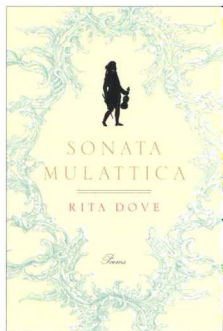


## Sonata Mulattica

By Rita Dove  
*W. W. Norton & Company; 231 pp.*  
*\$24.95*

I usually find poetry intimidating and narrative poetry puzzling. How could this be the best way to tell a story? Wouldn't a novel work better — or a graphic novel, or a movie, or a mini-series? No. Rita Dove's brilliance, her authority, her humor and compassion and sheer technical mastery make *Sonata Mulattica* the definitive biography of George Augustus Bridgetower.

Bridgetower was a mixed-race violin prodigy born in 1780, taken under Haydn's wing at the Esterházy court, then trotted all over Europe to give concerts.



The crux of Dove's story comes when, in 1803, Bridgetower meets Beethoven. The great composer writes a violin sonata for him, No. 9 in A major. Bridgetower performs it magnificently and Beethoven is elated. The pair celebrate together and — fatal mistake — Bridgetower flirts with a young woman Beethoven has been ogling. Such a small thing, but the consequences were tragic. Beethoven repudiated him and rededicated the sonata to Rodolphe Kreutzer (who considered it unplayable). Bridgetower's moment of glory came to a swift end. Then followed rueful years of further wandering and decline.

The narrative is structured in "Five Movements and a Short Play." Each titled "movement" consists of a group of poems clustered around a theme. For instance, "Bread & Butter, Turbans & Chinoiserie" covers Bridgetower's spell at the English court, while the "Short Play"

enacts the misplaced flirtation. Telling any story requires selection. Telling it in poetry, with brief, intense bursts of emotion and imagery, means that every scene or poem must distill the essence of the narrative into a potency that expands in the reader's imagination — or, as Dove herself puts it, "This is a tale of light and shadow/ what we hear and the silence that follows."

Dove's poems function like Impressionist touches of paint, independently lovely and together forming a picture. She uses a range of forms, mostly free verse, some more structured, some spare. Her themes are the big ones — life, love, music, race, identity, success, genius, luck. She scatters the point of view among her protagonists: Beethoven says, "I am by nature a conflagration." The Prince Regent says, "There can never be enough pleasure." Bridgetower himself says, "If I could step out/ into the street and become/ one of them,/ one of anything,/ I would sing — / no, weep right here — to simply/ be and be and be...."

CAROL MCD. WALLACE

## Living Opera

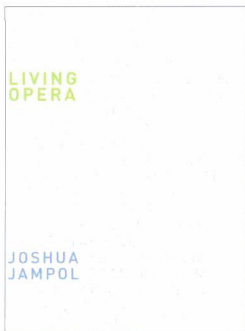
By Joshua Jampol  
*Oxford University Press; 368 pp.*  
*\$27.95*

Don't look to *Living Opera* for a grand thesis about contemporary opera performance. The book consists of nothing more than a series of Q&As with some of today's top singers, conductors and directors (and Natalie Dessay's throat doctor). Each comes with an imposing heading (e.g., "James Conlon, or surrendering your soul"), but what follows, after a brief introduction, is simply an interview transcript.

Happily, though, Jampol is quite a good interviewer. He touches only gingerly on his subjects' private lives, and he isn't out to uncover backstage scandal. But he knows about opera and the components of its performance. His evident knowledge of the subject puts his subjects at ease; some maintain their guard (notably James Conlon, Kent Nagano and José van Dam), and Plácido Domingo is perhaps too much of an old hand at this kind of thing to offer any revelations, but the author draws frank, insightful chat from most of them.

An avuncular Pierre Boulez, his enfant terrible days long behind him, shows a

disarming tendency toward self-deprecation. Natalie Dessay talks with stunning candor about her fears when she had her vocal-cord operations. Patrice Chéreau explains why he finds it easier to stage Wagner than Mozart. Samuel Ramey touchingly muses on the imminent end of his career. ("It's kind of sad.") Rolando Villazón reveals that, despite their long friendship, he is still too much in awe of Domingo to use the familiar "tú." Waltraud Meier admits to preferring concerts



to opera. [Q: "What don't you like about opera?" A (in a deep, Marlene Dietrich voice): "A lot."] It's true that Simon Keenlyside avoids offering his assessment of Lorin Maazel's *1984*, but in doing so (executing verbal choreography as intricate as any he performed in Trisha Brown's *Winterreise*), he tells us all we need to know.

The transcripts are seemingly unedited: even the questions that draw a puzzled response get duly notated. At times one wishes for a more organized presentation. An ebullient Joyce DiDonato has trouble articulating her sense of her own sound (an ineffable concept, to be sure); if the interview had been cast as a standard journalistic profile, the writer might have offered some help with his own words. But the cumulative effect of all the talk is illuminating. What's most remarkable, in a profession that is conventionally characterized as a hotbed of narcissistic foolishness, is the level of intelligence on display: these are all smart, hardworking people. *Living Opera* provides a graphic sense of the brains and dedication needed to sustain a career on the lyric stage.

FRED COHN