

Fellows



Kira Thurman

IFK_Research Fellow

Duration of fellowship

01. March 2018 bis 30. June 2018

Kira Thurman

PROJECT TITLE

Singing like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

How do musicians and their audiences translate different musical, national, and racial ideas and values through the medium of performance? In her book *Singing like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms*, Kira Thurman explores this question by tracing the history of black classical musicians in Central Europe from the 1870s to the 1960s. Germans and Austrians located their national identity in music, Thurman argues, championing musicians such as Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms as national heroes. But black musicians performing the works of “great German masters” complicated audiences’ understandings of national identity—and who had the right to express it.

By examining the transatlantic history of black musical migration to Central Europe, Thurman’s book asks how black musicians translated classical music to their audiences in cities such as Vienna, Salzburg, Berlin, and Munich, and how audiences responded to their performances. How are racial identities reinforced or challenged through musical performance and reception? When did people see the categories of blackness and Germanness as completely separate, and when did they see these categories as malleable? The book takes an interdisciplinary approach to a question Central Europeans debate today—Is it possible to be black and German?—by asking: What has it meant to be black and to perform Germanness?

CV

Kira Thurman is Assistant Professor of History and Germanic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan. A classically trained pianist who grew up in Vienna, she earned her Ph.D. in history from the University of Rochester, with a minor in musicology through the Eastman School of Music. Her research, the results of which have appeared in the *German Studies Review*, *Journal of World History*, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, and *Opera Quarterly*, focuses on two topics: the relationship between music and national identity in European history, and Europe’s historical and contemporary relationship with the black diaspora. Her article “Black Venus, White Bayreuth: Race, Sexuality, and the De-Politicization of Wagner in Postwar West Germany” won the German Studies Association’s prize for best paper by a graduate student in 2011 and the DAAD prize for best article on German history in 2014. As recipient of the Berlin Prize from the American Academy in Berlin, she is spending the 2017-2018 academic year writing her book, *Singing like Germans: Black Musicians in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms*.

Publications

Selected publications: “Searching for the Soul of ‘Black Music’ in Interwar Germany and Austria”, in: Tiffany Florvil and Vanessa Plumly (eds.), *New Perspectives on Black German Studies*, New York (forthcoming); “Singing the Civilizing Mission in the Land of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms: The Fisk Jubilee Singers in Nineteenth-Century Germany”, in: *Journal of World History*, September 2016; “The German Lied and the Songs of Black Volk”, in: *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, August 2014; “Black Venus, White Bayreuth: Race, Sexuality, and the De-Politicization of Wagner in Postwar West Germany”, in: *German Studies Review*, October 2012.