

Colombian musical production is a vexed question: After all, hybridity is part and parcel of Latin musical performance. Much like the people of Latin America themselves, Latin musical genres are hybrids of hybrids, and must be considered on those terms.⁷

One note of particular related interest is the manner in which U.S. Colombians, traditionally posited as “inauthentic” vis-à-vis Colombia, are instead featured in the soundtrack as part of Disney’s dogged efforts to offer audiences “authentic” material about the country. This is significant, given the long-standing tendency in Latinx popular culture to posit Latin American subjects and not diasporic Latinxs as the source of authentic Latinidad. However, diasporic Colombians are still effectively absent from the writing team, the research process, and all other aspects of *Encanto*’s production. Accounting for these contentious questions and many more, the soundtrack for *Encanto* offers a well-studied, highly produced musical representation of Colombia, but one that is strategically sanitized, decontextualized, and ultimately more reflective of the musical traditions and tastes of the Global North than those of Colombia.

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PUBLIQuartet, *What Is American. Bright Shiny Things*, BSTC-0171, 2022, CD.

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The string quartet PUBLIQuartet’s latest release, *What Is American*, is a concept album that challenges the listener intellectually, emotionally, and musically while still managing to entertain. The ensemble’s approach is to take two nineteenth-century works—Antonín Dvořák’s twelfth string quartet (nicknamed “American”) and the “fifth verse” appended to Francis Scott Key’s “The Star Spangled Banner” in 1861 by poet Oliver Wendell Holmes (father of the famous Supreme Court justice)—and recontextualize them by surrounding quotations from them with spoken words and music by or inspired by twentieth- and twenty-first-century Black American composers.¹

The album opens eerily with a dramatic reading by members of the quartet of Holmes’s “fifth verse,” which was written during the American Civil War to condemn the Confederacy and champion “the millions unchain’d.” The reading is backed by nonvibrato string quartet chords treated with electroacoustic effects, and this combination of spoken text with enhanced string quartet is used for three additional brief “fifth verse” interludes dispersed across the album. These interludes provide a connecting thread for the album’s concept. Dvořák’s “American” quartet, composed in Iowa in 1893 and his best-known chamber work, is the other centerpiece of the album. The extent to which Dvořák’s work actually connects with “American” music has long been a subject of debate among scholars: He publicly praised Black and Indigenous American music and the quartet contains a

⁷María Elena Cepeda, “Music,” in *Keywords in Latina/o Studies*, eds. Deborah R. Vargas, Nancy Raquel Mirabal, and Lawrence LaFountain-Stokes (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 144–47.

¹The concept has similarities to the Cavani Quartet’s collaborations with poet Mwatabu Okantah over the last several years, in which the quartet juxtaposes Bartok’s fourth quartet and Dvorak’s “American” quartet with Langston Hughes’s poetry. See this 2017 performance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzQQaeg1EbY>.

good deal of folksy pentatonicism, but, inspired by Czech folk music, he had employed similar approaches in his compositions long before coming to the U.S. and hearing spirituals. PUBLIQuartet's concept for the album seemingly depends on the premise (stated in the liner notes) that the "American" quartet was at least in part inspired by the music of Black Americans. But whether or not Dvořák's quartet actually drew specifically on African American music, this album makes fascinating juxtapositions and helps us consider the place of pentatonicism in turn-of-the-century concert music more generally, leaving us to examine whether it was convincingly and effectively incorporated in a given work or constituted exploitative appropriation.

The actual full Dvořák quartet does not appear on the album. Instead, PUBLIQuartet provides a series of four "improvisations," each corresponding with a movement in the Dvořák original. These improvisations alternate between literal quotations of the original and abstract, modernist textures, as well as moments that seem to suggest Black American vernacular musics more directly. While the four instruments in Dvořák's original are exclusively equal tempered, PUBLIQuartet in its improvisations does lots of bluesy sliding, suggesting the world of African American music that may or may not have inspired Dvořák. Similarly, Dvořák's original consists of straight eighths and triplets, while PUBLIQuartet includes swing rhythms in some of the music that responds to the Dvořák piece, such as in their improvisations on Ida Cox's "Wild Women Don't Have the Blues." At times in the improvisations the quartet seems to fall into clichés of twentieth-century modernism, with overuse of *jeté*, extended techniques, and angsty dissonances. But the optimism and exuberance of the original Dvořák is so convincing that, despite the more abstract framing gestures around it and the argument in the liner notes, when PUBLIQuartet quotes Dvořák it is difficult to hear it as a condemnation of the composer. Their improvisations sound more like a recontextualization.

Comparing the improvisations with Dvořák's original and considering the relationship with the "fifth verse" interludes is an intellectually stimulating exercise that encourages one to re-listen to both PUBLIQuartet's album and Dvořák's original quartet. The "fifth verse" fragments also bring up important questions about the legacy of slavery and the American Civil War that make one want to listen to the music closely to hear the ways in which these concepts might be manifested musically. But the album also works on an emotional and expressive level. The performances throughout are virtuosic and very musical—the quartet seems equally at ease with avant-garde stylings, Dvořák's sunny pentatonicism, and the tight grooves of Vijay Iyer's *Dig the Say* and of the last four tracks channeling African American female artists. Iyer's James Brown-inspired piece, Rhiannon Giddens's "At the Purchaser's Option," and these four closing arrangements of pop songs are highlights of the album. Iyer's four-movement work evokes elements of Brown's grooves while also taking his original in contrasting new directions. The final four tracks on the album—each one an arrangement of an iconic Black woman's song—form a four-movement sequence that can also be heard as an answer to Dvořák's four-movement quartet. The first, second, and last are upbeat and fun, making a case for the string quartet as an ensemble that can play percussive, groovy music even while maintaining the expressivity, rawness, and potential for slides of unfretted bowed string instruments. The renditions of Tina Turner's "Black Coffee" and of Betty Davis's "They Say I'm Different" combine hand clapping, chanting, a grooving accompaniment, and a bluesy, soulfully sliding violin. The third of these four "improvisations"—based on Alice Coltrane's "Er Ra"—effectively provides a quiet, contemplative contrast to the previous two tracks before a return to a more ebullient texture with Ida Cox's "Wild Women Don't Get the Blues." Notably, PUBLIQuartet chose to close the album with this relatively uplifting set of songs rather than by bookending it with a return to the Dvořák or to the fifth verse. Doing the latter would have tightened the concept album structure and made the album as a whole more cohesive, but would have made the release as a whole a more somber affair. The quartet perhaps wanted to end on a more upbeat note.

One might reasonably wonder why there is no Black American music from Dvořák's lifetime on the album, since this could have more directly interacted with the twelfth quartet. Given Dvořák's enthusiasm for African American spirituals, it could have been interesting to include arrangements of one or more of these, or music inspired by them, or music by Harry Burleigh, who was the African American composer who shared spirituals with Dvořák and nurtured the European composer's interest in them.

Also, Dvořák notably praised Indigenous American music as well, and the album's liner notes repeatedly bring this up, but Giddens's "At the Purchaser's Option" is the only representation of Indigenous Americans on this album. Inclusion of more would have fit well with the album's concept, especially because Dvořák was particularly inspired by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's epic poem *The Song of Hiawatha*, which he planned to make into an opera.

It is possible to listen to the album without knowing any of the original music on which it is based or reading the program notes, but listening without that background would be an incomplete encounter, like hearing only one conversationalist in a dialogue without hearing the other. PUBLIQuartet has created a multilayered experience that poses the question: Can Dvořák's melodies be fully enjoyed with the knowledge that he composed from a position of privilege while Black and Indigenous Americans of his time suffered horrific injustices? Ultimately only the individual listener can answer that. But PUBLIQuartet starts a conversation that raises such questions, helping us to hear the Dvořák quartet in a new way and realize how the twenty-first-century string quartet as an ensemble can successfully go far beyond the idioms of the Western classical tradition.

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