

Duke Ellington on Boola

Boola is the name Negro historians use to symbolize their race. If they want to tell you that Negroes took part in this or that event they will say 'Boola was there.' My opera traces Boola's whole history in four scenes. The first scene is laid in Africa. The music there is mostly imaginary, because no one today knows what African Negro music was like in the days of the early slave traders. The second scene is Negro life in slave times, the third, Negro life in the period after the Civil war, and the fourth, Negro life today. There isn't any continuous plot, but there is one symbolic figure – Boola himself – who appears throughout.

Duke Ellington to San Francisco music critic Alfred Frankenstein, 1941.

I wrote it because I want to rescue Negro music from its well-meaning friends....All arrangements of historic Negro music have been made by conservatory-trained musicians who inevitably handle it with a European technique. It's time a big piece was written from the inside by a Negro.

Duke Ellington to San Francisco music critic Alfred Frankenstein, 1941.