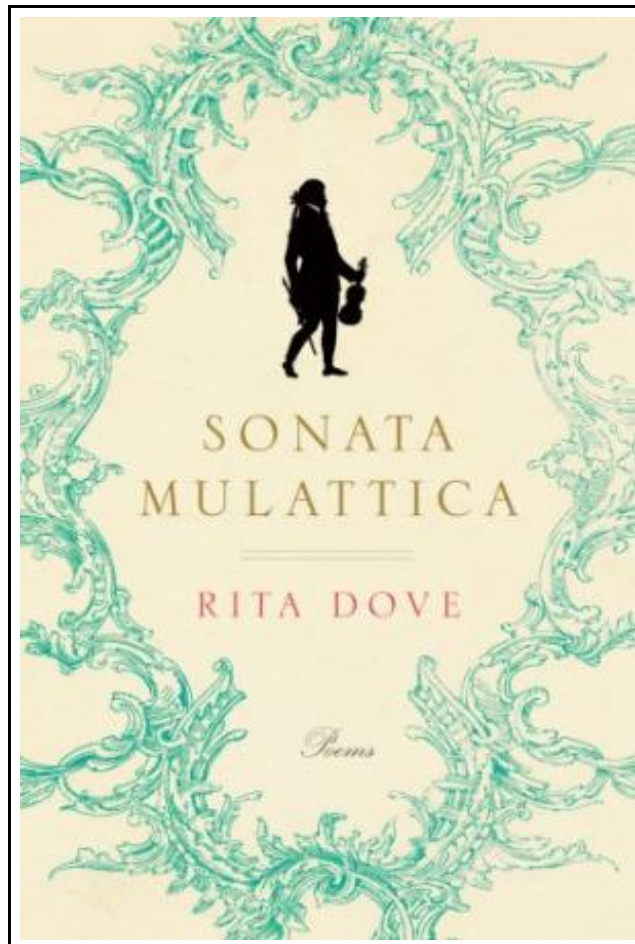


Sonata Mulattica: A Life in Five Movements and a Short Play



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Reviews

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(Taylor Medhurst)*

SONATA MULATTICA: A LIFE IN FIVE MOVEMENTS AND A SHORT PLAY

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Norton. 1 Cloth(s), 2009. hard. Book Condition: New. In a book-length lyric narrative inspired by history and imagination, Pulitzer Prize winner and former U.S. Poet Laureate Rita Dove re-creates the life of a 19th-century virtuoso violinist. The son of a white woman and an "African Prince," George Polgreen Bridgetower (1780-1860) travels to Vienna to meet "bad-boy" genius Ludwig van Beethoven. The great composer's subsequent sonata is originally dedicated to the young mulatto, but George, exuberant with acclaim, offends Beethoven over a woman. From this crucial encounter evolves a grandiose yet melancholy poetic tale."Dove's verse sequence re-creates the life of the biracial violinist George Bridgetower, best remembered for being the first performer, and the initial dedicatee, of Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' Sonata. (Beethoven replaced his humorous dedication to the 'lunatic and mulatto' after quarrelling with him, apparently over a woman.) A virtuosic treatment of a virtuoso's life, the poems use all registers: nursery rhymes, diary entries, drama and are stuffed with historical and musical arcana. Yet the book remains highly accessible, reading much like a historical novel. Dove is fascinated by Bridgetower's life as a black musician and occasionally implies parallels with the world of jazz and rap, but the issue of race does not predominate. She is concerned equally with the status of musicians in a world of precarious patronage: even Haydn, at the Esterhazy estate, has 'no more leave / to step outside the gates / than a prize egg-laying hen' and with 'the radiant web' of music itself." *The New Yorker* 231.

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