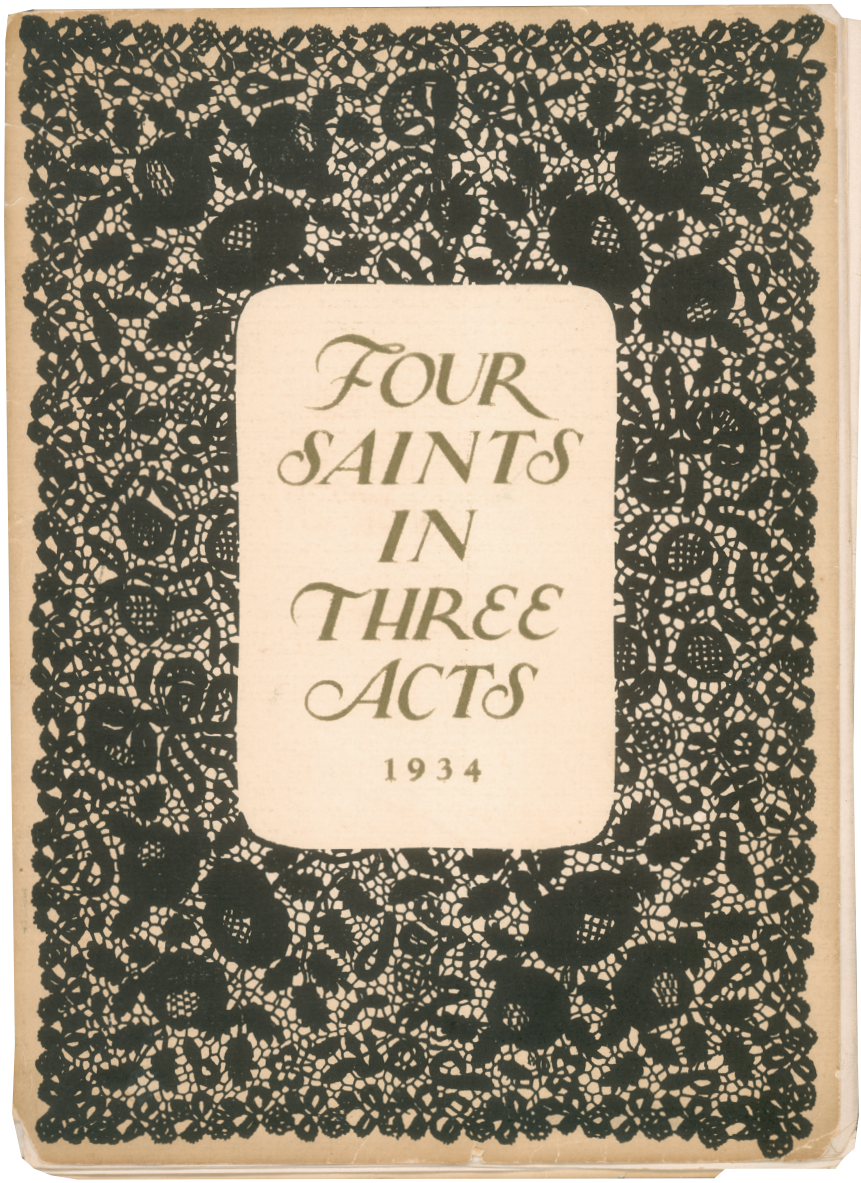


Figure 22 44th St Theatre brochure, New York, 1934

Cooke wrote that the cast of the 1941 revival, largely that of the original performances, sang "with remarkable clarity of diction".[44] Virgil

44 Marvel Cooke, "'Four Saints' at Town Hall", *The New York Amsterdam Star-News* (31 May 1941): p. 21.

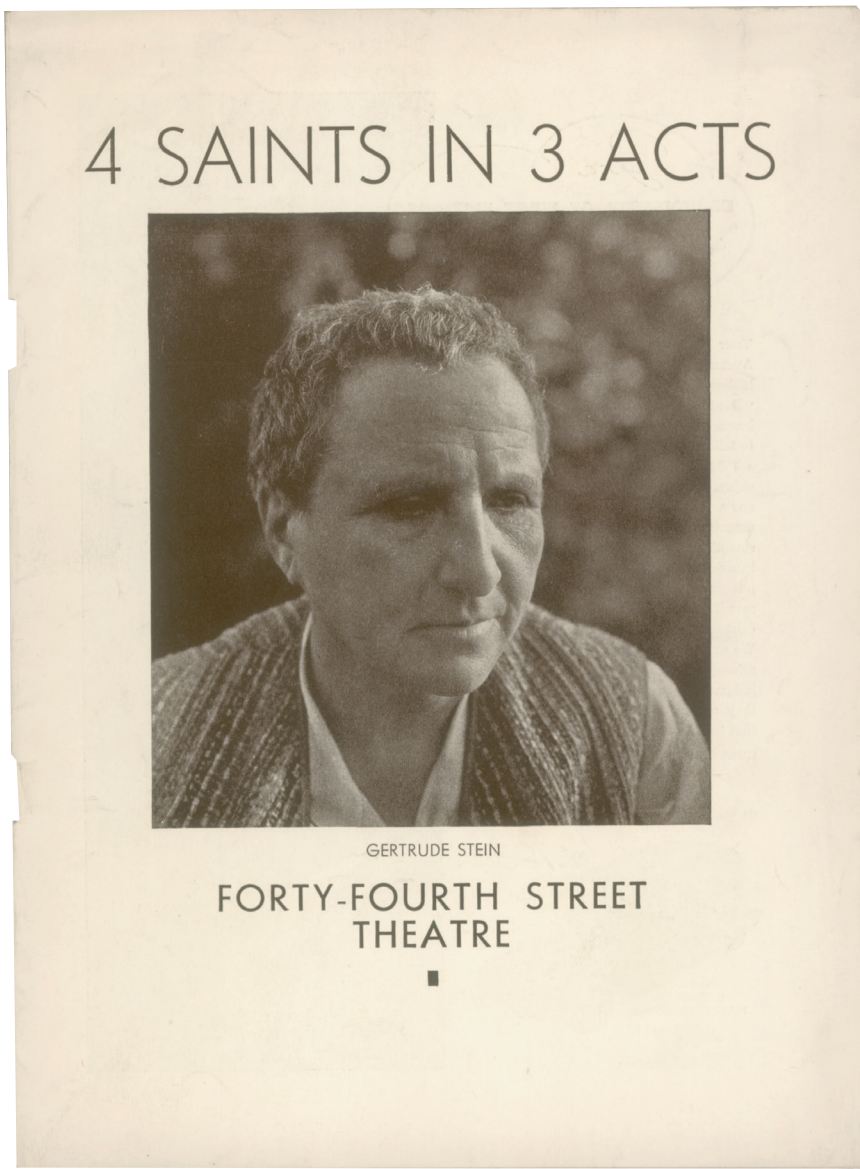


Figure 23 44th St Theatre programme, New York, 1934

Thomson's autobiographical and epistolary comments on the opera and his desire to cast African American singers also focus mainly on questions of vocal expression, while unconscious allusions to racial difference pepper his prose – like the effect of his idiosyncratically limited choice of orchestral accompaniment to the Hartford

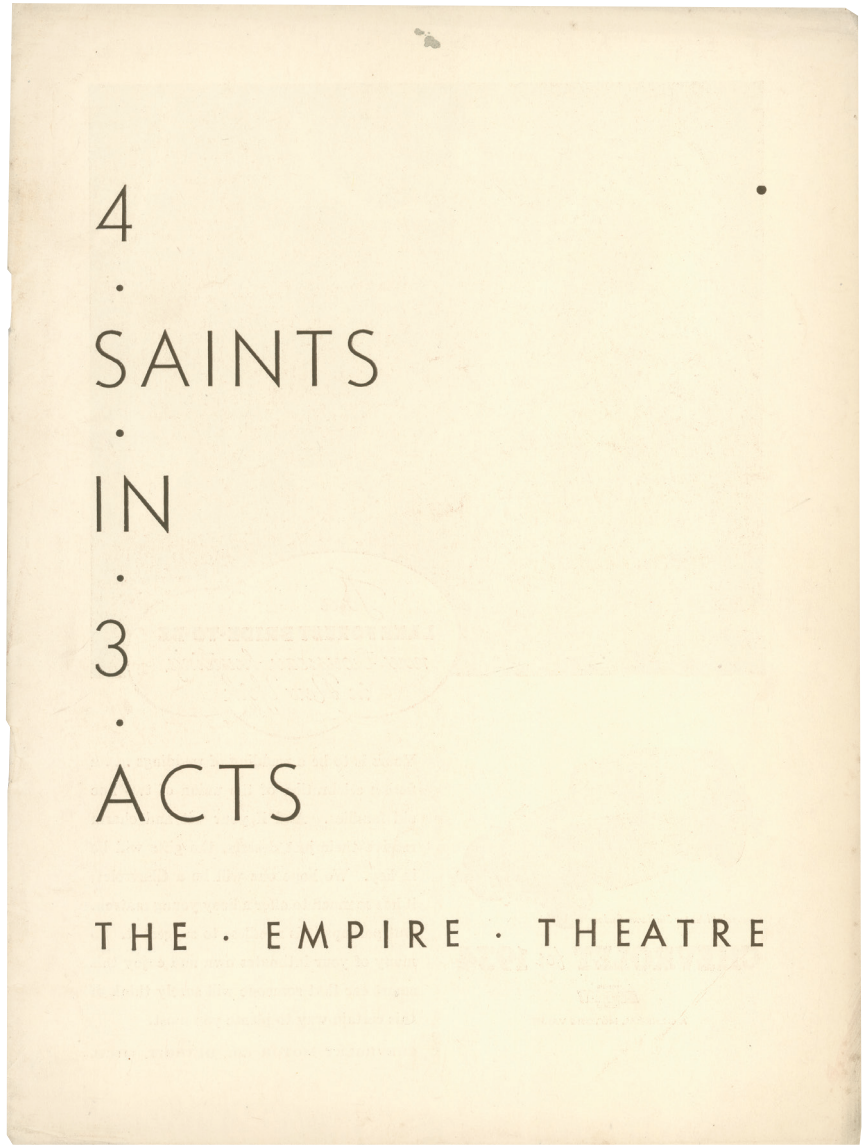
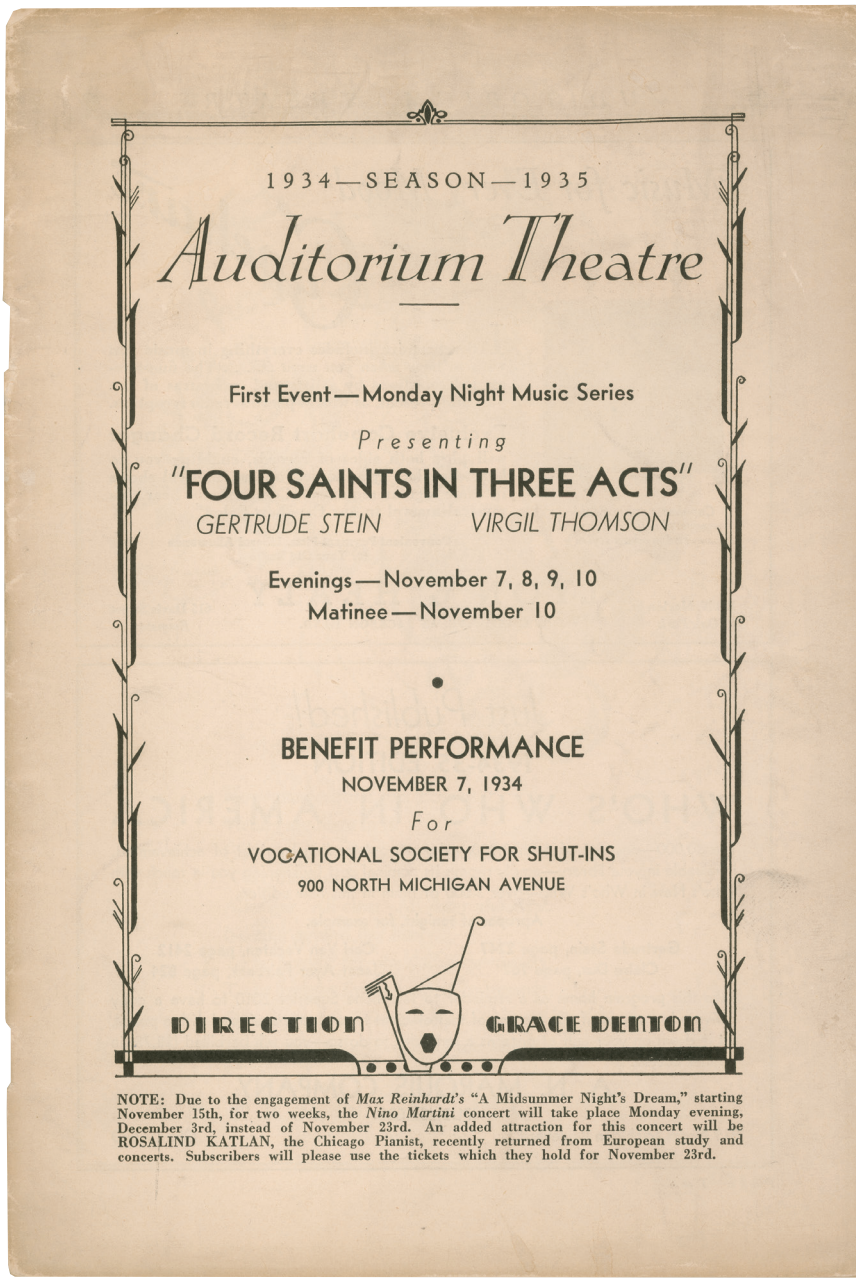


Figure 24 Empire Theatre programme, New York, 1934

production, which, he notes, "gave the work a color like that of no other".[45] "My negro singers are, after all, purely a musical desideratum", he wrote to Stein on 30 May 1933, "because of their rhythm,

45 Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, p. 224.


1934—SEASON—1935

Auditorium Theatre

First Event—Monday Night Music Series

Presenting

"FOUR SAINTS IN THREE ACTS"

GERTRUDE STEIN *VIRGIL THOMSON*

Evenings—November 7, 8, 9, 10

Matinee—November 10

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BENEFIT PERFORMANCE

NOVEMBER 7, 1934

For

VOCATIONAL SOCIETY FOR SHUT-INS

900 NORTH MICHIGAN AVENUE

DIRECTION GRACE DENTON

NOTE: Due to the engagement of *Max Reinhardt's* "A Midsummer Night's Dream," starting November 15th, for two weeks, the *Nino Martini* concert will take place Monday evening, December 3rd, instead of November 23rd. An added attraction for this concert will be ROSALIND KATLAN, the Chicago Pianist, recently returned from European study and concerts. Subscribers will please use the tickets which they hold for November 23rd.

Figure 25 Auditorium Theatre programme, Chicago, 1934

their style and especially their diction".[46] His pride in his choice of performers is clear: "My singers, as I have wanted, are negroes, & you cant [*sic*] imagine how beautifully they sing", he wrote to Stein on 6 December 1933.[47] A passage from his autobiography (quoted without comment by Holbrook and Dilworth) elaborates:

> Not only could they enunciate and sing: they seemed to understand because they sang. They resisted not at all Stein's obscure language, adopted it for theirs, conversed in quotations from it. They moved, sang, spoke with grace and with alacrity, took on roles without self-consciousness, as if they were the saints they said they were. I often marveled at the miracle whereby slavery (and some cross-breeding) had turned them into Christians of an earlier stamp than ours, not analytical and self-pitying or romantic in the nineteenth-century sense, but robust, outgoing, and even in disaster sustained by inner joy.[48]

Thomson's language here (his autobiography was published in 1967) betrays much about the complexities and problems of the racial codes of language and representation deployed by his generation. His alertness to the intensity of the performances relates closely to the photographic portraits and their problematic depiction less of individuals than of performances, or of visualisations of saintly ideals (a theme discussed in John Sears's essay).

Carl Van Vechten was a long-term friend of Stein and a well-known supporter of African American advancement, despite the notoriety surrounding the publication of his 1926 novel unfortunately titled *Nigger Heaven*. Emily Bernard comments on the dynamic ambiguity of his "passionate attachment" to black Americans and their cultures: "He warned against the evils of condescending whites at the same time as he offered up black bodies for the enjoyment of white spectators."[49] He attended the opening night in Hartford, Connecticut, in February 1934, and also commented on the voices of the performers,[50] and wrote to Stein on 8 February 1934:

> The Negroes are divine, like El Grecos, more Spanish, more Saints, more opera singers in their dignity and *simplicity* and extraordinary

46 Ibid., p. 231.

47 *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson* (ed. Holbrook and Dilworth), p. 221.

48 Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, p. 239, quoted by Holbrook and Dilworth, *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson*, p. 222.

49 Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten & The Harlem Renaissance*, p. 23, p. 72.

50 For a detailed discussion of the controversy around Van Vechten's novel, see Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten & The Harlem Renaissance*, pp. 107–90.

> plastic line than *any* white singers could ever be. And they enunciated the text so clearly you could understand every word.[51]

A few weeks later, on 12 March, Van Vechten sent Stein copies of "photographs I made especially for you of the electric signs over the 44th Street Theatre", depicting Stein's name in lights;[52] and then on 29 March he sent her "my photographs of 3 of the Saints – the costumes are still Florine Stettheimer's, but the décor in these photographs of the lilies, peonies etc. are by C. V. V.".[53] Stein responds in her letter postmarked 11 April:

> The photographs are wonderful I have never seen such photographs, and the background what wonderful stuffs and paper and flowers, and the black one of Saint Ignatius, it has completely upset everybody, everybody wants to see them, I do honestly think they are the finest photographs I have ever seen.[54]

One might ponder here what it was about Van Vechten's photograph of Edward Matthews, whom Stein names in his role as St Ignatius, that so "upset everybody" while sustaining the superlative public interest Stein claims. Stein (her name inscribed in Broadway neon) and costume and stage designer Florine Stettheimer bear names in this correspondence; the performers do not.

The emphasis in Stein's comment is on the spectacle, rather than the people, recorded in Van Vechten's photographs. Van Vechten's and Thomson's accounts focus, instead, on performance and voice, or clarity of "enunciation" – what Roland Barthes calls "the *grain* of the voice", "that apex (or that depth) of production where the melody really works at the language"[55] – the "grain" metaphor evoking, of course, the grainy monochrome photograph. Amid this attention to vocal and visual qualities, the actual identities of the performers are already in danger of erasure – selves are in the process of being redefined as utterances, traces of "the body in the voice as it sings".[56] If the photographs, for Stein, present a "wonderful" visual spectacle,

51 Carl Van Vechten to Gertrude Stein, 8 February 1934. In *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten 1913–1946* (ed. Edward Burns) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), p. 295.
52 Ibid., pp. 301–2.
53 Ibid., p. 305.
54 Ibid., p. 306.
55 Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice", in *Image-Music-Text* (ed. Stephen Heath) (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 181–2.
56 Ibid., p. 188.

Figure 26 Carl Van Vechten, Edward Matthews as St Ignatius in *Four Saints in Three Acts*, 9 March 1934

the voices, for Van Vechten and Thomson, render the performing and photographed subjects strangely invisible.

The photographic portraits of the African American singers thus assume huge significance as counter-histories to this tendency – all too familiar – to render African American historical presence invisible. They powerfully affirm Henry Louis Gates's insight that

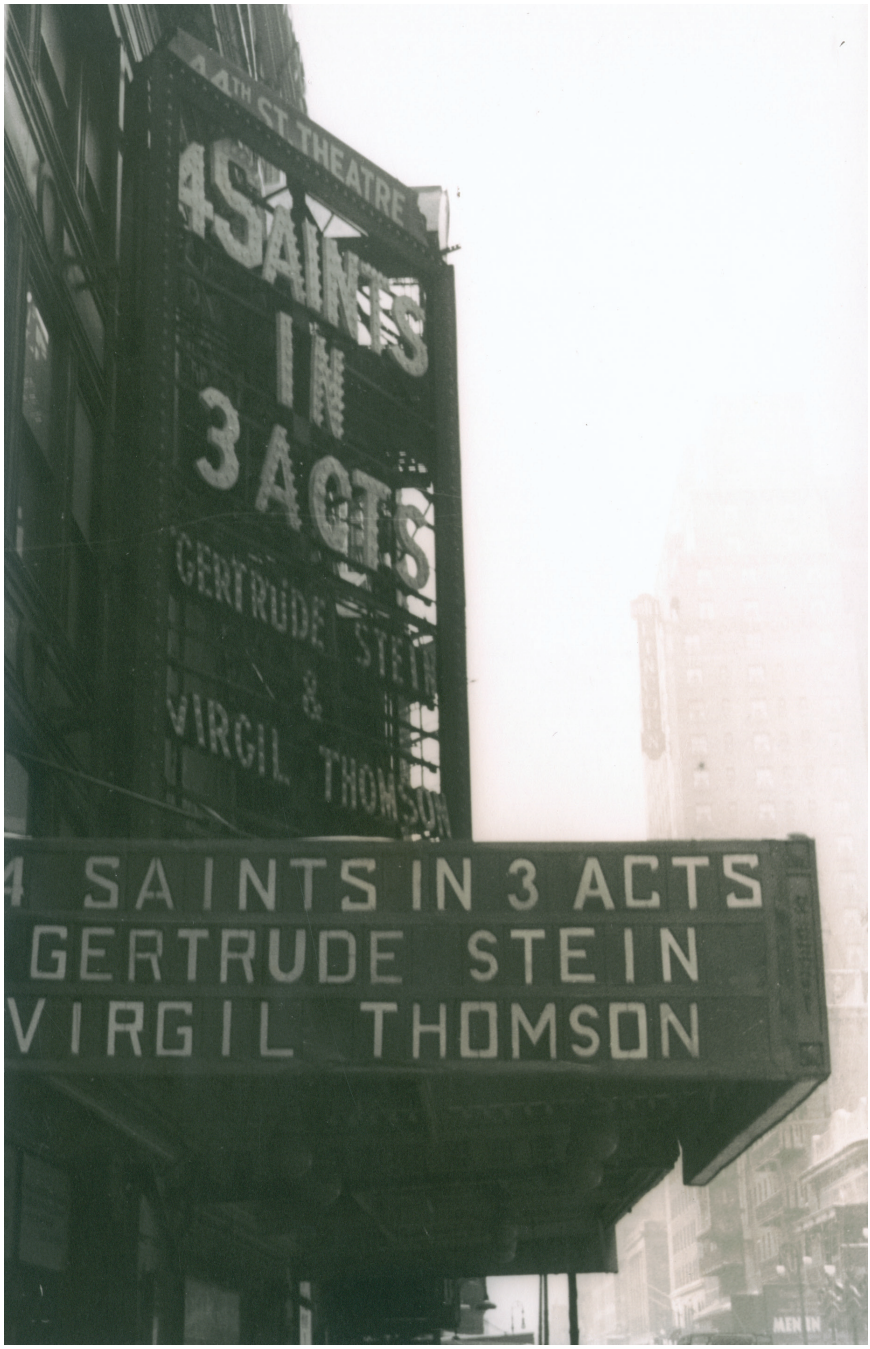

Figure 27 Carl Van Vechten, Gertrude Stein's name in electric light over 44th St Theatre, New York, March 1934

"Voice, after all, presupposes a face".[57] And the faces we see in these portraits belonged to people working and performing in Harlem and on Broadway in the 1930s. The contexts from which they emerged – teaching music, performing classical and other works in choirs and orchestras, in churches and dance halls, small theatres and music houses – are part of a complex weave of cultural practices embedded in the broader fabric of the culture industries in the crucial period of modernist African American cultural production and self-definition that was, in 1934, coming to an end – the Harlem Renaissance.

Classical music in the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance, also known as the New Negro Movement, describes the centrality of Harlem to the establishment of African American culture within American modernity. This centrality accommodates Harlem's, New York's, and America's complex roles in what is increasingly understood as (in Claire Oberon Garcia's words) "a transnational phenomenon of black cultural and political affiliation",[58] a cosmopolitanism that resonates with the transnational and transatlantic white collaborations that organised *Four Saints*. Partly a product of the migration of large numbers of African Americans from the southern states, and spanning roughly the period 1918–37, the Harlem Renaissance was an extraordinarily productive period of literary, artistic, and intellectual labour, largely centring on the establishment and definition of African American identities and potentialities – what Alain Locke (editor of the definitive 1926 anthology *The New Negro: An Interpretation*) called "group expression and self-determination",[59] and what Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar has more recently defined as "black people exploring the challenges of being black in a virulently anti-black society".[60] Classical music occupied an ambivalent position in intellectual debate over these questions. David Levering Lewis, introducing his *Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, comments on the desire of intellectual leaders like W.E.B.

57 Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the "Racial" Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 104.

58 Claire Oberon Garcia, "Jessie Redmon Fauset Reconsidered", in Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar (ed.), *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited: Politics, Arts, and Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), pp. 93–108; p. 93.

59 Alain Locke, "Harlem", in *Survey Graphic* (Harlem Number) (March 1925).

60 Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, "Introduction" to *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited*, pp. 1–4; p. 1.

du Bois to "exclude the blues of Bessie Smith and the jazz of 'King' Oliver", and to favour the "*Lieder* of conservatory-trained Roland Hayes" as "appropriate forms to present to mainstream [i.e., white] America".[61] And Frank A. Salamone, writing on Duke Ellington, has recently asserted "the continuity between the Cotton Club and the Cathedral" in assessing the ambivalent perception in 1920s Harlem of jazz, with its "mixing of sacred and profane music".[62]

But (as Roland Hayes demonstrated) classical music practitioners existed, and could make a (sometimes precarious) living, in the Harlem Renaissance. Eileen Southern's extensive 1971 history, *The Music of Black Americans*, notes that "Because of the barriers of discrimination, performers generally found it very difficult to launch a career",[63] suggesting that the opportunity afforded to Harlem-based classical performers by a major mid-town event like *Four Saints* would have been well received by those people scouted out by Edward Perry, the "Negro talent scout" mentioned in Virgil Thomson's autobiography (and also, later in 1934, "the personal representative" of Edward Matthews).[64] Steven Watson nevertheless notes that "Thomson considered the renowned Marian Anderson but she was not interested"; he also auditioned Caterina Jarboro on 1 December 1933 "but quickly realized she was likely to be a temperamental diva".[65] Jarboro (1898–1986), from Wilmington, North Carolina, had studied in Paris and Milan, and in 1933 became the first African American to sing on stage in an opera in America when she performed in *Aida* with the Chicago Opera Company at the New York Hippodrome. Philadelphia-born Anderson (1897–1993), praised by Toscanini – "Yours is a voice one hears once in a hundred years" – and by Sibelius (who dedicated *Solitude* to her), gave her first recital at New York's Town Hall in 1924, and, in 1955, became the first black person to perform at New York's Metropolitan Opera House. She studied in London in 1925 and spent the next decade touring Europe, later being active in the 1960s civil

61 David Levering Lewis, "Introduction" to *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1994), p. xvi.

62 Frank A Salamone, "'It's All Sacred Music': Duke Ellington, from the Cotton Club to the Cathedral", in Ogbar (ed.), *The Harlem Renaissance Revisited*, pp. 31–41; pp. 39, 34.

63 Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971), p. 414.

64 Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, p. 238; Frances Moss Mann, "Roland Hayes Scores Again", *The New York Amsterdam News* (24 November 1934): 4.

65 Watson, *Prepare for Saints*, p. 248.

rights movements and working as a UN ambassador. Van Vechten photographed her in 1940.

If little is known of many of the performers of the early stagings of *Four Saints*, the contexts in which they worked can be glimpsed in some of the biographical and historical details – the places of birth, education, and records of stage appearances – outlining key figures in the music scenes of Harlem and New York, including composers, performers, concert-hall managers, and agents. The huge African American migration into Harlem from all over the USA (61 per cent of New York City's black population in 1910 had arrived there from elsewhere, principally from the Southern states) introduced an immense variety of musical skills, styles, accents of speech, and diverse cultural traditions, a climate ripe for complex cultural mixing and creativity.[66] Eileen Southern emphasises the resulting syncretic productivity of African American musical practices in the period after the First World War: "The composers used poems by black poets in their art songs; they exploited the rhythms of Negro dances and the harmonies and melodies of the blues as well as spirituals, and of the newer music called jazz in their composed concert music."[67]

Classical music was thus overtly hybridised by Harlem performers and composers, adjusted to accommodate and create specific forms, sounds, and rhythms which could also be found in jazz, blues, and rag, the dominant popular musical forms of the period. Locke's *The New Negro* includes essays on jazz and spirituals but not on classical music. Levering Lewis, in *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, cites as a crucial moment in the development of classical music in Harlem a concert at Harlem Town Hall by tenor Roland Hayes in December 1923, at which he sang both spirituals and lieder.[68] Hayes (1887–1977), born to ex-slaves in Curryville, Georgia, had performed before the King in England in 1920, an extraordinary elevation described by Marva Carter as a movement "From the plantation to the palace".[69] William Grant Still (1895–1978), the major African American composer of the period (known as "Dean of Afro-American composers"),

66 See "'Come Out From Among Them': Negro Migration and Settlement 1890–1914", in Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto – Negro New York 1890–1930* (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), pp. 17–34.

67 Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, p. 413.

68 David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 163.

69 Marva Carter, "Roland Hayes: Expressor of the Soul in Song 1887–1977", *The Black Perspective inMusic*, Vol. 5 (Autumn 1977): 188.

"maintained close personal and professional relationships with several prominent novelists, poets, and playwrights" in Harlem,[70] and worked on operas in collaboration with poets like Countee Cullen and (more successfully) Langston Hughes. In 1932, two years before *Four Saints*, Still recorded for WJZ radio. "Unfortunately," he wrote in 1933, "the folks at NBC are not broadminded. They don't want a Negro conductor. So I am now serving merely as an arranger."[71]

Another work by a major composer, William Levi Dawson's (1899–1990) syncretically titled *Negro Folk Symphony*, was first performed in 1934 (the year of *Four Saints*) by the Philadelphia Orchestra. Dawson had studied at Tuskegee and in Kansas and Chicago, and from 1931 to 1956 ran the Tuskegee Music faculty. Harry T. Burleigh (1866–1949), born in Erie, Pennsylvania, was the first black chorister at St George's Protestant Episcopal Church in New York. His repertoire, again emphasising the cross-cultural dynamism of the period, popularised a variety of forms ranging from folk songs and spirituals to minstrel and plantation melodies. Burleigh had worked as Anton Dvorak's copyist in 1893 at the National Conservatory of Music, and performed as baritone soloist in the 1904 Washington performance of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast*. Other classical musicians in Harlem included Marion Cumbo (1899–1900), a native of New York City and cellist in the Negro String Quartet, who recorded with blues singers Clara Smith (sister of Bessie) and Eva Taylor; he later performed with Marian Anderson, and played with the Eva Jessye Choir. Anne Wiggins Brown (1912–2009) auditioned before Gershwin in 1935, singing the Negro spiritual 'City Called Heaven', and performed as Bess, singing with Edward Matthews in *Porgy and Bess* at the Alvin Theatre in New York, 1935. In 1965 she directed a Norwegian production of the musical. Ruby Elzy (1908–43), born in Pontotoc, Mississippi, had graduated from New York's Juillard School in 1934 and debuted on Broadway in 1930, subsequently starring with Paul Robeson in Dudley Murphy's film version of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* (1933). She also performed (as Serena) in *Porgy and Bess* in 1935 and 1942, and on tour. Van Vechten photographed her in 1935. Robert Nathaniel Dett

70 Gayle Murchison, "'Dean of Afro-American Composers' or 'Harlem Renaissance Man': The New Negro and the Musical Poetics of William Grant Still", in Catherine Parsons Smith (ed.), *William Grant Still: A Study in Contradictions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 43.

71 William Grant Still, "Personal Notes", in Parsons Smith, *William Grant Still*, pp. 220–1.

(1882–1943), born in Drummondsville, Ontario, became, in 1908, the first person of African descent to receive a Bachelor in Music from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. A student of his Hampton Institute Choir, Dorothy Maynor (1910–96), born in Norfolk, Virginia, founded the Harlem School of the Arts in the 1960s and was in 1975 the first African American named to the Metropolitan Opera board of directors.

While Grant Still and Levi Dawson were producing work in the contexts of American modernist interventions into classical music traditions, most of the people noted above would have worked in more conventional, traditionally oriented contexts, and many (like Marion Cumbo) would have been familiar with working across high and low cultural boundaries, performing with jazz and blues as well as classical musicians. Salamone's geographical and cultural continuity between the Cotton Club and the Cathedral was also generic – between popular and classical forms – and professional, with performers operating across and between musical modes and distinctions.

The exhibition

4 Saints in 3 Acts: A Snapshot of the American Avant-Garde presents photographs (many never previously exhibited) and related ephemera in order to examine some of the ways portrait and documentary photography played their crucial roles in the representation and perception of the early performances of *Four Saints*, and to offer insights into the principal visual record of this extraordinary event – its provision of a unique arena in which those rich potentialities could find expression. In many cases these photographs are the only visual record of the musical and performance contributions of the African American singers and performers to the success of *Four Saints*, and add to our understanding of what Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith describe as "the variety of effects photography had on racialised thinking" in the US.[72] They are also images that, entering the national imaginary through their circulation in widely read promotional material of the time, become, in Nicole R. Fleetwood's words, "part of the production and circulation of the racial narrative" of America, a country in which "visualizing

72 Maurice O. Wallace and Shawn Michelle Smith, 'Introduction', to *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 9.

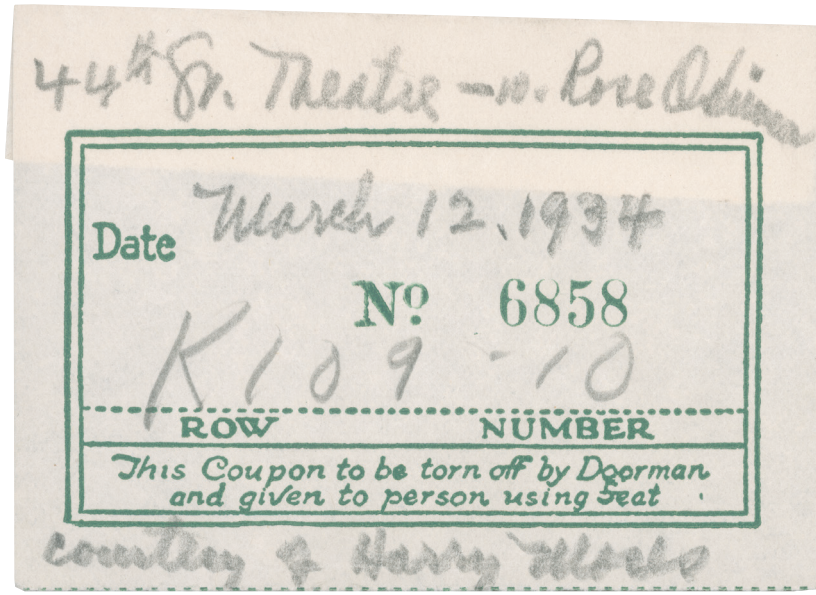

Figure 28 Original 44th St Theatre ticket for 12 March 1934 performance of *Four Saints in Three Acts*

is integral to narrating the nation".[73] Fleetwood's language recalls Homi Bhabha's important text *Nation and Narration* (1990) and its emphasis on the importance of understanding nation-formation as "a process of hybridity";[74] it also harks back to Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, a text connected in important ways to *Four Saints*. Creative hybridity, and its syncretic effects, characterise the processes through which *Four Saints* was produced.

The essays collected here address different aspects of the complex syncretic totality that was *Four Saints*. Patricia Allmer considers photography's relations to and roles within the opera and its strange temporailty; Lisa Barg explores the musical forms of the opera; Christopher Breward analyses its place in fashion history; Lucy Weir discusses Ashton's contributions to English choreographical traditions; John Sears examines Stein's writing; and Steven Watson recounts meeting key figures involved in the original production.

73 Nicole R. Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), p. 3.

74 Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction" to *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 4.

Figure 29 White Studio, scene from the theatrical production *Four Saints in Three Acts* at the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut, 1934

The final chapter presents a Gallery of rarely seen and, in some cases, previously unreproduced portraits by Lee Miller and Carl Van Vechten of some of the African American cast and their choir master, together with the cast lists printed in the programmes accompanying the various 1934 performances. Daniel Albright argues that *Four Saints* was "an opera that tries to be a picture – an opera in which the text defies discursivity and the music defies temporal progression", a work in which "the temporal media" might be violently reconfigured ("wrenched so strongly", writes Albright) to "provide the delights formerly reserved for the spatial media".[75] The essays in this collection, and the photographs and illustrative material presented in *4 Saints in 3 Acts: A Snapshot of the American Avant-Garde*, explore some of the ways photography recorded and affected this process of "wrenching" during a unique moment in American cultural history.

75 Daniel Albright, "An Opera with No Acts: *Four Saints in Three Acts*", *The Southern Review*, Vol. 33 No. 3 (Summer 1997): 574–605; 574.