An American Abroad: The Life and Career of Robert Owens

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The life and career of African-American composer Robert Owens are a result of perseverance, creativity, and accidental opportunity. From his roots in Texas to his travels in France and his eventual settlement in Germany, Owens proves that if one believes in himself and his abilities, nearly any obstacle can be overcome.

Robert Lee Owens III was born September 19, 1925, in Denison, TX, to Alpharetta Helm-Owens and Robert Lee Owens II. Shortly after his birth, his family moved to Berkeley, CA, where Owens would spend his formative years. His mother was an excellent pianist and earned extra money playing at piano bars around the Bay Area in the evenings. As a result, the young Owens grew up around a piano and seemed to have a natural affinity for the instrument. He spent his early childhood picking out melodies he heard neighbors playing on the piano and had his first piano lesson at the age of four.

When he was eight years old, his mother contracted tuberculosis and was committed to a sanatorium in the California countryside. The highly infectious nature of the disease prevented him from visiting his mother, but he would sit in the car as his father went inside to see her. Four years later, she returned home, but he did not see her often because of the risk of contagion.

Nonetheless, her impact on her son's life was significant, although she died when he was fourteen. Her last words to him, "I know you will be a great musician," were inspiration for the rest of his life. When Owens was in junior high school, he composed his first piano concerto, which was premiered by the Berkeley Young People's Symphony. He was fifteen years old.

Owens began work as a typist in the front office of the San Francisco Civil Service Commission in 1940. At the same time, he attended night school to train as a flying cadet, ultimately planning to join the army. Thanks to his cadet training, he was placed at the training camp for the Tuskegee Airmen in Mississippi. Following a medical release from the cadet program, he was sent to a camp in Stuttgart, AR, for the remainder of the war. Unlike many others, he could type and was placed in the front office doing paperwork for the commanding officers. He soon discovered the lieutenant in charge was a Southerner near his age, raised in the ways of racism. Until this time, he had avoided much of the racism present in early twentieth-century America. Undaunted by the situation, Owens was successful in befriending the officer and remained his assistant when the officer was promoted commander of the camp.

His time in Arkansas provided a second unexpected interaction, this time with German prisoners of war. As the black soldiers' barracks were located near the outskirts of camp, Owens regularly passed the area where POWs were held. Many of them were his age, and they were very curious about him, having never seen a person of color before. Despite the language barrier, Owens befriended the German prisoners. In exchange for his bringing them books and other small items, the prisoners taught him how to speak German.

Following his Army experience, Owens took advantage of the GI Bill to travel to Europe in 1946. The United States government would not pay for him to study in Germany because of the heavy war damage, but it would pay for study in Paris. He planned to study at the Conservatoire. He called this decision the "beginning of his life."

He arrived in Paris with no place to live, as he had not yet been accepted to the Conservatoire. He soon found a room to rent at Cité Université and experienced the worst of
post-war France – little food, no heat – all in the dead of winter. Though life in Paris was difficult, Owens had arrived in France at a time of great artistic creativity, and he explored all that the early Existentialists – including Piaf, Cocteau, and Signoret – had to offer. When he was not accepted at the Conservatoire, an examiner who also taught at Paris' École Normale de Musique agreed to take him as a student there.

That winter, Owens began his study with Jules Gentil and the renowned pianist Alfred Cortot. His course of study was focused on piano performance in addition to standard harmony and counterpoint classes. He made his debut as a concert pianist in Copenhagen in 1952 and dedicated the next four years to additional study, this time in Vienna under Professor Grete Hinterhofer.

Owens returned to the United States in 1957 with a contract to teach at Albany State College in Albany, GA. It was here that, for the first time in his life, Owens experienced segregation and racism firsthand. The racially divided culture made itself known even before his arrival in Georgia with the news that the school had been burned.

Not easily deterred, he was determined to fulfill his obligation to the school, but soon discovered that teaching in Albany was not at all what he had expected. Because of the poor education system for black students, Owens delayed teaching music and began teaching his students proper English instead. His interest in his students' backgrounds challenged the community's standards for college faculty. As an African-American who had previously lived outside the constraints of segregation, he was in many ways ignorant of the restrictions placed on the black community in 1950s Georgia. He soon learned that he could bend the unspoken rules of society if he operated under the guise of an outsider from Europe. (Owens was fortunate that most of the college community believed he was French.) As a result, he struggled with isolation his first year in Georgia. Even as a newly arrived “European,” he could not completely erase the racial lines that bisected the community in which he lived.

In the summer of 1958, Owens presented a homecoming concert for friends and family in Berkeley. An old family acquaintance suggested that the poet Langston Hughes might be interested in having Owens set some of his poetry to music. She provided Robert with a letter of introduction and suggested he make an appointment with Hughes the next time he was in New York.

On his way back to Georgia, he stopped in New York to visit some friends and called for an appointment with Hughes. He took the letter of introduction to Hughes' home in Harlem, and the poet himself gave him a copy of Fields of Wonder, a book of lyrical poems, instructing him to "see what you can do with it."

Owens returned to Georgia that fall and began composing music for Hughes' poems. The first cycle, Silver Rain for tenor, was premiered at the college's Lyceum concert in 1958. Owens was working on the second cycle, Tears, at the same time.

His tenure in Georgia ended as racial tensions were reaching a boiling point. Several students were arrested for their participation in street marches, as were several instructors from the college. It was then that Owens read the small print at the bottom of his teaching contract, and realized that by signing it, he had unknowingly agreed to abide by the laws of segregation in Georgia.

When he left Georgia in the spring of 1959, he returned to New York and informed Hughes about the two completed song cycles. When Owens, who was invited back to the poet's home, played both cycles, Hughes commented, "My God, they just sound so much more beautiful with music."

Years later, Hughes sent Owens a letter saying, "[you] should sing 'our songs' because [in the United States] they aren't interested in publishing anything unless it is a musical or something. So you don't have to worry – just have people perform them."

Hughes and Owens would have little other contact in the years following 1959, except for a few letters and one brief visit in 1965. Owens would eventually write 46 songs to poetry by Langston Hughes.

Owens had told his father at the age of eight that when he grew up, he wanted to live in Germany as he had developed a fascination with the country that produced composers such as Schumann and Schubert. In 1959, he finally realized that by signing it, he had unknowingly signed away his freedom to be a great musician.

He was in demand both as an actor and as a composer and performed as a solo pianist and accompanist as time permitted. A large number of American singers were living and touring in Germany at the time, and several of his song cycles were composed as commissions for these singers. He found himself collaborating frequently with American singers including Felicia Weather, Rhea Jackson, and Thomas Carey.

Owens' life in Munich since that time has involved several theatrical appearances around Germany and Austria, with leading roles in Shakespeare's Othello, Ionescu's The Lesson, and Uhry's Driving Miss Daisy. His first opera, Kultur! Kultur! was produced at the Ulm Opera House in 1970 to great critical acclaim.

In recent years, Owens has collaborated with musicians both at home and abroad in concert, coaching, and commission capacities. Several of his songs have been recorded on the Cinnabar and Albany labels by internationally acclaimed baritone Donnie Ray Albert and tenor Darryl Taylor. Owens has expanded his compositions to include works for flute, violin, and cello, and in 2006, he was invited to compose a work for Mozart's 250th birthday celebration by the Munich Composers organization. The result was the Idomeneo Quartet for oboe and strings based on a theme from the opera of the same name.

Owens' accomplishments as a composer have gained considerable recognition in the last five years, including the "Martin Luther King, Jr., Cesar Chavez, Rosa Parks Visiting Professorship" at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (2004) and The International Lifetime Achievement Award from the National Association of Negro Musicians (2008). Owens received the National Opera Association's "Lift Every Voice" Legacy Award at Washington, D.C. on January 10, 2009. Kappa Chapter of Sigma Alpha Iota at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln initiated him as a Friend of the Arts in 2007.