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Saturday, March 5th, 2005, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

- [John Powell](#) (1882-1963). Rhapsodie nègre, for piano and orchestra (1918). Los Angeles Philharmonic, Calvin Simmons, Zita Carno. [New World Records 80228](#). 16:19
- John Powell. Symphony in A Major, "Virginia Symphony" (1945) movements 1, 4. Virginia Symphony, JoAnn Falletta. Albany 589. 26:06
- Interview with [Rolf Charlston](#)

An easy composer to listen to, but a difficult man to understand, is the Virginian John Powell. A brilliant musician and scholar, he completed his four-year course of studies at the University of Virginia in two years, then moved to Vienna to study piano and composition. While there, he became friends with Efrem Zimbalist, Auguste Rodin, and others, and during his extensive tours as pianist met the great author of *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad. The writer was taken with the pianist's enthusiasm for the book, but balked at Powell's offer to turn it into an opera, believing that the interior drama would not translate well operatically. Conrad did suggest that a tone poem might be more appropriate, and so Powell wrote *Rhapsodie nègre* as his homage. It became quite a successful piece, and Powell soloed in this work with many major orchestras.

After settling in his native Richmond, Powell became deeply involved in statewide music circles, and also traveled extensively throughout the South, collecting the old tunes that had evolved there, far from their Scottish and Irish origins. In this he mirrored the work of Vaughan Williams, Bartók, and Kodály in their own countries, as he felt strongly that an American musical language should be built on its folk foundations. His *Symphony in A Major*, subtitled the "Virginia Symphony," is teeming with these tunes.

It is hard, however, to extricate Powell's laudable goal of an American music, shared by many composers throughout our country's history, from his outspoken opinions on the superiority and inferiority of races. Hard, but perhaps not impossible. Neither excusing nor dismissing this failing, we can still appreciate the beauties in his music, as we might with, say, a Richard Wagner, whose racist views were also abhorrent. In any case, it may be time to try, with John Powell.

As it happens, Rolf Charlston, one of WRTI's on-air announcers, is a devoted Conradian and an expert on Powell's relation to Conrad and *Heart of Darkness*. A musician, writer, and scholar, Rolf is uniquely qualified to help us navigate through the singular life of John Powell.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of WRTI. In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music in the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#).