

La Malibran Noire

Martínez, Doña María de Morena (1835ca.-)

To the unsuspecting reading public it might well be assumed that the position of the black female singer in European circles was more a twentieth century innovation than of earlier origin. Even the black writer, J. A. Rogers in his *Sex and Race* (3 vols., 1944) gave no space to early black female vocalists of the previous century, including the American-born Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield, *The Black Swan*. Nonetheless, sufficient evidence exists concerning one personality rarely acknowledged in American sources: Maria Martínez, born Havana, Cuba.

In far off Detroit, Michigan, its newspaper published the following document in its September 10, 1850 issue [see in *Elizabeth T. Greenfield, The Black Swan* (author 1969), p. 23]:

Jenny Lind's Rival.

There is a black Prima Donna arrived in London who promises to be a formidable rival of Jenny Lind's. She was born of free negro parents at Havana. Her god-father was Don Aguilar Ycondi, the military intendent of the place and her god-mother was Madam the Intendent's wife, Donna Josepha de Unsaige.

Surprised at her intelligence and precocity, they begged her parents for adoption, took her to Spain and had her educated at Malaga. Here she received her first lesson in music. Soon her benefactors died and her father and mother soon after at Havana.

The accomplished negress was sought in honorable marriage by a Spanish officer, who soon became involved in political difficulties, and was obliged to betake himself to sudden exile leaving his wife indefinitely a widow and without support. The Queen Christiana heard of her and sending for her procured her a place in the Royal Musical Conservatory of Madrid. Her husband was Capt. Martínez in Ferdinand's army.

Her voice is a mezzo-soprano (sic) of great scope, and of a purity and precision remarkable. She is said to be Jenny Lind's only rival. Where's Barnum.

Having been alerted by the American press that a "black" woman was performing in a musical capacity in England by mid-nineteenth century, it was indeed surprising that no mention of this so-called

rival to Jenny Lind was found in standard English reference sources. Therefore some investigative snooping was in order.

It appears that Maria Martínez first command world-wide attention at Paris, where, in 1850, the following information (paraphrased) read:¹

In spite of our travels at home and abroad, music found here at home has again set Paris buzzing. It is true that music has sometimes been performed in a strange and unusual ways (“Il est vrai qu’elle le fait quelquefois de la façon la plus bizarre”). For example, last week, the voice of a black songstress captured the attention and imagination of the few remaining critics. Dona Maria Martínez, born in Havana, reared in Seville and in the employ of the Queen of Spain, has been nicknamed the Black Malibran. Surely, those who ascribe such a name desire to pay homage at the shrine of the celestial Malibran. If, on the other hand, Malibran could be resurrected, she herself would hardly be flattered by this present incarnation when she discovers that this Dona is just another actress of colour using herself to win sympathy for the Black cause. Lovers of blacks have made this rank comparison, for obviously a black would scarcely know at least at present, the worth of a white.

While the Detroit reference referred to a comparison between Martínez and Jenny Lind, the then reigning diva, without haughtiness, the French critic gave the correct sobriquet: the Black Malibran.

Not content with this general introduction, the French notices further read:²

1 *Illustration* (Paris), 386/3, item dated June 15, 1850. “Malgré tous ces voyages en province et à l’étranger, la musique trouve encore moyen de donner signe de vie à Paris. Il est vrai qu’elle le fait quelquefois de la façon la plus bizarre. Le semaine dernière par exemple, c’est par le voix d’une chanteuse négresse qu’il lui à pris fantaisie de réclamer l’attention des rares auditeurs qui restent parmi nous. Dona Maria Martínez, née à la Havane, élève à Séville, et pensionnaire de la reine d’Espagne, à été surnommée, la Malibran noire. Assurément ceux qui lui ont donné ce surnom n’ont pas su l’intention de flatter les manes de la sublime Malibran. Si celle-ci vivait encore, elle serait médiocrement satisfaite de l’assimilation. Jusqu’à ce qu’on ait découvert une autre diva de couleur pour plaider la cause des noirs, nous ne pouvons que plaindre les négrophiles; car évidemment, une noire ne saurait, quant à présent, valoir une blanche.”

2 *La Musica* (Paris), 1850 (copy at the Library of Congress, Washington D. C.). “C’est une étrangeté que l’apparition d’une cancatriceau teine d’ébène qui arrive en droite ligne du Nouveau-Monde. On à vanté la souplesse des negrès, leur lascivité, leur haine profonde pour tout ce qui n’a pas leur couleur; mais je n’ai jamais entendu dire qu’aucun ait encore eu la fantaisie de suivre la civilisation chantante et d’essayer son intelligence musicale devant le public européen. Les nègres ont leur musique à eux, bamboula, airs nationaux, qu’ils répètent jour et nuit à satiété, mais

A strange sight has arrived directly from the New World (sic) in the appearance of an ebony coloured warbler (“cancatriceau”). We are all familiar with the black woman’s twistings and turnings -- their gyrations which show the suppleness of their bodies, their suggestive poses, their deep hatred of all who are not of their own colour -- these things we know. But I have never heard it said that any of them had any amount of nerve and such nerve to appear in civilized society singing! Trying their musical artistry on European shores.

True enough blacks have their own music, their Bamboulas, their patriotic songs which they repeat night and day to the point of weariness and fatigue. These dances, at the same time, serve to heighten their joy after working hours. Then they sleep only to dream of their dances in the silver, cool moonlight.

It is therefore something quite new that a black woman musician, developed and trained by the techniques and disciplines of European theories of intelligent vocalization makes a creditable vocal rendition.

Maria Martínez’s rendition encircled the whole realm of human emotion, ardent love, then, again, joyfulness, gleeful play, and human feelings both humorous and sad. These were the feelings expressed by the sweet accents of her voice.

Such is Dona Martínez, a beautiful and young black woman -- a distinguished woman of dignity. She has engaging manners and charm. She was before us with the air of composure and her slight, haughtiness left our merely pretty ladies of the salon rather breathless.

The article also gave a short biographical sketch mentioning in general that her parents were of color who earned their living by gathering wood and cutting it into plank lumber which they sold to local merchants such as cabinet makers, carpenters and wood carvers. When Lieutenant Aguilar y Conde and wife were recalled to the continent, they took their young protege whom they had adopted about age two and had been orphaned.

The adoptive parents, too, were stricken but not before they had arranged a marriage with Senor Merens, a Malagasian from Madagascar and captain of the troops of St. Fernando. He, also, suffered political vicissitudes and was forced into exile leaving his young bride without means to survive sufficiently.

dont ils ne sortent pas, et qui les aident à franchir joyeusement leurs heures de travail, à animer la folie de leurs danses, à les endormir après les feu étents du soleil, dans les rêves des douces nuits. C’est donc chose nouvelle qu’une négresse musicienne, formée par les principes du chant, vocalisant avec intelligence et faisant rendre à sa voix les accents de l’amour, de la tristesse et de la joie. Telle est Dona Martínez, belle et jeune femme d’un noir irréprochable, dont les manières charmantes et la distinction étudiée ne le cèdent pas à nos plus aimables ladies des salons.”

Through the graciousness of the Queen of Spain, she was accepted into the elite musical society captivating them with her coolness, and composure as well as her beautiful “contralto” voice.

About 1850, Maria decided to try her wings at Paris and after receiving permission from the Queen, arrived first at Bordeaux and then on to Paris.

At Paris, she obviously captured the imagination of many concerned with the cause célèbre of blacks, which, although a rather unpopular one at that time, was nevertheless highly visible. One critic was rather pleased that she performed in a manner dear to the heart of polite French society -- with a finesse and delicate turn of manners. However, the music critics, on the whole, appear far removed from the anthropological and other evidences which had noted accomplishments of blacks in European society. Their remarks of Bamboulas and “patriotic songs” bespeak a limited knowledge of musical presentations by blacks outside the African continent.

The review by the music critic of *La Musica* was very complimentary. Under the banner “La Nègresse”, the remarks read:³

Strange things never cease to happen. Who has the last laugh? How can one explain this oddity named Maria Martínez? She gives so much of herself to her singing. She has a certain expression of experienced truth and sincerity in her singing! All of her is in motion when she lifts her voice. Her teeth, her head, her feet, her arms, her figure or what have you -- she has rhythm! This perpetual motion is the expression of a black woman.

It is necessary to hear her renditions of Andulucian folk songs, full of feeling and spirit, full of a strange and charming rhythm. It is the like of which I have

3 Ibid. “La Nègresse”. C’était fort drôle, et l’on à ri d’un rire sans égal. Comment dépeindre cette eccentricité qui à nom Maria Martínez et qui donne à ce qu’elle chante une expression saisissante de vérité? Tout travaille en elle lorsqu’elle anime sa voix: ses dents, sa tête, ses pieds, ses bras, sa taille, que sais-je? C’est le mouvement perpétuel à l’état de nègresse. Il faut lui entendre réciter des chansons andalouses, pleines d’entrain et d’esprit, d’un rythme bizarre et charmant. Jamais on n’a entendu pareille chose. Maria Martínez est un phénomène dans son genre! c’était un spectacle vraiment nouveau que la vue de cette femme charbonnée, montrait ses belles dents blanches à travers son masque noir; des perles et des bijoux ornaient ses cheveux, des bracelets enlacaient ses poignets, et des chaînes dorées tournées à son cou et descendant jusqu’à sa taille faisaient ressortir encore davantage les formes et la couleur de sa figure, de ses épaules et de ses bras. Maria Martínez part pour l’Angleterre, où elle va exciter sans nul doute une vive curiosité! De là, elle retournera à Madrid, à la cour de la reine, dont elle est le plus noir ornement.”

never heard. Maria Martínez is phenomenal in her field. It was truly something entrancing to see this dusky hued woman showing her beautiful even row of teeth in a broad pleasant smile (“montrant ses belles dents blanches à travers son masque noir”); her pearls and her ornate hair ornaments; her bracelets entangled with chains; her finger rings and her golden chains draped around her neck and falling to her waist made still a more beautiful picture. All this set off by her decollege which again was heightened by the color of her body.

Maria Martínez departs for England where she will without a doubt cause a stir and continue to be a lively curiosity! From there she will return to Madrid and the Queen’s court a part of which she must be the most beautiful of black jewels there.

With these reviews ringing in her ears, Martínez arrived in England where she was also noted by the English critics. The latter were particularly displeased at the announcement regarding her first appearance scheduled for September 9th “. . . the terms of the (her) announcement (i.e., the use of a distinguished woman’s name, Malibran), at such as merely benefit a monster.” It may well be imagined that the double offense (the second being the inclusion of “black songs”) was more than the staid English could stomach. Another pronouncement read similarly.⁴

On Thursday all such as have made their stand on the aristocratic nature of Her Majesty’s Theatre must have received a shock in seeing announced (between Madam Pasta’s concert and M. Thalberg’s concert) the black Malibran, who is to sing black songs in a divertisement on Tuesday next. Race and color apart (!!!) -- and this vein being opened by the manager, we are curious to see whether the Hippopotamous, the mysterious Lady, Mlle. Vandermeersch, the Arab snake charmers, and any particular novelty from the Surry and Cremorne (r.) Gardens (not forgetting Mr. Pell, the original Bones) are in turns to be introduced at a theatre the fashion, taste and interprise of whose management has been again and again paraded, -- from Low St. James” up to high St. Pauls.

The *London Times* (July 9, 1850) published a notice of her first appearance at Her Majesty’s Theatre. On that program *I Puritani* featured such well known artists as Mde. Frezzolini, Signor Gartiotti, Signor Coletti, Signor Lablanche and between acts selections from *La Esmeraldi* with Mdlle. Carlotta Grise and M.

⁴ *Athenaeum* (London, 1850), 715 dated July 6, 1850. This item was re-echoed in *The Message Bird* (London, 1850), August 1, 1850, 410. For other announcements see *Daily News* (July 5, *The Examiner*, July 6, *The Era*, July 7, *Morning Chronicle*, July 11 (debut in London), *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commerce and Morning Chronicle* August 1, 1850 (Hanover Square Rooms).

Charles. The ballet (M. Gosselin, music by Signor Pagni) *Les Delices du Serail*. In the middle La Senora Martintz, surnamed the Black Malibran, was to make her first appearance in England performing characteristic songs of Spain such as “Havannah,” Ms. Bella de Errana,” “El Contrabandists,” “El Tango Havanero,” and “O La Lamentacion de los Negros.”⁵

However, there were several postponements. The Tuesday performance closed because of death and the following Saturday, a poster announced Martinez hoarseness.

Curiosity about her excellence and “procrastination” only whetted the English expectations! When the event finally took place. *Les Delices*, especially written for Martinez opened showing the interior of a seraglio who was being amused by feats of dancing Odalisques. Then Martinez made her appearance “attired in a suit of rich amber-coloured satin and after strumming a few notes on the guitar began her songs.

The songs were described thusly:

“These are all very similar in character, and have all more or less about them of what we should call the Moorish syle. Her manner of singing is quaint and pointed, especially when she seems to give vent to a flow of spirits, but her voice does not appear commensurate to the size of the house, and hence her simple ditties are not so effective as they might be in a smaller compass. Much applause followed each song, and there was a call at the end of the performance, but still enough disapprobation was mingled with approval to render it pretty certain the Cuban style of vocalization will obtain no permanent footing in this country.”

In another review dated February 24, 1851 her appearance at Mlle. Rosalie Themar’s concert⁶ she was harshly denounced:

This very agreeable entertainment took place at Willis’s Rooms, on the evening of the 24th February 24 – too late to be noticed in the last number of our magazine. Madame Garcia, Mr. Wrighton, Signor Montelli, and Signora Martinez (La Malibran Noire) were the vocalists. Mademoiselle Thémars’ pianoforte playing was of course the chief attraction, and one of no common order. This pianists has now attained a purity of style, a delicacy and

⁵ These items published in 1851 as *Chansons caractéristiues Espagnoles et Américaines, chantées par la Señora Doña Maria Loreto Martinez surnommée la Malibran noire [arranged by C[esare] Pagni and El Tango Havanero o la lamentacion de los negros. Music by Havana and M. Martinez.*

⁶ The New Monthly Belle Assemblée (1851), p. 247.

choiceness of expression, and a command over the difficulties and profundities of music which justify us in ranking her among the very élite of her profession. She played several pieces with immense power and effect, and the most charming subtlety of feeling. Our particular favourites were a romance sans Paroles (“La Sylphides”) by Jacques Herz, and a Tarantella (“Les feux Follets”) by Mademoiselle Thémair herself. Madame Garcia sings with great keenness, brightness, and ornamental execution. La Malibran Noire is, in our opinion, as great a failure as a curiosity. She is as fine a negress as she is a poor singer, and the public will perhaps listen to her more for the sake of her well-moulded throat than for the sounds it emits; and her handsome figure will probably gain even that weak applause which would be altogether withheld from her performances. The music at this concert was, however, on the whole, of that chaste and recherché order which excites the thoughts of the connoisseurs rather than the feelings of the multitude and the audience.

Unable to successfully launch a career in England, Martínez undoubtedly returned to Madrid for a few years. Her discouragement in England and success at Paris spurred her to desire another trip to the latter. Continuing to use the sobriquet, the Black Malibran she appeared in Paris in 1852.⁷

(May 20, 1852)

A New Black Malibran

Mr. Walsh, the foreign correspondent of the Journal of Commerce, describes a recent party given to a bride in Paris, which he attended. The chief phenomenon on the occasion was a negro vocalist, who is called in the gay metropolis the black Malibran. Says Mr. Walsh: She is from Havana, and acquired there the reputation of a musical prodigy. She seems to be about twenty five (25) years old; her complexion the sambo, Florentine bronze; wooly hair. Her charms were displayed without stint; arms, neck, and shoulders bare; bust and arms beautifully turned, thick lips, scarlet gums, white teeth, short stature.

She played the guitar beautifully and gracefully, accompanying herself in the Spanish lays -- some comic -- which she executed with signal effect. If I had shut my eyes I might have fancied myself in Old Virginia, listening to a good banjo, and peculiar mellow tones of the African race. Her feet were raised on a cushion, and as she struck, I will not say unjustly thumbed, her fine guitar, with her frame drawn up, some of the French ladies remarked that they might have thought her a chimpanzee, brought from the garden of Plants and dressed for the occasion. Her grimaces excited as lively a sensation as her melodies. Her toilette was a white silk, with two deep flounces of superb, costly lace, cost perhaps, 5,000 francs, strikingly contrasted with the color of her skin. The corsage was cut as low as possible; no sleeve, literally; on her neck a rich string

⁷ *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, May 20, 1852, 2/2.

of pearls, fastened with a clasp of brilliants; ear-rings of gold and diamonds; a quantity of bright artificial flowers on her head; white satin slippers; etc.

Thus the remarks of this American writer did not laud her for her artistic singing but for the comicality of the scene.

However, a year later, English decorum was better observed when the singer, Elizabeth T. Greenfield, using the sobriquet the *Black Swan*, arrived from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and made her appearance in London under the patronage of the English nobility.⁸ The *Athenaeum* in speaking of Miss Greenfield, recalled Martínez: “We observe that another singing lady, who started here as a “Black Malibran” a few seasons since, has been coming out anew in Paris as a dancer.”⁹ In response, Elizabeth, in her biography published in England, spoke negatively to any possible association of personalities emphatically saying that she had “not visited these shores before.”

While portions of the Martínez episode are not pleasant to recall, the bibliographical knowledge of her musical points cannot be ignored. She is the first singer of color to sing folk songs in polite society using all of the necessary local color.

In helping to break the chains of thought which usually referred to the primitiveness of “black music” utterances, she deserves even more credit. Even further, she introduced the exotic songs of Spain, hitherto not heard in public performances either in Paris or England.

Martínez’s brief appearance in Vienna in January of 1853 (or was it the third black songstress, Ovea, who in 1852 was reported to have been in Paris “with the most magnificent soprano in the world”) will be pleasant to rediscover and compare with the other notices, no matter how few, about black women singers.¹⁰

8 See further in this issue.

9 *Athenaeum*, 746, item dated June 18, 1853.

10 Carpentier *La Música* in Cuba gives her name as Maria Gamboa. Other sources: Peress y Gonzales, Felipe: “La ‘Malibran’ Negra – La ‘Patti Negra’” in *La Ilustracion Espanola y Americana* (Madrid), 49, No. 12 (March 30, 1905, pp. 182f. and No. 13 (April 8, 1905, pp. 206f. See also, *Le Menestrel*, 17 avril 1859, p. 158; *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris*, 9 juin 1850 (194), 16 juin, 4 janvier 1852 (6), 18 avril 1852 (122), 1 mai 1853 (161), 29 mai 1853 (194), 25 decembre 1895 (429) and 5 fevrier 1960 (46).

The German's also noted a program by the well known Karl Werner, who, later, assisted the black Cuban violinist, José White in his New York programs:¹¹

New York City.

Concert with Eliza Carlati and cellist, C. Werner on February 15, 1870.

Ein bedeutender Violoncellist is Hr. Werner, welchen ebensogut in der classichen Musik als in der Bewaltegung moderner Kunststucke zu Hause ist und nach der letztern Seite hin Beweise in seinen Negerliedern gab.

It appears that “black” or “Negro” songs had begun to make an impression in European sources through other than the popular minstrel medium.

11 *Musikalischen Wochenblatt*, February 18, 1870.