ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation:	TONES IN BLACK: A HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BASS/BARITONES IN CLASSICAL MUSIC: IN THE ECHOES OF ANCESTORS, A PIONEER'S VOICE
	VaShawn Savoy McIlwain-Lightfoot, Doctor of Musical Arts, 2024
Dissertation directed by:	Professor Kevin Short Division of Voice/Opera School of Music, University of Maryland

This dissertation project has three major foci: a) to trace the history of classically trained African American Bass/Baritone vocalists through performance, recordings, and narrative; b) to recognize the historical performances of African American Bass/Baritone vocal pioneers and the significant contributions they made to the accessibility of opportunities for other African Americans within these voice types; and c) to discuss how Bass/Baritone community performances can promote social connectedness and DEI in opera. In addressing these foci, the paper will emphasize how the performances of Bass/Baritone vocal artists, past and present, have a) made African Americans, in general, more acceptable to White audiences and b) changed the perceptions of White Americans about who African Americans are and what they are capable of.

Methodology involved securing physical/digital historical data from newspapers, journals, and books; collecting photos, programs, and articles from the private library of a former University of Maryland professor; conducted oral history interviews of students and progeny of the first African American Baritone to sing with a major opera company in the U.S. (Todd Duncan); delivered community performances domestically and internationally as a current

example of the legacy of African American classical vocal artists, specifically Bass/Baritones. This project's accounting of historical performances can serve to recognize unknown or forgotten contemporaries and predecessors.

TONES IN BLACK: A HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN BASS/BARITONES IN CLASSICAL MUSIC: IN THE ECHOES OF ANCESTORS, A PIONEER'S VOICE

by

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Dissertation submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Dedication

For the women who raised this Black man:

Tonya Marie Bodrick

Patricia Marie Murphy

Ylonda Christina Nadine Thompson-Young

Lakisha Janaya Thompson

"When we learn to trust, we become a vessel of the performance. The vessel shapes the performance, and performance determines the vessel. The performer then becomes the music – they are indistinguishable. Performer and performance are one entity." -Robert Triplett.

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I deeply appreciate the members of my authentically Black dissertation committee: Kevin Short, Chairman; Dr. Jason Max Ferdinand; Dr. Lester Green; Dr. Aaron Paige; Dean's Representative Dr. Sharon Harley; and Dean Stephanie Shonekan. You all exemplify Black

Excellence. Your faith in my vision and commitment to success has significantly strengthened this dissertation and shaped its direction. I am particularly thankful to Dr. Aaron Paige, whose influence has been pivotal in shaping my doctoral journey and the inspiration behind this work.

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I am exceedingly grateful to the Foundry Methodist Church (Washington, DC), Stanley J. Thurston and the Heritage Signature Chorale (Washington, DC), Everett Williams and the Asbury Methodist Church (Washington, DC), as well as Pamela Simonson, Terri Allen, and Dr. Dale Allen of the Coalition for African Americans in the Performing Arts (Fort Washington, Maryland) for their artistic and financial support throughout my candidacy. Your ongoing commitment to promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in the performing arts has inspired me and countless others to use our voices to advocate for positive change.

Special thanks to Collaborative Pianist Dana N. Scott. Creating music with you is fun, fulfilling, and rewarding. Thank you, D. Jarrod Lee, Kevin Thompson, and Neville E. Ottley-Adjahoe (Auntie Nevie), for your consultation, recommendations, time, and interest in my work. I would also like to express my sincere appreciation to Nicole (Nikki) Brooks and "The Black Woman Aesthetic," whose artistic perspective inspired the title of this dissertation, "TONES IN BLACK."

Thank you, late great pioneers Benjamin Matthews, William Warfield (Uncle Bill), and Grace Bumbry. Your legacy continues to guide and inspire me. I have been blessed to visit, break bread, debate, befriend, or even live with you; for this, I am grateful.

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Introduction/Artist's Background

The world influences every student's educational journey. Their parents, guardians, teachers, communities, culture, and country often influence them. Music students discover genres beyond their communal world. My childhood was filled with vernacular music like go-go, soul, gospel, rhythm and blues, rock, and pop. Radio, television, and film unconsciously influenced introductions to classical forms. As early as eight, I remember Bugs Bunny singing "Figaro" in the Looney Tunes cartoons; who would know I would one day sing it myself? In my teens, public access television in the 1990s had the "Arts Channel," a cable channel that played classical music and music videos that sparked a peculiar yet delightful interest in opera within me! Yet, most of the faces behind the music bore no resemblance to me. It was this transformative power of music that shaped my identity and inspired me to pursue a career in classical music.

My formal introduction to classical music came in high school, where, at 14, I fell in love with the Arts Channel. Classical music spoke to me unlike any other style of music. I would mimic some of the most iconic operatic voices. However, out of all the recordings and music videos broadcast, the only chocolate face I would see was African American Soprano Leontyne Price, as she appeared on the Bell Telephone Hour (1966).[1] At this pivotal point in my youth, I learned through teachers, videos, and live performances that Black history included a hidden legacy of classical singers.

[1] Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library, "Leontyne Price on the television program *The Bell Telephone Hour* [March 27, 1966]," *New York Public Library Digital Collections*, accessed June 29, 2024, https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/bfb54fe3-3a67-8916-e040-e00a1806495b.

My interest in classical music led me to the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, a blue-ribbon performing arts school in Washington, DC. It was there that world-renowned African American educators brought me to explore the cherished repertoire of my ancestors, the Negro Spiritual. The Spiritual was a gateway to learning the technical skills required to perform classical music in multiple languages. Under the tutelage of Baritone Samuel L.E. Bonds, I became a part of a musical lineage aligned with the great Todd Duncan, the first African American male to sing with a major opera company.[2] Duncan broke racial barriers in 1945 with his debut as Tonio in Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* with the New York City Center, opening doors for artists like Sopranos Camilla Williams, Adele Addison, and Bille Lynne Daniels; Baritones Lawrence Winters and Andrew Frierson; Contralto Carol Brice; and Tenor William DuPree.[3]

Throughout my years of music education and work in the music industry, unbeknownst to me at the time, I had studied and worked with many whom Mr. Duncan has influenced: my first teacher, Samuel L.E. Bonds, my master teacher, Martha Randall, and my current voice teacher, Professor Kevin Short. Duncan's legacy touched nearly every voice teacher who played a significant role in my development. Mr. Duncan was a seminal artist and pedagogue who forged a path for numerous African American Classical Singers to reach the world stage of opera.

If Duncan opened the doors for those who followed him, who opened the door for him? The Fisk Jubilee Singers, for example, would be a significant entry point for further exploration. Who are the people who made a generational bridge from the cotton fields of the Southern United States to the concert halls of the world? What other African American Bass/Baritones

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[2] Randye Jones, "Todd Duncan Biography," *Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music*, last modified December 3, 2022, accessed April 16, 2024, http://www.afrovoices.com/wp/todd-duncan-biography.

[3] Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan, and Erice Saylor, "Il Rodolfo Nero, or The Masque of Blackness," in *Blackness in Opera* (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 264.

shaped opera history, breaking barriers while supporting the rich and sonorous sounds of "Black" classical singers? Among the opera world's celebrated Baritones were Todd Duncan, the first African American to sing with a major opera company, New York City Opera, and Robert McFerrin, the first African American Baritone to sing at the Metropolitan Opera. How did Duncan and McFerrin influence African American Bass/Baritones activity after establishing themselves in the highly selective field of Opera? How are leading singers/vocal pedagogues impacting the next generations of African American Bass/Baritones? How are institutions of higher education and professional companies evolving to support the diversity and inclusion of the lowest voice types of Black men in the light of societal movements like Black Lives Matter? While I have many questions about the legacy of African American Bass/Baritones in Opera, this dissertation explores some of the above, prioritizing a) my career path, b) institutional roles in DEI, and c) the impact of social movements on opera; intending to understand how I not only arrived as the first African American music McNair Fellow at the University of Maryland, College Park but also how I have reached the international stage as an African American opera singer.

This dissertation project delves into the rich and inspiring history of African American Bass, Bass-baritone, and Baritone vocalists trained in classical music. Through a meticulous examination of performances, recordings, and personal stories, the narrative of this dissertation showcases standard repertoire that has shaped the journey of these artists from post-emancipation through the present. This is the same repertoire that continues to shape my ongoing journey and every Black Bass/Baritone pursuing this ancient craft of classical music, specifically opera. This study features a curated recital of art songs, musical theater, and arias that these pioneers of classical vocal music have frequently programmed, examining technical challenges in iconic

roles such as Il Commendatore in W.A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and technical advancements in electronics through Amonasro in Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*. These opera productions represent color-conscious casting (*Don Giovanni*) and color-blind casting (*Aida*), two approaches to DEI practices/initiatives.

The project highlights the profound contributions of these artists to the world of classical music. It explores how the industry has evolved towards greater inclusivity for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) artists in response to social movements like the Civil Rights Movement, the LGBTQIA+ Movement, and the Black Lives Matter Movement. My motivation derives from my experience as a cross-over musical theater artist to opera. Through my preparation and performance of Bass/Baritone repertoire, this project seeks to uncover and celebrate the often-overlooked contributions of African American pioneers in classical vocal music. As a modern pioneer who has broken racial barriers through performance and community engagement, I aim to highlight the lasting relevance and exceptional artistry of these pioneering Black Bass/Baritones. This dissertation also highlights continued contributions by the world-renowned artist, pedagogue, and modern-day pioneer Bass-baritone Kevin Short, underscoring his legacy of Black artistic excellence, educational activism, and unyielding support for Black artists amid adversity. In tandem, this work examines my legacy as a current pioneer, innovating opportunities for BIPOC artists and representing their diverse voices while continuously championing artistic equity. I use myself as a case study, drawing on personal performance experiences from higher education, select professional training programs and professional companies to explore the historical context of African American operatic pioneers, their legacy, influence, and the challenges they faced and overcame to succeed, making it possible for "this Black man" to see his dreams realized. Without the Fisk Jubilee singers and artists like Jules

Bledsoe, Todd Duncan, and Robert McFerrin, I might not have made it to this stage in my career. Like my ancestors, I am establishing a career in Northern America and Germany, choosing this country for its historic receptivity of African American Classical Singers and rich tradition in opera. I own my position in history as a pioneering "first," portraying roles traditionally performed by White men and originating a leading role written specifically for Black Bass/Baritones—encouraging others to claim their voice amid political uncertainty.

Social Connectedness: Moving from Equity to Equality

My goal goes beyond acceptance within the canon. Equality is what is sought! The benefits of learning and performing music help integrate people into a growing society by creating a milieu where intrapersonal skills are developed, thus allowing performers to adapt and the audience to evolve into a progressive and morally receptive society. Performing and spectating serve as a means of connecting on profoundly deep levels through similar or shared experiences, providing a medium for **social connectedness**. While discussing the 2010 Gallup study on the 'Soul of the Community,' Author Lucas Bernays Held aptly states, "…the arts may be an important way (though probably not the only one) for people in communities to come together through shared, meaningful experiences. It also underscores the value of finding ways for arts organizations to expand their audiences and connect with their communities."[4] I have spent a lifetime bringing forth efforts to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion through teaching, performing, and connecting with dynamic history-making organizations like the Heritage Signature Chorale and the Coalition of African Americans in the Performing Arts.

[4] Ben Gallaher, "How the Arts Bring Communities Together," *Want Stronger Communities? Create a Bridge to the Arts*, authored by Lucas Bernays Held (New Knight Foundation report suggests arts and cultural opportunities can increase community attachment, July 3, 2018), accessed April 8, 2023, https://veniceperformingartscenter.com/how-the-arts-bring-communities-together.

It is hard to address the topic of social connectedness without briefly discussing the pioneers' societal impact through vocal performance. I often think about the relationship between solo work, choruses/ensembles, the audiences, and the long-term implications vocal artists' engagement has. Through social engagement, artists can quickly and effectively affect social institutions, culture, and society, having the greatest power to achieve equality. A significant proponent of this dissertation project is centered around using the classical voice for social engagement by intently connecting with communities, domestically and abroad. Despite societal inequities, Bass/Baritone pioneers galvanized support for advocacy through performance, harnessing a power that affects social justice and racial equality. This continues to be my motivation for self-development while hoping to leave my mark in the annals of history. My ongoing work considers the history of the classically trained African American Bass/Baritone pioneers—prominent Black men who used their voice in performance for impactful social engagement within domestic and international communities. Voices that promote positive representation as they reverberate through society in what is (and remains) a rare platform for African American Bass/Baritone classical vocalists. This legacy permeates my very being and supports me in my efforts to be a voice not only for African Americans but also for other people of color (POC), as well as members of the LGBTQIA+ communities throughout the world.

The original Bass/Baritone pioneer's work in artivism (promoting social causes through the arts) was initially limited, having a slow reach compared to the expanded resources available in today's global entertainment market. Unlike when artists needed to traverse land, air, and sea to perform physically, music is now accessible remotely. Multimedia (e.g., TV, radio, digital, or social platforms) resources accessible today are now vehicles for content becoming *viral*

(circulating rapidly through the internet), bringing virtual strangers together, and influencing societies rapidly with the expansive use of digital technology through virtual and live performances. With these resources, today's classical artivists can advance DEI efforts promoted by civil rights and social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter.

> The artivist (Artist + activist) uses their Artistic talents to fight and struggle against injustice and oppression—by any medium necessary. The artivist merges commitment to freedom and justice with the pen, the lens, the brush, the voice, the body, and the imagination. The artivist knows that to make an observation is to have an obligation.[5]

Targeted Population

Though there are many great civil rights voices in vocal artivism, my target population for this dissertation is a specific niche: cisgender Black Bass/Baritone men born in America who worked post-emancipation internationally in Opera - in essence, the reflection of me. Unfortunately, that excludes the great Bass Paul Robeson, who "refused to sing opera or German, French, and Italian art songs—the core of the classical repertoire."[6] Research for this dissertation was met with some limitations due to America's ongoing and debatably successful efforts to suppress Black Culture and History. Much information about late African American classical vocal artists remains unsung as it was either undocumented or destroyed. Fortunately, scholarly efforts and community preservation have uncovered and archived histories (e.g., Jules Bledsoe's scrapbooks, preserved in the Texas Collection at Baylor University, and Todd Duncan's papers at the University of Michigan).[7] Adding my historical narrative to the Western

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[5] Molefi Kete Asante, *It's Bigger than Hip-Hop: The Rise of the Post-Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 6.

[6] William Pencak, "Paul Robeson and Classical Music," *Pennsylvania History* 66 (1999): 83-91.

[7] Elena Arredondo Farel, "African American Opera Singers, 1850-1950: Ambition, Uplift, and Performance" (PhD diss., Washington University in St. Louis, 2022), 227, accessed March 19, 2024, https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/art_sci_etds/2673.

canon aids in correcting this wrong, offering resistance to new waves of suppression in a consistently divided United States of America.

Methodology

In this project, I researched operatic Bass/Baritone pioneers using physical/digital historical data from public sources: newspapers, journals, and books. Photos, programs, and articles were collected from the private library of former University of Maryland professor Martha Randall. Oral history interviews were conducted with former voice students of Todd Duncan: Martha Randall, Soprano; Samuel L.E. Bonds, Baritone; and my current teacher, Kevin Short, Bass-baritone, the musical progeny of Betty Ridgeway, a former student of Todd Duncan.

An additional methodology involved using my community engagement (i.e., performances) as a present-day pioneer a) to continue the legacy of past African American Bass/Baritones and b) to present myself as a seldom-seen model of Black Excellence in classical music.

Chapter Synopses

Chapter One, tracing the historical origins of African American Classical Singers, looks at the example and legacy of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and their impact on equality in classical music. Their historic journey led to international acclaim and recognition, opening concert hall stages to African American Classical Singers. Chapter Two celebrates the historical representation of progressive pioneer Black Bass/Baritone voices of opera connected to classical concerts, opera, and traditional (legit) theatrical/film works: Jules Bledsoe, Todd Duncan, Robert McFerrin, Simon Estes, and Kevin Short. The biographies featured in this chapter show the standard path or "Rite of Passage" to international careers for African American Bass/Baritones. That standard path was through the role of Amonasro in Verdi's *Aida*. These pioneers enacted

change through voice/opera performance by promoting social connectedness (togetherness). Chapter Three will explore the relationship between the performer and the audience. The chapter discusses the importance of recitals as a means of community engagement. I then describe my own community engagement recital as an African American Classical Singer reflecting the standard repertoire often programmed by previous pioneering Bass/Baritones.

In Chapter 4, I use my opera performances, theatrical casting practices, and educational/professional initiatives to illustrate the evolution of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in opera. The chapter focuses on four operatic genres that I performed in community settings. I analyzed each opera through a different lens, representing my perspective as an African American Bass-baritone transitioning from BIPOC advocacy in academia to advocating for BIPOC artists internationally through opera performance, including the voices of FKP Show Creations creative team to provide their perspective on DEI in international community opera today. Chapter 5 is my conclusion, including a summary, findings, and recommendations for the future of opera.

Chapter 1: The Collective Legacy

The Fisk Jubilee Singers - A Historical Example

The Negro Spiritual, original folk music that enslaved Africans created in America, was birthed out of the need to communicate and connect with fellow "workers." Singing provided shared experiences for Africans and descendants of Africans once enslaved in the United States. Regardless of the language barriers and different ethnic, regional, and socioeconomic backgrounds, African American enslavement often led to unity through the common cause of seeking freedom. These Black religious songs were lyrical and expressed a wide range of emotions, such as elation, hope, and sorrow.[8] The spiritual eventually became significant in contemporary music (gospel, country, jazz, and blues) and social movements, such as America's Civil Rights Movement.

Post-emancipation, the development of the Negro Spiritual was seen in the work of an amazing group of Black singers, formerly enslaved people, freedmen/women, sons, and daughters of those who were enslaved, the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The Jubilee Singers were founded in 1871, after the aftermath of the American Civil War. The newly established Fisk University (1866) in Nashville, Tennessee, faced financial hardship. The university aimed to educate free and formerly enslaved individuals. Funding was scarce:

> From the day it opened its doors on January 9, 1866, the school attracted an abundance of students but suffered from a severe shortage of funds. Housed in flimsy, abandoned Union Army barracks, Fisk's all-White faculty worked for minimal pay and with barely adequate supplies. The new "Fisk School" was on the verge of financial- and physical- collapse.[9]

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[8] Tilford Brooks, *America's Black Musical Heritage* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 32.

[9] Tim Brooks, and Richard K. Spottswood, *Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry, 1890-1919* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 192.

As a result, George White, a Caucasian abolitionist, treasurer, and music teacher at Fisk University, turned to music to raise the necessary funds to keep the institution afloat. In 1871, White sent his African American choral ensemble on a fundraising tour to the East. He believed that the liberal White establishment would surely help Fisk.[10] At the time, the American public viewed Black entertainers almost exclusively as minstrels and comedians. No serious attempt had even been made to present an ensemble in the "high-class" setting.[11] Though White's assistance, guidance, and direction were responsible for their exposure, the Jubilee Singers' hard work and beautiful voices garnered them international fame, honors, and recognition, leading them to the preservation of the Negro Spiritual, America's original folk music.

The Original Fisk Jubilee Singers consisted of four men and six women: Phebe Anderson, Isaac P. Dickerson, Green Evans, Benjamin Holmes, Jennie Jackson, Maggie Porter, Thomas Rutling, Ella Sheppard, Minnie Tate, and Eliza Walker. During three tours, the troupe's membership changed due to the lack of availability, illness, and death.[12] The group gained notoriety by embarking on ambitious journeys, sharing their rich musical heritage with audiences domestically and internationally. The music they sang initially bonded them through trauma but eventually healed them, leading them to liberation through extensive travel and pinning music notation, lyrics, and recordings that brought forth the collective experience of self, family, and community.

Among their first documented experiences where their gift of song changed hearts and ensured their safety was during their first tour, which started on October 6, 1871, when the

[10] Brooks and Spottswood, *Lost Sounds*, 193.
[11] Brooks and Spottswood, *Lost Sounds*, 193.
[12] VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, "THE FISK JUBILEE SINGERS: The Black Classical Singers Road Paved" (scholarly research paper, University of Maryland College Park, 2019).

original group, along with their choirmaster, abolitionist George White, were met by an angry crowd of White men as they traversed the rugged and dangerous roads of the south on their way to a fundraising event across state lines. Soprano Ella Shepard recalled:

> Threatenings began near evening. We prayed through song for deliverance. Mr. White stood between us and the men and directed the singing. One by one the riotous crowd left off their jeering and swearing and slunk back, until only the leader stood near Mr. White. With tears falling, he finally took off his hat [and] begged us to sing again.[13]

The Jubilee singers delivered music that stirred deep emotions, leaving spectators in tears and awe of their effortless execution and pristine clarity of sound, touching the hearts of many. The Jubilee Singers were more than ensemble members; they helped define African American music in today's concert halls, paving the way as the foremothers and forefathers of generations of world-class soloists and ensembles. Each member of the Fisk Jubilee Singers made significant contributions to the ensemble, with their voices and dedication forming the collective soul of the group.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers' experience in defusing imminent racial violence is a powerful example of how African American voice performances in America and beyond was capable of changing hearts and minds.[14] Their music moved many because it was unlike anything they had experienced before. The music was delivered with a deep and heartfelt connection to the text. The Jubilee singers could internalize concepts from their appreciation for classical and standard literature to make them speak and be true to their own experiences. When they sang their acapella concertized Negro Spirituals, it moved all who encountered them.[15] The choir defied

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[13] Llewellyn Smith and Andrew Ward, *Jubilee Singers: Sacrifice and Glory* (film, Public Broadcasting Service, 2019), accessed December 10, 2019, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/singers/#transcript.

[14] Smith and Ward, *Jubilee Singers.*

[15] McIlwain-Lightfoot, "THE FISK JUBILEE SINGERS."

societal expectations and limitations, showcasing their exceptional musical talent through resilience, one of the cultural hallmarks of the African American experience.

The Fisk Jubilee Singers pioneered a model that saved Fisk University and other Black ensembles, soloists, educators, and entrepreneurs utilized to fundraise. Their influence was so significant that other choirs performed in their image, hoping they, too, would gain the same prestige and financial success. For example, the Hampton Institute of Singers, under the direction of Thomas P. Fenner, used the Fisk Jubilee Singers as a model.[16]

Fisk Jubilee Singer members actively worked to advance the rights of African Americans. For example, the work of two original members (Basses Evans and Holmes) reflects some of the earliest documented actions taken to fight for civil rights, societal change, and acceptance in classical music. Their activism continued even after the original choir disbanded. Green Evans left the Jubilee singers and began a life in politics, fighting against Jim Crow laws as a Tennessee State Assemblyman and Councilman for Memphis City in 1885. Benjamin Holmes participated in the first two tours but missed the third due to his declining health. Holmes was crucial in securing contracts and advocating for better touring conditions for the troupe.[17]

The Fisk Jubilee Singers were a dynamic catalyst for change. Author Andrew Ward notes, "Their performances remained resonant with justice."[18]

The Fisk Jubilee Singers paved the way and introduced the world to the "Black Classical Singer." They left an indelible mark on the realm of classical music. Thus, the Jubilee Singers'

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[16] Sandra J. Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of a Black Entertainment Industry* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 87.

[17] Tazewell Thompson, libretto, "Jubilee" (Arena Stage Production, Washington, DC, June 9, 2019).

[18] Andrew Ward, *Dark Midnight When I Rise: The Story of the Jubilee Singers, Who Introduced the World to the Music of Black America*, 1st ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 114.

historical significance extends far beyond the boundaries of their time. Their legacy remains a powerful reminder of the significance of honoring and cherishing the vibrant heritage of all musical descendants of Northern American slaves. They have had an enduring impact on vocalists in the world of classical music. Their contributions to the advancement of African American opera singers continue to reverberate today.

In the following chapter, I explore the historical journey of African American Bass/Baritones: a) original pioneers Jules Bledsoe, Todd Duncan, and Robert McFerrin; b) bridging pioneer Simon Estes; and c) modern pioneer Kevin Short. Voices that have contributed significantly to the worldwide receptivity of Black opera singers are reflected by the increased job opportunities for Black Bass/Baritones, not only as classical singers but as composers, librettists, and conductors. The following are companies recently featuring Black Bass/Baritones in new Black operas: a) The 2022 Dutch National Opera production of *Blue* by Jeanine Tesori and African American Librettist Tazewell Thompson featured African American Bass-baritone Kenneth Kellogg; b) The Finger Lakes Opera's recent 2024 premiere of *Two Corners* by African American composer Brittany (B.E.) Boykin and African American librettist/Bass-baritone Jarrod Lee; and c) the July 2024 premiere of Des Moines Metro Opera's productions of *American Apollo* by African American Composer (Conductor, Bass-baritone) Damien Geter, with African American Baritone Justin Austin, show evidence of these pioneers' continued legacy. However, it is important to note that the work of the pioneers continues to unfold in tandem with today's civil rights/social movements and not solely because of it. Movements such as BLM have raised significant awareness of inequities in the opera landscape, illuminating the evolving work of late and living African American Bass/Baritone Pioneers.

Chapter 2: Black Pioneers in Classical Music

Under the administration of President Abraham Lincoln, enslaved African Americans in Confederate states were granted freedom, but slavery did not officially end until 1865 with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. These freedoms marked significant changes for all Americans but were a matter of life and death for Blacks. During Reconstruction, around 2000 African American men held local, state, and congressional offices. These significant moves towards equality, though lauded by abolitionists, were fraught with immense hatred and discrimination. Southern White Americans remained transparent about their distaste for Blacks, leading to a slew of laws enforcing segregation, best known as "Jim Crow" Laws, hindering Blacks who gained equal citizenship with the Fourteenth Amendment, as well as the right for Black men to vote with the establishment of the Fifteenth Amendment. The Ku Klux Klan and other organizations supporting White supremacy attacked White Republican leaders, African Americans, and others during this period, killing at least 35 Black officials.[19] Although progress was made during Reconstruction, every aspect of African Americans' lives faced prejudice, discrimination, and systemic racism, especially in classical music.

Blacks who desired careers in classical music had to create their own path to the stage. For example, Black singers seeking formal training had to do so privately. Opportunities to perform were often limited; discrimination and prejudice kept many from performing with major companies.[20] Early performances were given at central places such as churches, schools, and

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[19] Eric Foner, *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 134.

[20] Dean Southern, "Breaking Barriers: Four Pioneering African American Singers in Opera," Classical Singer Magazine, February 2, 2023, accessed July 6, 2024, https://www.csmusic.net/content/articles/breaking-barriers/.

social clubs within African American communities.[21] Novak notes a path that I, too, have followed, stating how, "Many Negro vocalists follow the pattern of the typical American artist who studies in American colleges and conservatories, then tries his wings in European opera houses."[22] A major obstacle to Blacks pursuing careers in classical music was the belief that opera was reserved for White performers.[23] Thus, despite the success of a few artists (i.e., Sissieretta Jones, Roland Hayes), opportunities for African American singers–especially male singers–were nearly non-existent on the concert or operatic stage between the 1800s and the early 20th century. Classical artists who found any success had to travel to Europe to pursue their dreams of singing opera.[24]

The success of artists like Jones, who captivated international audiences, illuminated the lack of *domestic* performance opportunities. Consequently, artists – I refer to them as "original pioneers" - began to create their own opportunities, opening doors to Black-led troupes and opera companies and creating career pathways. Among these original pioneers were Jules Bledsoe, Todd Duncan, and Robert McFerrin. These African American classical artists were forerunners in unveiling a promising route to operatic careers, particularly for African American Bass/Baritones. That route ultimately involved performing the role of Amonasro, one of the few roles open to African American Bass/Baritones in traditional opera history. These "original

[21] Aaron J. Paige, "Tracing the History of Classically-Trained African American Tenors" (DMA diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2019), 3, doi.org/10.13016/yyee-atlu.
[22] Benjamin Novak, "OPENING DOORS IN MUSIC," *Negro History Bulletin* 34, no. 1 (1971): 10-11, accessed April 16, 2024, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/opening-doors-music/docview/1296740827/se-2.
[23] Stephen Grove, "Breaking Barriers: Celebrating the Trailblazing Black Opera Singers of the 19th Century," accessed April 16, 2024, https://19thcentury.us/Black-opera-singers-19th-century/.
[24] Jones, "Todd Duncan Biography."

pioneers" were able to begin formal professional careers because of small, Black-led opera companies that began to emerge in the U.S. during the first half of the 20th century.

Roughly between 1901 and 1950, many small opera companies and impresarios began to sponsor and showcase works by Black composers and produce standard repertory with Black singers."[25] In the 1920s, African American Bass/Baritones such as Jules Bledsoe started to make their mark in concert, Broadway, and operatic stages. Shortly after that, organizations such as Mary Cardwell Dawson's National Negro Opera Company in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, became the starting point of equity for many Black Singers. Hundreds of African Americans would not have been able to obtain operatic stage experience without trailblazers like Mrs. Cardwell. Her opera company provided onstage, backstage, and musician pit experiences. Several compositions performed in early 20th century Black opera companies (e.g., Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*) served as a training ground for Black Classical Singers.[26]

The Original Pioneers: Bass/Baritones Active Before 1950

The following biographical sketches depict the lives of three Bass/Baritone "original pioneers" whose professional careers began domestically in Black opera companies then advanced to the portrayal of a role that launched their international careers – In Verdi's *Aida* as Amonasro, Aida's father and the Ethiopian King. This character, Amonasro, was a "breakthrough" role for African American Bass/Baritone opera singers. The role of Amonasro in Verdi's *Aida* is a prime example of how stereotypical casting of the featured pioneers became what I call a "Rite of Passage" for lower-voiced, classically trained African American opera

[25] Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018), 35.
[26] Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History,* 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 513.

singers. It allowed these pioneers to boost their individual career trajectories and redefined how art organizations and communities interacted with classical musicians of color.

Jules Bledsoe (1897-1943)

Born December 29, 1897, in Waco, Texas, as Julius Lorenzo Cobb Bledsoe, Bass-baritone Jules Bledsoe was among the first pioneering African American Bass/Baritones of Opera and Broadway. Bledsoe was active from the mid-1920s until the early 1940s, when opportunities for Blacks to perform with major companies were unheard of.[27] Gravitating towards music, his voice grabbed the ears of audiences early in his youth. Bledsoe graduated as valedictorian from Central Texas Academy in 1914.[28] He then attended the Bishop College of Marshall, Texas, graduating *magna cum laude* in 1918.[29] Bledsoe was briefly a member of the ROTC at Virginia Union University. As a graduate student, he briefly studied medicine at Columbia University (1920); after that, Bledsoe pursued his passion for music and embarked on a career as a vocal artist.[30] This journey would redefine the landscape of African American Bass/Baritones internationally.

In 1924, Bledsoe made his first professional debut at Aeolian Hall in New York, NY.[31] His immense talent gained him management from impresario Sol Hurok, who helped open doors worldwide.[32] Bledsoe historically created the iconic role of Joe in Hammerstein and Kern's 1927 production of *Showboat*, a role initially offered to Bass Paul Robeson. While breaking barriers

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[27] Amanda Sawyer, "Jules Bledsoe," Waco History, June 3, 2024, accessed April 14, 2024, https://wacohistory.org/items/show/72.
[28] Sawyer, "Jules Bledsoe."
[29] Lynnette G. Geary, "Jules Bledsoe: The Original 'Ol' Man River," *The Black Perspective in Music* 17, no. 1/2 (1989): 27–54, doi.org/10.2307/1214742.
[30] Geary, "Jules Bledsoe."
[31] Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 407.
[32] Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 407.

during an immense time of prejudice, his fame did not make him immune to racism. Author Randye Jone's research uncovered an incident involving Bledsoe and police when he was stopped while on tour with *Showboat* in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1930:

> "The local African American newspaper, The Pittsburgh Courier, described how the police pulled him and his passenger over, searched the vehicle–a Packard, verbally harassed them with racial epithets and accusations that the car was stolen, and then the police threatened to arrest them. Only after Bledsoe stated that he would sue the city for $10,000 (equivalent to more than $150,000 in 2022) did the police allow them to continue on their way."[33]

Despite the challenges to equality Black Classical Singers faced in the first half of the 20th century, Bledsoe stood up for civil rights with resilience and determination, transcending racial barriers to some of the world's most prestigious stages. A video recording of his original 1929 performance of "Old Man River" is marked in history and displays his beautiful voice and solid, commanding stage presence.

Jules Bledsoe's career was filled with prestigious achievements, taking him from the stages of America to London's Royal Opera House. His repertoire was diverse and covered multiple languages. He cemented his place in history with his 1932 Cleveland Stadium Opera appearance as Amonasro in the company's final performance of Verdi's *Aida*.[34] Bledsoe's performance as Amonasro was the first occurrence of an African American singing the role with an established American company and White cast.[35] African American Tenor George Shirley recounted how Soprano Caterina Jarboro:

> "is often credited as being the first Black singer to perform with an established opera company in the United States. It would appear this honor was earned by Bledsoe, whose Amonasro in 1932 marked the first critically appraised

[33] Randye Jones, "Jules Bledsoe Biography," *Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music*, last modified January 4, 2022, accessed April 14, 2024, http://www.afrovoices.com/wp/jules-bledsoe-biography.

[34] "Stadium Opera," *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, Case Western Reserve University, accessed April 22, 2024, https://case.edu/ech/articles/s/stadium-opera.

[35] Farel, "African American Opera Singers," 182.

> performance of the role by an African American Bass-baritone to be recorded in the historical annals of operatic performance in America."[36]

Bledsoe's contributions to the canon were significant as an actor, singer, and composer. Not only did he grace the world-renowned opera stages, but he was among the first African American men to work consistently on Broadway, appearing in productions like *Deep River* and *Blackbirds* of 1936.[37] Bledsoe's resonant voice was strong and beautifully supported by his commanding stage presence. Harboring a lovely legato, his voice rang, singing with clear diction, opting to incorporate the performance practice of rolling his "R's" when singing English. He incorporated character choices that mixed sprechstimme and singing when performing musical theater. He was unafraid to put his voice out by taking artistic freedoms in the music, holding long notes far beyond the bars, and showing his impressive capacity to control his breath. Bledsoe was regarded by his contemporaries as a versatile and gifted musician, making several recordings of songs and writing compositions; the *African Suite* for Violin and Orchestra is among his best-known works.[38] As a composer, Bledsoe would write spirituals and patriotic songs, even composing an opera titled "Bondage" based on Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which is unfortunately now lost to history as there is no full copy extant.

By 1940, Bledsoe began appearing in Hollywood films like "Drums of the Congo" and several uncredited films, including "Santa Fe Trail" and "Western Union."[39] His amazing journey ended untimely at 44 with his passing in 1943 from a cerebral hemorrhage.[40] Understanding his position in history, Bledsoe embraced opportunities for advocacy and representation, stating how:

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[36] André, Bryan, and Saylor, "Il Rodolfo Nero," 263.
[37] Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 407.
[38] Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 407.
[39] Geary, "Jules Bledsoe," 27–54.
[40] Geary, "Jules Bledsoe," 27–54.

> It is up to the few of us that have gotten past the sentinels at the gate to fling the gates wide open for our successors. Once the ambitious educated Negro youth turns his steps toward the Theatre as a profession not to be considered too lightly, and revels in it as he does in the professions of Medicine and law: we shall find ourselves able to run the whole gamut of the Theatre and be thoroughly capable of doing the finer things of the stage, whether it be uttering the classic lines of Shakespeare or chanting the masters of song in a manner befitting only the Gods.[41]

This Baritone pioneer's legacy is an inspiration that has cemented Bledsoe in Black and American history. His undeniable achievements broke the ceiling on racial barriers to Domestic and international operatic performance opportunities, allowing other African American Bass/Baritones to let their voices shine.

Todd Duncan (1903-1998)

African American Baritone, opera singer, civil rights activist, and pedagogue Todd Duncan was born on February 12, 1903, in Danville, Kentucky, to John C. and Letitia Cooper Duncan.[42] His mother was his first music teacher. Influenced by Roland Hayes, he would later obtain a B.A. in Music at Butler University in 1925, and study at the Indiana College of Music and Fine Arts in Indianapolis, Indiana.[43] Duncan obtained an M.A. from Columbia University

[41] Jones, "Jules Bledsoe Biography."
[42] "Celebrating Black History: Curtis Faculty Member Todd Duncan," Curtis Institute of Music, February 9, 2023, accessed April 19, 2024, https://www.curtis.edu/news/celebratingBlack-history-curtis-faculty-member-todd-duncan/.
[43] Jones, "Todd Duncan Biography."

Teachers College in 1930.[44] He was later honored with eight honorary doctorates, one of which was from his alma mater, Butler University.[45] Duncan is a member of Alpha Phi Alpha, the first inter-collegiate Greek-letter organization established for African Americans.[46]

Duncan debuted with the Black opera company, The Aeolian Negro Opera, in 1934, playing the role of Alfio in Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* at the Mecca Temple in New York City.[47] His vocal/operatic performances would soon lead him to be the first African American to perform a large role with a major opera company, debuting as Tonio in New York City Opera's production of *I Pagliacci* (1945).[48] This was significant because he was the only African American artist with an otherwise all-White cast.[49] Before hitting that milestone, Todd Duncan originated the role of Porgy on Broadway in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in 1935, a role that he performed more than 1,800 times and recorded with the original cast on Decca Records with the original Bess, Soprano Anne Brown.[50] In 1947, while on one of many European Tours, Duncan appeared as Amonasro in *Aida*. In many European opera houses, it marked the first time that a Black man would sing the part of the Ethiopian King.[51]

Duncan's work for civil rights and equality in the African American community is well documented. While touring with *Porgy and Bess*, Mr. Duncan is famously credited with the

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[44] Allan Kozinn, "Todd Duncan, 95; Sang Porgy and Helped Desegregate Opera," *The New York Times*, March 2, 1988, accessed January 23, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/03/02/theater/todd-duncan-95-sang-porgy-and-helped-desegregate-opera.html.

[45] Jones, "Todd Duncan Biography."

[46] Rashid Darden, "Notable Alphas: Arts and Humanities," Old Gold & Soul, accessed June 3, 2024, https://oldgoldsoul.com/notable-alphas/.

[47] Kozinn, "Todd Duncan."

[48] André, *Black Opera*, 89.

[49] "Celebrating Black History."

[50] "Celebrating Black History."

[51] Darryl Glenn Nettles, *African American Concert Singers before 1950* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), 59.

historic but short-lived desegregation of the National Theater in Washington, DC, in 1936.[52] "Breaking the color barrier, he was instrumental in desegregating opera houses and theaters at a time when African Americans were forced to either attend performances for Black audiences only or use side entrances and sit in the balcony sections."[53] Duncan is noted for stating that he "would never play in a theater which barred him from purchasing tickets to certain seats because of his race."[54] The recounting of the occurrence is documented by Randye Jones, with Duncan saying, "To make the story short, we won. Negroes came, and they sat everywhere at every performance. The manager of the theater came to me in the middle of the second week and said, "Mr. Duncan, I want to thank you for what you've done. We haven't had one person come back and ask to return their tickets. Not one. We haven't had one complaint, not one situation."[55]

Though there are dual accounts of exactly who led the talks with the theater's management, this occurrence may have been a rite of civil rights activism for himself and his co-star Anne Brown.

> Anne Brown, who played Bess, recalls a drama offstage after the show closed in New York. A native of Baltimore, she was pleased to see that the show would tour Washington. But when she realized that the venue was the National Theatre, she was taken aback. Her Black friends, family, and the Black public would not be allowed to attend."[56]

Duncan (Porgy) and Brown (Bess) successfully led the 1938 Porgy and Bess cast in protest against the theatre's segregation policy.[57] As a civil rights pioneer, Duncan was posthumously inducted into the Kentucky Civil Rights Hall of Fame at Kentucky State University in Frankfort,

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[52] National Theatre, National Politics, "Desegregation," *thenationaldcpolitics.org*, accessed July 7, 2024, https://thenationaldcpolitics.org/desegregation/.
[53] "Celebrating Black History."
[54] "Celebrating Black History."
[55] Jones, "Todd Duncan Biography."
[56] Ron Cowen, "George Gershwin: He Got Rhythm," *The Washington Post*, November 11, 1998.
[57] "Porgy and Bess: Today in History, September 2," *Library of Congress*, December 6, 2007, accessed April 19, 2024, https://www.loc.gov/item/today-in-history/september-02/.

Kentucky, in 2005.[58] Duncan and his wife, Gladys Duncan, fought valiantly against racial discrimination on a national level.[59] Together, they were making significant strides here in the United States of America through his love of music and her activism. In his return to Broadway, Mr. Duncan created the role of Kumalo in Kurt Weill's *Lost in the Stars* in 1949, which ended after 281 performances.[60] Duncan also made his mark on London's West End at the historic Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, in 1938, appearing in the production of *The Sun Never Sets.* Known for his international work and community engagement, he maintained an active and successful career as a concert artist with over 2,000 performances covering 56 countries and two films.[61] Filmed in 1954, Mr. Duncan was the first to record "Unchained Melody" by Alex North.[62]

Todd Duncan's no-nonsense, hard-working approach to music was exemplified through his singing and teaching.[63] As a champion of African American music, he was a strong advocate for the Negro Spiritual. Nash noted how, in his final interview, Todd Duncan spoke of his love for spirituals:

> "... spirituals are so deep inside of me, it's difficult for me to find words that are meaningful. Spirituals are a part of whatever I am. When I sing them, my being sings them, not my throat... It is very difficult for me to put into words something that is at the bottom of my very being."[64]

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[58] "Celebrating Black History."
[59] Martha Lee Randall, "TONES IN BLACK: Oral History Interview," zoom interview by VaShawn Savoy McIlwain-Lightfoot, February 14, 2024.
[60] John F. Wharton, *Life among the Playwrights: Being Mostly the Story of the Playwrights Producing Company* (New York: Quadrangle, 1974), 294.
[61] Kozinn, "Todd Duncan."
[62] Bill Bronk, "The Best of 'Unchained Melody': A Love Song for the Ages," *Goldmine Magazine*, March 21, 2022, accessed June 3, 2024, https://www.goldminemag.com/features/the-best-of-unchained-melody-a-love-song-forthe-ages.
[63] Randall, "TONES IN BLACK."
[64] Elizabeth Nash, *Autobiographical Reminiscences of African-American Classical Singers, 1853-Present: Introducing Their Spiritual Heritage into the Concert Repertoire* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 170.

Mr. Duncan was a renowned voice pedagogue known for his organic approach to singing called the Duncan Technique. Mr. Duncan influenced generations of African American classical musicians, and this studio produced some of the nation's most successful singers and voice teachers. Mr. Duncan taught at the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and at Howard University, a Historic Black College and University in Washington, DC.[65] Duncan successfully combined a teaching career at Howard University, maintaining extensive concert touring worldwide with pianists William Duncan Allen and George Malloy.[66] After retiring from Howard University, Mr. Duncan gave periodic recitals and opened a private voice studio. Maintaining a studio at Curtis Institute of Music from 1977-1990.[67] When Mr. Duncan could no longer travel, Curtis would send his students to Washington, DC, for their voice lessons.[68]

Mr. Duncan's private studio consisted only of professional singers and voice teachers who studied classical music. Many students sought to work with Mr. Duncan, but he was frank and selective. Being in his studio meant you must want it and do the necessary work. According to Jones:

> His influence as a teacher was equally extensive. He worked with hundreds of students over his lifetime, teaching into his 90's. Several students went on to successful singing careers themselves, and at least two–Philip Booth and Carmen Tencredi–contracted with the Metropolitan Opera.[69]

Duncan advised his students that the greatest lessons to learn are "honesty, integrity, and deep commitment." Understanding that "if you want to be an artist, every hour in the day, every day

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[65] "Celebrating Black History."
[66] Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 406.
[67] "Celebrating Black History."
[68] Samuel L.E Bonds, "TONES IN BLACK: Oral History Interview," zoom interview by VaShawn Savoy McIlwain-Lightfoot, April 16, 2024.
[69] Jones, "Todd Duncan Biography."

in the week must be a testament to your inner desire."[70] Mr. Duncan's last noted public performance was in the 1970's when Duncan briefly came out of retirement to sing for the Washington Performing Arts Society in their production of David Berlinski's oratorio *Job* at the newly built Kennedy Center in Washington, DC.[71] "There was a student downstairs waiting for a lesson when Duncan, 95, died upstairs at his home on Feb. 28, 1998."[72]

Robert Keith McFerrin Sr. (1921-2006)

Robert McFerrin, American Baritone, opera singer, and educator, was born in Marianna, Arkansas, on March 19, 1921. After singing in the choir and receiving private voice lessons in high school, McFerrin briefly attended Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and returned to St. Louis. In 1941, He won a scholarship to attend Chicago Musical College. The following year, he won his first vocal competition at the Chicagoland Music Festival."[73] After serving in War II in 1943, McFerrin returned to finish his Bachelor of Music, graduating in 1948.[74] McFerrin later received honorary doctorates from Stowe Teacher's College in 1987 and the University of Missouri in 1989.[75] After winning the Metropolitan Airs competition in 1953, he made his historic debut at the Metropolitan Opera of New York, NY, in 1955, playing Amonasro in Verdi's *Aida*.[76] McFerrin became the second African American to win "Auditions of the Air"

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[70] Jones, "Todd Duncan Biography."
[71] Bonds, "TONES IN BLACK."
[72] "Robert Todd Duncan, Singer, and Teacher Born," *African American Registry*, accessed June 3, 2024, https://aaregistry.org/story/robert-todd-duncan-an-original/.
[73] Randye Jones, "Robert McFerrin Biography," *Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music*, last modified December 4, 2022, accessed April 16, 2024, http://www.afrovoices.com/wp/robert-mcferrin-biography.
[74] Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 513-514.
[75] Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 513-514.
[76] Kaeli Groenert, "Blackface at the Met: An Exploration of the Casting of Performers of Color in the Roles of Aida and Othello from 2007-2017" (Honors Thesis, University of Albany, State University of New York, 2019), accessed March 25, 2024, https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/honorscollege_music/1.

and the first Black man to sing at the MET.[77] "Making his debut just three short weeks after Marian Anderson broke the color barrier."[78] McFerrin actually had a Metropolitan contract before Miss Anderson.[79]

Over three seasons, Mr. McFerrin performed in 10 operas, enduringly impacting the representation of BIPOC artists on one of the world's most exalted stages. His presence was a testament to the importance of diversity in the arts. McFerrin's voice was described as "a handsome one, mellow and vibrant in quality, with voluminous top tones, though occasionally a little weak in the lowest register."[80] McFerrin's influence extended beyond the opera stage. He served as the singing voice of Sidney Potier in the 1959 film of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess,* a role that further showcased his versatility and talent. André asserts:

> Robert McFerrin sang for Porgy (played by Sidney Poitier) ... In a historical moment of racial uplift that led into the civil rights era. The film presented a difficult cognitive dissonance with great acting and musical talent, portraying a story based on negative stereotypes, adverse assumptions, and tragic outcomes for the Black community.[81]

As a Baritone civil rights activist, McFerrin advocated for Black music and vocal artists. Considered one of Kentucky's great pioneering civil rights leaders, in 2005, McFerrin was inducted into the Kentucky Civil Rights Hall of Fame at Kentucky State University in Frankfort,

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[77] Jones, "Robert McFerrin Biography."
[78] Groenert, "Blackface at the Met."
[79] Wallace McClain Cheatham, *Dialogues on Opera and the African American Experience* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 151.
[80] Albert Goldberg, "THE SOUNDING BOARD: ROBERT MCFERRIN HEARD IN RECITAL," *Los Angeles Times*, May 6, 1959, accessed April 21, 2024, https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/sounding-board/docview/167488420/se-2.
[81] André, *Black Opera*, 90.

Kentucky.[82] His musical contributions and avid work against discrimination were exemplified through his teaching and performances for communities across the United States. Though suffering a severe stroke in 1989, he remained active in music until his passing by a heart attack in 2006.[83]

Interestingly, Robert Sr. created a new generation of pioneers beyond the realm of classical music. His son, Bobby McFerrin, Jr., is an international household name whose song "Don't Worry, Be Happy" has been used in commercials, music videos, and film soundtracks. Robert McFerrin continues to illuminate the path for Black musicians through his musical legacy.

Bass/Baritone Active Between 1950 and 1990: Bridging the Past and the Future

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the racial climate in the United States of America was marked by significant developmental transitions, such as the Civil Rights Movement, the Voting Rights Act, and shifts in public opinion toward racial equality. It was also fraught with challenges: violence, intimidation, income disparities, prejudices, and racism. Jim Crow and other laws wore heavily on the lives of African Americans who fought tirelessly for equal rights throughout the Civil Rights Movement.[84]

Black Classical Singers in 1950s-60s America faced significant adversities due to racism in major opera companies. Exposure was limited to concert halls, churches, and private events. However, these community venues allowed them to sing classical music in welcoming spaces,

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[82] Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Robert McFerrin, Sr.," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, May 1, 2024, accessed April 21, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-McFerrin-Sr.

[83] Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Robert McFerrin, Sr."

[84] Julius A. Amin, "America's Unfinished Democracy: The Struggle for Black Racial Equality" (*History Faculty Publications)*, no. 109 (2004), accessed April 23, 2024, https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub/109.

offering success and celebrity while intimately connecting with audiences. These connections contributed to changes in perceptions of Black classical artists and performers. The barriers broken in community concert halls helped shape a musical and cultural environment where African American singers, instrumentalists, composers, and conductors could thrive, ultimately leading to some of the most influential Black voices in classical history: Tenor Roland Hayes, the first African American concert artist to win international acclaim and Marian Anderson, the first African American to debut at the MET in 1955.[85]

However, it was not until the 1970s that African American singers started to see regular engagement with America's major opera companies. Domestically, Black opera companies emerged, repertoire by Black composers expanded, and major companies increasingly cast Blacks in leading and supporting roles. Despite these newly available opportunities, prejudicial discriminatory practices remained: Black Sopranos were traditionally cast in exotic roles; Mezzos were cast as witches and gypsies. Black Tenors were typically cast in supporting roles of Moor, demon, or creature and were excluded from love-interest roles that might cast them opposite a White Soprano.[86] Black Bass/Baritones were often cast as villains, the Devil, or roles capitalizing on race. Yet, an intriguing *loophole* or exception to discriminatory practices existed for Black Bass/Baritones, whose Fach (vocal type) is highly sought after in opera. This acceptance loophole allowed Black Bass/Baritones to enter major international opera careers more quickly than other voice types.[87] This distinct benefit provided a crucial opening to the inclusion and representation of future generations of Black opera singers.

[85] Paige, "Tracing the History," 7.
[86] Paige, "Tracing the History," 8.
[87] Cheatham, *Dialogues*, 115.

Simon Estes (b. 1938)

Opera's first Black Bass-baritone celebrity, Simon Estes, is the bridge between the original pioneers and subsequent torch passers (those active after the 1990s). Estes's voice was described as "big" with a natural, warm texture and a velvety tone.[88] Mr. Estes' international work helped create opportunities for Black Classical Singers, breaking down barriers and ensuring that the torch of Black operatic excellence would continue to burn brightly. Born March 2, 1938, in Centerville, Iowa, Simon Estes, Bass-baritone, began his education at the University of Iowa as a pre-med student in 1957, then theology and social psychology.[89] In 1961, while singing in one of the university choirs, voice teacher Charles Kellis heard Estes sing and introduced Estes to classical recordings, prompting Estes to pursue a career as a professional singer. After graduating, Estes attended the Juilliard School in 1964, a school he would later return to as a visiting teacher.

Estes knew it was hard to perform in U.S. opera houses due to his race.[90] Seeking greater performance opportunities, Estes received funding from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the New York City Trust Fund to travel to Europe, audition, and begin an international career.[91] Estes debuted a well-received Ramfis in Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* at Deutsche Oper Berlin in 1965. Winning the bronze medal in the

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[88] Randye Jones, "Estes Bibliography," *Afrocentric Voices in Classical Music*, last modified June 11, 2015, accessed April 22, 2024, http://www.afrovoices.com/estes.html.

[89] Magy McCay, "Simon Estes Returning to Aid University of Iowa," in *Cecile Cooper Newspaper Clippings, 1966-1987*, accessed April 21, 2024, https://diyhistory.lib.uiowa.edu/transcribe/4193/120193.

[90] Shelby Copeland, "Simon Estes, 82, on What It Took To Make It as a Pioneering Black Opera Singer," Yahoo News, June 15, 2021, accessed April 22, 2024, https://news.yahoo.com/simon-estes-82-took-pioneering-110000784.html.

[91] Simon Estes, interview by Marc A. Scorca, "An Oral History with Simon Estes," *OPERA America*, July 15, 2021, accessed April 21, 2024, https://www.operaamerica.org/industry-resources/2022/oral-history-project/an-oral-history-with-simon-estes/.

Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow the following year led to his 1966 White House invitation from President Lyndon B. Johnson and numerous engagements in some of Europe's most esteemed opera houses.[92] "In 1978, he attracted wide attention when he sang the title role in Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* at the Bayreuth festival in Germany— the first male of his race to sing there… Estes made his debut with the Metropolitan Opera in January 1982 in the role of the Landgrave in Wagner's *Tannhäuser*."[93] Considered a pioneer in his own right, African American Baritone William Warfield reflected on an article published in the *New York Times* stating that with Estes's reputation in Europe, had he been a White singer, he would have been at the MET 3 to 4 years before his debut.[94]

Estes's extensive work in opera was instrumental in breaking down racial prejudice in opera. He and several leading African American operatic artists used their success to bring about change. When singing at the MET, Estes voiced concern about other African American artists cast in *Porgy and Bess* being seriously considered for future MET roles. André, Bryan, and Saylor (2012) have reported that in James Standifer's 1999 documentary about *Porgy and Bess*, Estes described having a conversation with "an unnamed administrator who became increasingly angry when he pressed her for more than weak assurances that the male cast members in particular, would be cast again."[95]

Estes' display of Black Excellence began to make the African American Classical Singers household names. He has worked as a voice, humanities, and foreign language professor,

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[92] Simon Estes, "The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Simon Estes," interview by The HistoryMakers®, February 6, 2006, accessed April 22, 2024, https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/simon-estes-41.
[93] Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 516-517.
[94] Cheatham, *Dialogues*, 160.
[95] André, Bryan, and Saylor, "Il Rodolfo Nero," 174.

establishing several foundations, including the Simon Estes Iowa Educational Foundation, the Simon Estes International Foundation for Children in Switzerland, and the Simon Estes Music High School in South Africa.[96] Estes received numerous honorary degrees, including his Doctorate from Iowa State University (1997), where he is an Artist in Residence and a visiting professor.[97]

Estes's professional prowess, activism for aspiring Black Classical Singers, philanthropy, and dedication to education cemented his position as a pioneer of his generation. He was a luminary—an inspiration to the Black classical artists who followed.

Passing the Eternal Torch: Bass/Baritone Active After 1990

The 1990s has been described as a decade of prosperity, political change, societal challenges, and technological developments. There were racially inspired riots and the bombing of the World Trade Center. There was also greater attention to a) multi-culturalism, b) equality for underrepresented groups (e.g., LGB community; disabled), c) global issues (e.g., Dissolution of the Cold War; terrorism), and d) technological advancement. During the decade of the '90s, the idea of a Black opera singer was no longer uncommon and eschewed. As a result of the work of the original, bridging pioneering artists and opera organizations, a new generation of African American Bass/Baritones became uniquely positioned to use their voices and other musical gifts. Black artistic excellence in classical music brought success and recognition, while demographic change ushered in diverse audiences and demand for BIPOC representation. With the crumbling of past barriers, the progress of the 1990s created new possibilities for Black classical artists.

[96] Estes, "The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview."
[97] Simon Estes, "The F. Wendell Miller Distinguished Artist in Residence," Iowa State University, accessed July 8, 2024, https://www.music.iastate.edu/people/simon-estes.

Among these artists was Bass-baritone Kevin Short, whose journey took him from a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) to prestigious international opera stages.

Kevin Cecil Short

A particularly gifted example of this new generation of Black Classical Singers was Kevin Short, Bass-baritone. Born in Washington, DC, Kevin Short became an accomplished and versatile international artist. He began his formal training at the HBCU Morgan State University, where he obtained his Bachelor of Science. Short holds a Master of Music degree from Curtis Institute of Music and is a graduate of the Juilliard American Opera Center, two of the world's most prestigious conservatories. He was inducted into the National Wrestling Hall of Fame, gaining recognition for his excellence in music and athleticism.[98] Spending numerous years as a Fest— Artist in Basel, Switzerland, Short is a dual citizen of the United States and Switzerland.[99]

Appearing in over 280 performances at the Metropolitan Opera, Short maintains an active performing and recording artist career while teaching at the University of Maryland, College Park, The Juilliard School, and the Curtis Institute of Music. Marked with groundbreaking achievements, Short's many awards include the Rosa Ponselle International Vocal Competition, the Bruce Yarnell Competition for Basses and Baritones, and the highly acclaimed Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions in 1989, known now as the Metropolitan Opera Eric and

[98] "Kevin Short," National Wrestling Hall of Fame and Museum, accessed April 21, 2024, https://nwhof.org/hall_of_fame/bio/1158.

[99] Kevin Short, "TONES IN BLACK: Oral History Interview," zoom interview by VaShawn Savoy McIlwain-Lightfoot, April 7, 2024.

Dominique Laffont Competition.[100] Short has graced the stages of some of the world's most elite opera houses.

As a modern-day pioneer and champion for Black music and BIPOC artists, Short's impact transcends the stage. His work in opera, concert, and recital has contributed to BIPOC representation in communities domestically and internationally. As a voice in privileged spaces, Short has experienced prejudice, racism, and discrimination when standing up for the rights of today's operatic Black artists. In an interview with Franciso Salaar of Operawire, Short recalled several moments when he was met with racism. Reflecting on his Figaro with the New York City Opera Touring Company's production of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, he received a review that said, "How dare NYCO foist this social experiment upon us by having Kevin Short sing the role of Figaro." Short digressed:

> Unfortunately, there were a lot of reviews of this sort during that tour that I quickly became accustomed to receiving. I also became accustomed to searching for restaurants in the company of my colleagues so as not to be a solo target while walking down a road since we were all without transportation and left to our own devices upon arrival into a new town. That still didn't stop a police officer from stopping the White Susanna and Countess and asking them if this "boy" was bothering them and what was he doing with them.[101]

Short, along with other leading African American classical artists - Morris Robinson, Larry Brownlee, Russell Thomas, Nicole Heaston-Lane, Kenneth Overton, Laquita Mitchell, and Karen Slack – founded B.L.A.C., the Black Leadership Arts Collective.[102] B.L.A.C.'s work through Master Classes, Lectures, and artistic gatherings are "designed to support and empower

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[100] "Kevin Short," *LA Opera*, accessed April 22, 2024, https://www.laopera.org/about-us/Artists-2/cast-members/kevin-short/.

[101] Francisco Salazar, "Q & A: Kevin Short on Systemic Racism, 'Aida' & the Future of Opera," *Operawire*, July 11, 2020, accessed April 21, 2024, https://operawire.com/q-a-kevin-short-on-systemic-racism-aida-the-future-of-opera/.

[102] Short, "TONES IN BLACK."

Black vocal Artists through leadership, performance, and by supporting creative and Artistic endeavors."[103]

Mr. Short remains a highly sought-after vocal teacher who has produced several Metropolitan Opera Winners. His advocacy for change and commitment to civil rights, representation, and inclusion is exemplified through his numerous affiliations: BLAC, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Pi Kappa Lamba music organization, American Academy of Teachers, the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) and the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM).[104]

Short's international work spans Europe, Asia, and Africa. He works with opera houses and orchestras in Switzerland, Germany, Spain, and France, to name a few, captivating audiences with his beautiful voice and fantastic skill as an actor. One cannot keep his eyes off him when Short is on stage. His artistry is showcased in opera, recitals, and concerts through his rich and expansive repertoire, which covers Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi, and newer works by African American composers like Terance Blanchard.[105] His voice has been described as sonorous, rich, and tenderly expressive – a full-bodied Bass-baritone with the Verdian ability to sing above the staff with ease. His active engagement with communities across the United States reflects his commitment to a) advocating for access, inclusion, and diversity; b) challenging opera, arts, and educational institutions to have open dialogues about racial inequality; and c) improving the opera landscape for generations of African American classical artists.

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[103] "Black Leadership Arts Collective: Kenneth Overton and Russell Thomas," University of Maryland School of Music, accessed April 9, 2024, https://music.umd.edu/events/Blackleadership-arts-collective-karen-slack-and-russell-thomas.

[104] Text message from Kevin Short, July 8, 2024.

[105] "Kevin Short: Bass-Baritone," Athole Still Artist, accessed April 22, 2024, https://www.atholestill.com/artist/kevin-short/.

Chapter 3: Current Pioneers: Black Excellence Through Domestic and International Community Engagement

Amongst my African ancestors, music became a communal mode of communication, for they did not speak the same language. Music initially allowed them to express their inner selves, desires, and motives secretly, not to trouble the waters of their enslavement. Their personal human experiences molded their inner self. Music and other cultural expressions like oral traditions, dance, religion, and visual arts unified my ancestors through emotions like joy, pain, and abandonment. For the original pioneers, this was naturally expressed through Folk Songs (the Negro Spiritual) and African American Art Songs.

This musical legacy embodies the voices of humanity, a unifying vessel of self-expression, understanding, and acceptance. Sharing music across cultures connects us (performer and audience) through the hallmarks of social connectedness: a) shared experience, b) personal growth, and c) communal bonding, cultivating intergenerational understanding and bridging cultural divides.

Walking the Path of Black Classical Music Pioneers: My Beginning

Vocal Performance can speak directly to one's inner self regardless of language. In my former vocal performance work as a Prince George's County public school music teacher, I often said, "Inside each and every one of us is a person that no one knows." As seen across the vocal spectrum, it is the inner self, colored by one's personal life experiences, that is expressed through one's voice. Like Mr. Duncan, my whole being sings when performing Spirituals. For me, Spirituals were not only the gateway to vocal technique and experiencing Western classical music but also an outlet that made space for expressing the whirlwind of emotions that accompany adolescence. It was my way of processing the world and finding myself. At that time,

I was an only child born to a teenage mother with no wanting father in sight. Struggling with identity, for not only was I Black in America, but I was gay. The beginning of my formal voice training took place in group lessons with peers who looked like me, taught by teachers who looked like me. It was there that I learned the power behind representation through live performance, allowing this once quiet and lonely young man to emerge and share my inner self through song. As a first-year freshman at Duke Ellington enrolled in Advanced Voice, our classes would consist of learning spirituals, receiving technical guidance, and performing individually in recital format at the end of class, with everyone singing the same song for practice and evaluation.

In the recital setting, I learned more about who I am, drawing on the strength of my ancestors to establish a voice with a cause. The music of my ancestors helped me find my voice. Now, I serve to continue their legacy and fight against the same hate that once kept them shackled.

Sharing a Legacy of Community Engagement: My Domestic Recital Performance Repertoire

In 2023, I decided to perform a recital for the Prince George's Community. I believed such a recital would achieve several goals: enhance community connectedness, provide a positive example of Black Excellence (particularly in a field to which many audience members had not been exposed), and highlight the contributions of Black composers to the Western music canon through introducing, representing and presenting their works. Additionally, I hoped to promote acceptance while communicating the necessity of equity and equality through performance, walking the path of pioneering Black Bass/Baritone classical artists in honor of their legacy.

I understood that community performance would enable me to connect directly with audience members, a vital connection for counteracting societal misconceptions about men of color, particularly Black men. This is evidenced by acknowledging the roles of a) Social Psychology's Contact Hypothesis (reducing prejudice and improving relations via positive intergroup contact), b) Communications (e.g., exposure and representation in media/live performance), and c) Sociology (social change through cultural activism); counteracting influences on societal misconceptions about men of color, particularly Black men.[106] By engaging with the community through the recital's introduction, performance, and post-performance meet and greet, I intended to challenge negative perceptions by fostering positive shared experiences through communication.

December 22, 2023, at the Collington Community of Bowie, Maryland, I performed with African American Collaborative Pianist Dana N. Scott in the recital, TONES IN BLACK: History Remembered. The Collington Community Recital was built on repertoire traditionally sung by Bass/Baritone Pioneers. The recital featured Negro Spirituals, Art Songs, Oratorio, Filmed Musical Theater, and Opera repertoire. The music chosen represented a wide range, vocally and stylistically. The program was curated specifically to highlight the versatility of these once-hidden voices and celebrate their bravery and authenticity. Though the music presented at the Collington was sourced through historical data documented in literature, newspaper articles, and reviews, many resources will aid singers in broadening their experience, specifically through Black music. Following is the program for the Collington recital. Digital samples of my Recital

[106] Alyssa L. Stewart, "The Ability of Music to Facilitate Social Bonding during Imagined Intergroup Contact" (undergraduate honors thesis, University of Colorado Boulder, 2015), accessed July 17, 2024, https://scholar.colorado.edu/downloads/6t053g67b.

performance, Program Notes, and Translations are available in Appendices II, III, and IV, respectively.

Collington Community Recital

History Remembered: Todd Duncan to Kevin Short, December 22, 2023, at 7:30 pm

Deep River	arr. H.T. Burleigh
Ain't Got Time to Die	arr. H. Johnson
Witness	
Ride on King Jesus	
Duet with Wayne Jennings, Tenor	
Du bist wie eine Blume	R. Schumann
Wohin?	F. Schubert
Von ewiger liebe	J. Brahms
Riding to Town	T. Kerr
At the River	A. Copeland
The Lord's Prayer	A.H. Malotte
Lord God of Abraham from *Elijah*	F. Mendelssohn
Pro Peccatis from *Stabat Mater*	G. Rossini
Alerte, Alerte from *Faust*	C.F. Gounod
Angeli Ferrette, Marguerite	
Wayne Jennings, Faust	
VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, Méphistophélès	
Bess, You is my Woman Now… from *Porgy and Bess*	G. Gershwin
Angeli Ferrette, Bess	
VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, Porgy	
Ol' Man River from *Showboat*	R. Hammerstein and J. Kern
Lost in the Stars from *Lost in the Stars*	K. Weill

Sharing a Legacy of Community Engagement: My Domestic Operatic Performance Repertoire

Between 2021 and 2023, I performed three operas at the University of Maryland School of Music for the Prince George's Community. One of the three which was performed for the Anne Arundel Community. I believed these performances would: a) foster community connectedness (using the recital as a shared cultural experience); b) showcase Black Excellence in opera (a historically underrepresented field), aiming to enhance audience receptivity, encouraging them to engage and appreciate Black artists talent, and creativity; c) highlight the contributions of a Black Female composer to the Western music canon; d) promote BIPOC representation while actively performing roles traditionally cast for someone of a lighter hue; and e) continuing the legacy of Black Bass/Baritone classical artists through performance. Additionally, I understood these community performances would enable me to challenge historical misconceptions about men of color, particularly Black men, cultivating an understanding of the contributions of Black classical artists. I utilize my performances to counter unfavorable stereotypes and contribute positively by highlighting the rich legacy of Black Bass/Baritones, humanizing Black men through fostering empathy, and inspiring Black Classical Singers through positive representation.

On June 8, 2021, in the Dekelboum Concert Hall at the University of Maryland, College Park, I performed the role of Sargeant Coyle in Benjamin Britten's *Owen Wingrave* with the Maryland Opera Studio as part of the National Orchestral Institute + Festival (NOI+F), supported by the National Orchestral Institute Philharmonic. While many patrons may be unaware of this traditional casting practice, Coyle has traditionally been sung by White men, a significant fact not typically advertised in promotional material. On August 27, 2021, at the Dekelboum Concert Hall, and Saturday, August 28, 2021, at Annapolis Opera, I premiered the

role of Officer Jones in the Opera New Work Reading of Nailah Nombeko's *Sunder* with the Maryland Opera Studio, accompanied by piano. A role created for a Black man in response to the Black Lives Matter Movement and advertised as a new work. From April 14 – April 23, 2023, in the Kay Theatre at the University of Maryland, College Park, I performed four performances of Il Commendatore in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* with the Maryland Opera Studio. White men traditionally have sung this role; this often-overlooked fact by general audiences has progressively opened to Black Men throughout recent years. Program Notes for the three operas performed are available in Appendix V. Digital videos for the three operas are available in Appendices VI, VII, and VIII, respectively.

Sharing a Legacy of Community Engagement: My International Operatic Performance Repertoire

In February 2024, I performed in the opera Guiseppe Verdi's *Aida* in five communities in Germany: Hamburg (Barclays Arena), Düsseldorf (PSD Bank Dome Düsseldorf), München (Olympiahalle München), Hannover (ZAG Arena Hannover), and Berlin (Mercedes-Benz Arena). I believed appearing in this opera would: a) build community connectedness through immersive experiences with the audience, interactions with local supernumeraries, local news broadcasts, and televised community initiatives; b) showcase Black Excellence in opera (a historically underrepresented field), aiming to enhance audience receptivity, encouraging them to engage and appreciate Black artists talent, and creativity; c) continue the legacy of Black Amonasro's Bledsoe, Duncan, McFerrin, Estes, and Short; d) promote BIPOC representation while actively performing a role that traditionally has been an entry point or pathway ("Rite of Passage") for Blacks into Verdian repertoire; and e) bolster the vulnerable operatic art form by presenting a "new" prototype for opera's survival, fostering audience participation, blending the

roles of ensemble and chorus, and incorporating modern technology and pyrotechnics. Additionally, I understood that these community performances would enable audiences to challenge historical misconceptions about men of color, particularly Black men, by reaching over 30,000 mostly White German audience members through live performances and news broadcasted pre-performance rehearsals with local supernumeraries. Although traditionally sung by White men, thanks largely to the work of pioneers mentioned in Chapter 2, the role of Amonasro has progressively opened to Black Men in recent years. Program Notes for the opera are available in Appendix V. A digital video of my appearance as Amonasro is in Appendix IX.

Chapter 4: A Current Artist's Multifaceted Perspective as a Black Male in the Classical Music Arena

A plethora of recent social and political events have threatened to reverse, rescind, or weaken civil and human rights for which Black and other pioneers' risk, sometimes losing their liberty and their lives:

1. Unrelenting dissemination of disinformation
2. Attacks on "woke" ideology
3. Legislation adversely impacting BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ communities, and other marginalized groups
4. Attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and initiatives
5. Misconceptions about and animosity toward Critical Race Theory
6. Hostile and dismissive responses to the Black Lives Matter Movement
7. Efforts to disenfranchise BIPOC and other vulnerable communities
8. Protesting of progressive initiatives and activism
9. Legal efforts reversing the civil rights of women (Roe vs. Wade)
10. The Heritage Foundation's proposal of "Project 2025" (a conservative initiative aimed at restructuring the U.S. Federal government)

Despite these threats masked as efforts to protect America, music continues to be a unifying medium and a driving force for diversity and inclusion. Though my dissertation is centered on the African American Bass/Baritone pioneers, I also credit the efforts of pioneering African American women in classical music, such as Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price, for laying the groundwork necessary for BLM's wider acceptance in theater, film, concert, and opera. Without the influence and partnership of African American pioneering women like

Sissieretta Jones, Maggie Porter, and Camila Williams, the continued work of Black artists may have delayed the transformation of societal acceptance and understanding evidenced through increased exposure and international community engagement. It is important to note the role of African American women such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Shirley Chisholm in America's voting process. They historically advocated for human and civil rights, progress evidenced by the endorsement of Kamala Harris, the first African American/Asian American female Vice President and 2024 Democratic Nominee for President of the United States of America.

In this chapter, I have analyzed four operas covering four periods through the prism of performing as a professional opera singer and Maryland Opera Studio (M.O.S.) Alum at the University of Maryland College Park. Analyses target operas I performed with a) the Maryland Opera Studio, b) The National Orchestral Institute and Festival (NOI+F), c) the Annapolis Opera, and d) FKP Scorpio/FKP Show Creations (FKPSC), an international touring company.

My analyses explore how integrating BIPOC artists into traditionally White operas not only adds to current diversity but also how such changes affect the opera's portrayal, especially for me as an African American male. My analyses also examine equity, inclusion in casting, and performance practices.

Analysis of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*

I played the role of Il Commendatore in W.A. Mozart's classical opera Don Giovanni. I analyzed my experience as an African American performing a traditional operatic role in a historically racially diverse America.

Historically cast for White men, Il Commendatore has been performed by notable performers such as African American Basses, Morris Robinson, Kevin Thompson, and Bass-baritone Kevin Short. Since the Perry brothers, Eugene (Don Giovanni), and Herbert's

(Leporello) appearance in Peter Sellar's film version of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in 1990, there has been a healthy appetite for exploring BIPOC inclusion in casting choices.[107] In 2007, while completing my Master's in the Maryland Opera Studio, I was fortunate to play the role of Leporello. Returning to this show as an alumnus and Doctoral McNair Fellow held significant importance to me as it became a full-circle moment as I assumed the role of Il Commendatore.

Following the footsteps of modern-day pioneers, I grew increasingly motivated to leave my mark on this 2023 Maryland Opera Studio production of *Don Giovanni*, where I brought a level of maturation and experience that came with my growth as a singer. Under the stage direction of Corrine Hayes and conductor Craig Kier, this production featured three Black men: me as Il Commendatore, Keyan Tenor Lawrence Barasa as Don Ottavio, and MOS alumnus Justin Harrison as Masetto.

These roles were not cast to highlight a racial divide; instead, the production was the culmination of the final semester of study for second-year studio members and was selected to complement select graduate students' voice fach.[108] However, the characters' nature and relationship with the Commendatore's progeny, a White Donna Anna played by Rhiannon Vaughn, stirred mixed feelings in me as I considered what embodying the character meant for me. On the one hand, I felt encouraged by sharing the stage and having the opportunity to promote Black Excellence through action. However, on the other hand, I was conflicted with the story and curious about how racial dynamics would play out in our rehearsals and performances. How would we be received? For in relation to my character, a Black Don Ottavio is betrothed to

[107] *Don Giovanni*, directed by Peter Sellars (TV movie, 1990, IMDb), accessed June 9, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0253051/.

[108] Maryland Opera Studio, "Performance Opportunities," University of Maryland School of Music, accessed July 12, 2024, https://music.umd.edu/ensembles/maryland-opera-studio.

my White daughter Donna Anna, and a Black Masetto, whom I have no interaction with, is set to marry a White Zerlina played by Victoria McGrath. This is a weighty dynamic with a treacherous Don Giovanni, played by a White Brazilian, Henrique Caravalho. The interplay between racial dynamics highlighted uniquely personal challenges when considering the studio's color-conscious casting of this traditional opera in today's America. Though set traditionally in Italy, the fact that this is an American production at one of the country's leading opera programs on a campus built by African American slaves did not elude me as I brought this story to life. Growing up in a divided America, the undoing of Black families, the suppression of Black men's right to security, and the pursuit of happiness were sadly present in my psyche while preparing and performing Il Commendatore. However, this casting choice added to the storyline's complexity and undoubtedly modernized the libretto.

With this choice in casting, the taboo of race easily gave way to telling the story, and my comfort came immediately as the show reached our audiences, whose demographic mainly included university students, professors, family, friends, and local patrons. With this production occurring in this ethnically diverse Mid-Atlantic region, the commonality of interracial relationships encouraged receptivity. This realization helped me address my conflicting feelings of anger and anxiety. Feelings commonly shared by BIPOC artists navigating careers in opera, allowing me to move beyond culturally controversial perceptions in various parts of the United States. Though individual experiences/attitudes may vary, college-educated Americans are generally more liberal in terms of American politics, which often correlates to one's disposition toward racial prejudices.

My strength in delivering Il Commendatore came from my understanding of self, the character's plight, and his celestial desire for vengeance. Attuning myself to the character's inner

workings allowed me to channel internal conflicts; drawing from my experience with injustice, I sought to understand Il Commendatore's vengeance, thus transforming mine into divine retribution. Taking this approach to character development removed self-imposed limits and helped me feel supported as an alumnus and teacher, shining as a beacon of light for my friends, family, and voice elective students while finding my balance with identity and purpose. This gave me hope and allowed me to be an inspiration to my lone Black Baritone student in the Voice Elective Program.

Technically, the role presented challenges for me as I was recovering from overusing my voice. I was under doctors' orders to be on vocal rest for the entire rehearsal period. Navigating the roles opening scene only came into play less than a week before opening, when I could slowly give volume to my character's voice. I, myself, have been blessed with a sizable instrument, so recovering from a vocal health challenge required me to be hyper-vigilant of Mozart's dynamics and the balance of my voice in the opening scene as I sang with the orchestra and my colleagues. Dying while singing "as sorrcosso, son tradito" required a controlled sotto voce throughout intense acting over the light triplet staccato of strings and the weaving descriptive phrases of Il Commendatore, Don Giovanni, and Leporello.

Another challenge came with the long break that my character has between his death and his resurrection. The opera itself ran for about 3 hours, so staying hydrated and vocally warm proved to be essential for my time offstage. Different aspects of vocal technique came into play with my return to the stage as the ghostly marble statue of Il Commendatore. The addition of the stiff multi-layered costume brought about external factors that affected sight, movement, temperature, and hearing. As a performer, I must conceal such challenges and concentrate on simultaneous vocal delivery and acting.

In the final dinner scene, vocal challenges presented themselves with navigating the stage in full costume while remaining true to musical dynamics and phrasings. The use of legato had to remain consistent linguistically; shadow vowels could easily creep in at the top of my entrance with the opening phrase, "Don Giovanni, a cenar teco." This proved to be a balancing act for me as dramatically, I wanted to fill the space with my opening lines, but when considering my vocal health, balance with the orchestra, and my desire to be heard intelligibly, I had to maintain some sense of restraint while remaining physically stiff but vocally agile. Giving too much voice dramatically would break the vocal line for me as a light shwa sound would creep in after the "n" in "Don." Stylistically, the simplicity in Mozart's vocal writings was more than enough to convey the story dramatically, and trusting that by doing so, every voice would be heard, and the harmonic rhythm would remain clear, especially at times when my headpiece would obstruct vision while connecting with Maestro Kier in the orchestral pit.

Il Commendatore is the first to die at the hands of Don Giovanni and the last to drag him to his death, symbolizing the unspoken desire to right the wrongs of the past. When traditional casting gives way to societal change, opera takes on unspoken layers that highlight trauma present but often not discussed despite efforts to create a more equitable environment. The receptivity to color-conscious casting is wholly dependent on the region's demographics and attending audiences. Given the current political climate here in the United States, it is still hard for Black artists to move forward without acknowledging that even efforts to diversify are wrought with internal challenges for the artists, the director, the conductor, and the institutions working to change the narrative while consciously staying on the right side of history.

Analysis of Britten's *Owen Wingrave*

Owen Wingrave, a 20th-century Opera, was written by Benjamin Britten, a gay White male. The opera traditionally is cast for White artists—I was the first Black man to play Sergeant Coyle.[109] I analyze this role from the perspective of a replacement for the original cast member.

With a little of a week's notice, I was asked to step into the MOS and National Orchestral Institute and Festivals production of *Owen Wingrave*. Due to the pandemic, the opera studio had to adjust its season, and performances would happen in the summer. With rehearsals starting on May 11, 2021, and an opening performance on June 6 in the Dekelboum Concert Hall at the University of Maryland, this would be my first opera since the pandemic started. I was eager to perform opera again. With my background in stepping into contemporary opera at a moment's notice and the fact that I had never sung Britten before, I was happy to join the cast as an Alum of the studio. I did not know how novel my appearance as Sargent Coyle would be in the history of Opera. With no known performing record of Coyle's portrayal by an African American, I was to join the league of trailblazing pioneers as the first Black Sargent Spencer Coyle.[110]

This *made-for-TV* opera had historically been traditionally cast for White singers. Seeing my chance to build my repertoire, get out of the house, and be a vessel for representation, I accepted the role. To do so, we followed strict COVID-19 protocols. Singers were encouraged to be vaccinated and watch rehearsal via live stream if they felt under the weather. Rehearsals were outside or in large, well-ventilated spaces within the School of Music, and we were required to enter a COVID bubble before transitioning into the Dekelboum Concert Hall. It was apparent that things would forever be different. The music was the most challenging I had ever learned;

[109] Nicholas Clark, email message to VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, June 3, 2024.
[110] Benjamin Poore, email message to VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, June 5, 2024.

rhythms were complex, the meter would shift often, and there were moments of polytonality. Yet, playing Sargent Coyle was about redefining expectations and being a voice for inspiration, as the performances would be live-streamed and have a live audience.

This minimalist production utilized Social Distancing in its staging, and there was a heavy reliance on the camera crew to capture our broad stage. I received terrific support in preparing for the role. The role of my wife, Mrs. Coyle, was double cast, and with me being the only Black in the cast, the interracial relationship was of no consequence as the storyline and the music were the stars of the show. With an unwavering commitment to Black Excellence, I was driven by the personal reward of triumph as I navigated through the character's complexities and his music. Coyle, a British Military teacher, was highly respected and had considerable empathy toward Owen Wingrave, who did not want to become a soldier but was destined to follow the path of service following the history of leaders in his family. In character preparation, I called on my experience teaching high school for Prince George's County Public Schools, embodying the firmness and compassion innate to me as an educator and leader in other aspects of my professional life. Despite layers of complexity, I had to consider the power performing this role had for me and my presence in the community, as I knew my artistry would be broadcast beyond the physical realms of the Concert Hall.

Having this experience made me reflect on the works of the great Bass/Baritone pioneers who, as "firsts," were met with the weight of forging through prejudicial times as reflected in creating their own "bubble" to secure personal health and safety. Under unique circumstances, I faced artistic challenges in a COVID bubble, being "away" from home, my husband, dogs, and family. Though miles away, I was lonely and struggled with the necessity of isolation, empathizing with the pioneers whose inner realities once mirrored mine. Being a first came with

a zeal of excitement supported by a prideful sense of responsibility. I infused my life experience as a Black educator in my performance, understanding that I may have been the first to break this barrier but knowing that my steps are ordered in the history of my people. I called on my knowledge of the pioneers' accomplishments to rise to the occasion, owning my space on the stage just as they have. The audience's reception was admirable, and in these challenging times, my presence proved that Black voices continue to transcend the boundaries of race. Honoring self-awareness and adaptability, I acknowledge with gratitude the efforts for advanced training programs to be inclusive in their re-envisioning of once rigidly cast roles. Immersing myself in Sargent Coyle's intent and compassion, I sang his aria "Straight out of School" passionately, encouraged by my contribution to the cannon.

Playing the complex role of Spencer Coyle in Britten's pacifist opera speaks to inner courage and exceeding societal expectations. As the first African American to embody Coyle, I approached his consternation over Owen's choice to reject his family's military traditions for pacifism by understanding the broader fight for BIPOC representation. As an educator and leader, I overcame stereotypes and contributed to the limitless possibilities that await future BIPOC pioneers. MOS and NOI+F recognized the significance of inclusion in their diverse casting. The role of Sargent Coyle in Britten's *Owen Wingrave* speaks for how this music industry continues to evolve in its casting practices to become more inclusive to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color in light of the Black Lives Matter Movement. My portrayal of Coyle voices the importance of enacting DEI initiatives and is a testament to the evolution of advanced classical training in America.

Analysis of Nombeko's *Sunder*

Sunder, a contemporary opera, was written by African American female composer Nailah Nombeko and represents opera companies' efforts to support the BLM Movement, utilizing inclusion as a path to equality. Co-commissioned through Annapolis Opera's "Lift Every Voice" initiative and MOS, *Sunder* embodies its commitment to systematic change, inclusivity, and representation. Nombeko states that her inspiration was the killing of George Floyd and the protests that followed, wanting the subject matter to be relevant to the time by addressing racial injustice from the perspective of a Black officer.[111] The opera showcases a Black man as the leading character and speaks to the core values of the BLM Movement.

Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to breathe life into many historic Black figures by creating their portrayal as a medium for education, representation, and awareness. My participation in Nailah Nombeko's "*Sunder*" became the first Black role I have originated based on a fictional character exacting the same. The commissioning of Nombeko's *Sunder* directly results from the reinnervated powerful work evoked by the Black Lives Matter Movement's global recognition. Becoming Officer Jones enabled me to explore the intricacies of the complex nature of being an African American officer during a heightened time of systemic injustice. This character lives a life of duality, honoring his heritage and representing "the blue" (the police force), a role emphasizing identity and duty. In preparation for the role, I considered the administrative struggles my stepfather endured as a federal police officer before choosing to retire. I sought to convey the heavy weight of policing in a small American town as a minority, a reality reflecting today's national challenges.

[111] Annapolis Opera, "Sunder: A New Work Reading Program," accessed July 12, 2024, https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/read/65834157/sunder-a-new-work-reading-program.

An amazing gift that comes with being the character's originator is that, as stated by MOS Bass-baritone Louis Cleare, "You're essentially an authority regarding performance practice for the work!"[112] So, I would like to share my thoughts on Officer Jones only Aria, "Thank God the kid's Alive…" Together with Nombeko's neo-impressionistic style, Haymer's lyrics illuminated the angst felt behind real-world issues. At measure 63 of scene X, Officer Jones's true relief and gratitude are expressed with a simple mezzo piano phrase, "Thank God the kid's alive…" At measure 70, the melody spirals through a long wielding legato line as Officer Jones finally acknowledges the state of his mental health and his desire to "disappear," having his family pick up and go! The officer speaks about the internal battle Black police officers struggle with daily, as reflected in the librettist Alicia Haymer's lyrics: "I thought that I could be a stand-up Black man and represent the blue, always going by the book, what did it get me?"[113] At a crossroads, Officer Jones is forced to choose between remaining in his career or honoring his morality.

In measure 111, Nombeko gives the direction "sung freely" paired with the text "So what's a man in my position to do but go?" embodying the internal conflict behind his actions and ongoing investigations. I interpreted the direction as a suspension of time that maintains the current of internal motion. Please note that when I speak of "internal motion," I am referring to the impetus to keep the story going, for that is the line before the return to the central point of gratitude, "Thank God the kid's alive!" When performing the aria, one must have a firm understanding of the music and its harmonic progression. Also important to note is one's presentation as an actor because Officer Jones is alone and exposed, vocally, and emotionally, as

[112] Text message from Louis Cleare, May 2, 2024.
[113] Nailah Nombeko (music) and Alicia Haymer (libretto), *Sunder* (2021; score, received by email from John King, July 26, 2021).

he laments his mistaking a phone for a gun. The aria ebbs and flows as Jones reflects on his life and purpose. Suspended moments of held notes dissipate before leading to the next section. The accompaniment creates a sense of silence with explosive episodes of chaos, which lends to its powerful impact, especially towards the end of the aria as the opera nears its moment of reconciliation between Officer Jones and wounded Aaron. Counting is essential, and the biggest mistake an English speaker could make is not treating this work with as much attention as one does with repertoire outside of their native tongue. The opera is roughly an hour long, and the story develops quickly. Nombeko's *Sunder* is too short for standard billing at a major opera house but is the perfect opera for educational outreach or double billing, perhaps with another complimenting work of a similar length.

Annapolis Opera's commitment to diversity is mirrored in its organizational structure, which speaks of the social relevance and the impact of the BLM Movement. At the same time as *Sunder*'s premiere, Annapolis Opera appointed modern-day Baritone pioneer, my cousin-in-law MOS graduate, choral director, conductor, and now Executive Director of The Denyce Graves Foundation, Terry Eberhardt to its board's "Lift Every Voice Advisory Trustees," a step that marks its commitment to diversified inclusion, representation and systemic change. An audacious broadening approach that honors the moment and meets the Black Lives Matter Movement with meaningful action through organizational structure, creating an advisory body appointing a prominent Black community music leader to a key advisory board position, goals aligned with BLM.

Analysis of Verdi's *Aida* (Amonasro - Rites of Passage)

In Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida,* I performed the role of Amonasro as a "Rite of Passage" with FKP Show Creations. I consider this production of *Aida* to be a "new" prototype for the future of opera by a) fostering contemporary community engagement throughout Germany, audience participation and community connectedness (using opera as a shared experience); b) promoting racial equality through color-blind casting, showcasing Black Excellence and challenging misconceptions with FKPSC casting of a Black Amonasro; c) technological inclusivity; local news broadcasts, televised community initiatives, press events, and social media promotions (Flash mobs, public art displays, and live-streamed presentations); and d) using/creating immersive theatrical crossover opera practices; blending the roles of ensemble and chorus (e.g., the army, priest, etc.), incorporating modern technology (projections, animation, live filming, sound engineering) and pyrotechnics.

Amonasro is an intricately nuanced role that must be portrayed by an experienced actor and singer who can navigate the varying masks of the Ethiopian King. Traditionally played by White men in Blackface, this role is one of many "Rites of Passage" for African American Bass/Baritone as it is expected to be in the wheelhouse of any Verdian Baritone seeking a career in opera. The role is essentially the vocal equivalent of Aida and Radamès, condensed into two acts rather than four. Amonasro sings with vigor from the moment he enters until he escapes.

I always find it challenging to balance my fury behind practices of typecasting and the use of Blackface. Both are negative in historical context, with the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes depicting Blacks as lazy, stupid, and/or submissive. However, the international creative team of FKP Show Creations' *Aida* made a conscious effort to live in the now and reach into the future! Their production of *Aida* is a prototype and bridge into what opera for the

community can look like. FKP Show Creations chose to uplift Guiseppe Verdi's concept of "Opera for the People," becoming a bridge into the future.

As an undergrad, I told my voice teacher, Dr. Darryl Taylor, that I wanted to be a Verdi Baritone (a rare voice)! He replied, "Honey, that's not up to you… That's up to God." In January 2022, my dear, esteemed colleague and friend, Tenor Marvin Scott, informed me that Conductor Michael Ellis Ingram was trying to contact me. This was a pleasant surprise, as it had been roughly twelve years since our last collaboration on MOS's production of Pronto's *Shadow Boxer* in 2010. Ingram asked me if I had any recordings to share. Without question or pause, I emailed him eight video recordings. Unbeknownst to me, he was casting for Verdi's *Aida*. Though I was set to play Germont in La Musica Lirica's production of Verdi's *La Traviata* in 2020, COVID-19 swiftly eliminated that opportunity, thus making *Aida* my first Verdi opera! Fast forward to January 2024, and I find myself in Germany, embarking on one of the most significant opportunities to date: playing Amonasro. I recall watching the documentary Aida's Brothers & Sisters: Black Voices in Opera and Concert as a youth, and now I reverently follow the "Rite of Passage" of the pioneers who paved the way for me: Jules Bledsoe as the first Black man to sing Amonasro with an established Opera Company in 1932, Todd Duncan with European debut in 1947, Robert McFerrin with his 1955 debut at the MET, Simon Estes with his iconic MET performance with Leontyne Price in 1985, and Kevin Short with his Arizona Opera debut in 2012.

In recent years, Black Lives Matter and other DEI initiatives have taken center stage in casting practices across the United States and Europe. Though racial issues are not exclusive to America, the German Opera System has long welcomed African American Singers for their talent and gift of voice. CEO/producer Jasper Barendregt of FKP Show Creations (FKPSC) and

his Creative team, African American Conductor Michael Ellis Ingram and Dutch Director Rian van Holland, shared their thoughts on their casting for *AIDA* - THE ARENA OPERA SPECTACLE 2024 and their choice to cast diversely.

FKPSC met the times with equitable diversity, embracing artists through color-blind casting. In this production, the roles of Aida and Radamès were initially double-cast. Danish Soprano Nina Clausen and Russian Soprano Yana Kleyn were cast as Aida. Playing Radamès were Caucasian American Tenor Dr. Martin Shalita and African American Tenor Marvin Scott. Although Scott only stayed with the cast until the premiere, his casting was a distinctive choice that voraciously challenged racial prejudices that historically blocked Black men from playing romantic leads opposite of traditionally White characters.

Scott's participation in promotional commercials, advertisements, and news interviews also allowed him to reach a global audience expediently through the media and the Internet. Markedly incongruous from the world Black pioneers experienced post-emancipation, technology allows artists to reach more communities and change more lives. This level of exposure is impactful, not only for representation but for the development of kindred visibility. In part, this type of access aids in the inclusionary progress of BIPOC artists.

With Scott's departure, I became the only person of color in the main cast. A familiar position that is still very much experienced by many BIPOC artists who chose to pursue careers in opera. This was an impactful reality that I would face as Scott moved on to his next project—a critical moment in my debut as Amonasro, continuing the legacy of *Aida*'s once-hidden Bass/Baritone pioneers.

10-Year Snapshots of Casting Representation in *Aida*

Kaeli Groenert's dissertation "Blackface at the Met: An Exploration of the Casting of Performers of Color in the Roles of Aida and Othello from 2007-2017" utilized 10 years of the Metropolitan Opera's archived performances of Verdi's *Otello* and *Aida* Opera. At the time of Groenert's research, "of the 66 performances of *Aida*, there were only nine performances in which Aida, an Ethiopian princess, was played by a Black performer, accounting for 13.6% of the performances... Amonasro, Aida's father and the king of Nubia, was played exclusively by White performers."[114]

Table 1: Ethnicity of Performers in Aida at the Metropolitan Opera from 2007-2017

Year	Total Performances	Non-Black Aida	Black Aida	Non-Black Amonasro	Black Amonasro
2007	7	3	4	7	0
2008	-	-	-	-	-
2009	10	10	0	10	0
2010	5	5	0	5	0
2011	-	-	-	-	-
2012	17	16	1	17	0
2013	-	-	-	-	-
2014	9	9	0	9	0
2015	4	4	0	4	0
2016	7	4	3	7	0
2017	7	6	1	7	0
Total	66	57	9	66	0

I looked at MET *Aida* opera archives for the years following Groenert's analysis. The results of my search are indicated in Table 2.

[114] Groenert, "Blackface at the Met."

Table 2: Ethnicity of Performers in *Aida* at the Metropolitan Opera from 2014-2024

Year	Total Performances	Non-Black Aida	Black Aida	Non-Black Amonasro	Black Amonasro*
2018	14	14	0	14	0
2019	-	-	-	-	-
2020	-	-	-	-	-
2021	-	-	-	-	-
2022	15	6	9	15	0
2023	-	-	-	-	-
2024*	17	5	12	13	4
Total	60	35	25	56	4

*Upcoming

As indicated in Table 2, there have been only three Black Aidas and no Black Amonasros during the six years since Groenert's analysis. The MET's future casting does show the addition of African American Bass-baritone Eric Owens as Amonasro in the upcoming 2024-2025 season.[115] Including the upcoming season, the Black performer percentage of Aida will increase to 48.3%. Within just a few years of the BLM Movement, the MET has stood by its commitment and made definitive changes in its casting—making the four upcoming performances with Owens as Amonasro denote progress.

In FKPSC's production of *Aida* Barendregt states: "We have cast the roles based on voices, not on skin color or body sizes. We wanted to hear the right energy in the voice and looked for voices that touched us. So, it just happened that Aida was a Danish Soprano, and Amonasro turned out to be a person of color. Skin color was never a theme that we wanted to

[115] "The Metropolitan Opera: Aida," *The Metropolitan Opera*, accessed June 4, 2024, https://www.metopera.org/season/2024-25-season/aida/.

implement into the show's message."[116] These active practices of inclusivity are essential to the evolution of opera.

Traditionally, a White Aida would darken their skin tone for the role, but this is an old and racially insensitive practice that, like the use of live animals, has increasingly been disavowed. In 2022, two years after the height of the revived BLM Movement, Russian Soprano Anna Netrebko posted several pictures of herself in Blackface as Aida at the Arena di Verona Opera Festival (AVOF), Verona, Italy, via Instagram, prompting backlash from many people denouncing her makeup as racist.[117] This led African American Soprano Angel Blue to cancel her scheduled festival appearance in Verdi's *La Traviata* in protest, stating, "The use of Blackface under any circumstances, Artistic or otherwise, is a deeply misguided practice based on archaic theatrical traditions which have no place in modern society."[118] Blue states, "In order to keep opera relevant in today's society, there's no place for Blackface."[119] The New York Times, Javier C. Hernandez, reports:

> Many leading opera companies, including the Metropolitan Opera in New York, have only recently stopped the practice of having White singers darken their skin with stage makeup to perform the title roles in "Aida" and "Otello," long after minstrel shows, Blackface roles and other types of performances that rely on makeup that echoes racist caricatures disappeared from many stages. But the practice is still common in parts of Europe and Russia, and Netrebko has been a vocal proponent of wearing dark makeup.[120]

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[116] Jasper Barendregt, email message to VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, May 3, 2024.
[117] Javier C. Hernández, "Soprano Withdraws From Opera, Citing 'Blackface' in Netrebko's 'Aida'," *The New York Times*, July 15, 2022, accessed May 23, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/15/arts/music/angel-blue-anna-netrebko-blackface.html.
[118] Melissa Treinkman, "A Conversation with Angel Joy Blue," *Journal of Singing* 80, no. 3 (January/February 2024): 351-353, doi.org/10.53830/sing.00013.
[119] Hernández, "Soprano Withdraws."
[120] Hernández, "Soprano Withdraws."

Although her withdrawal made no immediate difference in the festivals' practices, Blue's defiant act of artivism has encouraged other artists to primarily move away from this practice. Considering themselves as a "theatrical museum," AVOF defended their Blackface practices as aiming to preserve historical productions as they were initially conceived, a "living" history. In OperaWire's article, a spokesperson for the AVOF said, "Everywhere in the world used to have what you call Blackface. So as long as we have a historical production, it is very hard to change them because it means changing something designed that way."[121] Acknowledging that "Every country has different roots, and their cultural and social structures developed along different historical and cultural paths."[122] Further, the topic varies greatly around the world.[123]

In clearly differentiated juxtaposition, FKPSC's Hair and Costume department made no efforts to alter the complexion of either Aida. Therein, highlighting the artists' voice and acting, illumined by our (1942 *Illustrated Stories of the Operas – AIDA)* comic-book-inspired costume designs by Ilka Rönitz-Leyh helped complete the portrayal of the characters. I argue that adhering to such antiquated practices as utilizing Blackface leads to maladaptive performance standards in most theatrical art forms. Using Blackface or Whiteface should only be acceptable in the protest and historical telling of artivism. Producer Barendregt asserts, "We have had no single question raised regarding the fact that both father and daughter had different skin colors. Amonasro has been accepted without any hesitation by both audience as well as critics."[124] This outcome shows that the color of one's skin proved inconsequential in FKPSC's telling of *Aida*

[121] Treinkman, "Conversation," 352.
[122] Hernández, "Soprano Withdraws."
[123] Hernández, "Soprano Withdraws."
[124] Barendregt, email message.

and is one example of how color-blind casting aids in opera's modest efforts towards diversity, receptivity, and equality.

In FKPSC's production, the director's vision was to lift the story out of its original racial context (Egyptian v. Ethiopian) and throw it through the prism of our diverse cast in a way that would ideally reach audience members of any and every race or country of origin.[125] Van Holland notes, "We decided to go for a multicultural cast, a bit Bridgerton… open for all nationalities in the choir, the soloist cast, the orchestra, and the group of dancers."[126] With over 20 nations represented on and backstage, the creative team was happy that the cast appeared to be mixed. Choosing not to hold open auditions, Maestro Ingram invited principal soloists to live and virtual auditions. Ingram also had the unique pleasure of hand-picking some of Europe's finest instrumentalists for the orchestra:

> It is always my goal for the people in the pit, on the stage, and in the hall to look like the people in the city—in other words, for the opera house to be a microcosm of the society it is meant to serve. However, most opera houses in Germany and the United States are oases of Whiteness and wealth. This can only change by pulling all of the available levers: casting diverse Artists, programming diverse repertoire, experimenting with diverse formats (like an opera in a sports stadium), and reaching out to diverse communities. I am almost invariably the only Black person in every opera house I enter, whether as a conductor or just an audience member. Choosing a diverse cast for this production of *Aida* was just one small step towards the goal.[127]

Van Holland affirms reverently, "The voice was number one in the choice. The voice that colored the character, charisma, and the ability to act and to be physically and mentally there to fill the whole stage because it is, as you know, huge. An adventurous, open personality was also very important in letting go of traditions… All these kinds of elements were important for the

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[125] Michael Ellis Ingram, personal communication to VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, April 22, 2024.
[126] Rian van Holland, WhatsApp audio message to VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, May 3, 2024.
[127] Ingram, personal communication.

decision, and if Jonas, Michael, or another person would come with a beautiful Chinese Soprano or a Black Soprano, then that would be Aida."[128]

Conductor Michael Ellis Ingram shared his approach to casting and why, as a person of color, diverse casting matters:

> The producer indicated in one of our very first meetings that he was interested in "color blind" casting. I, too, am interested in very diverse casts, but I also make it a point to hire People of Color whenever I can. Often POCs don't even make it to the casting call because producers, directors, and general managers lack the imagination to welcome a new look for an old role. It is unsettling how often I hear things like, "But that's not what Tamino looks like" while sitting on the jury of an audition in Germany. Because POCs cannot always make it into the audition room, they sometimes end up with CVs that do not accurately convey the breadth of their talent, which in turn makes it even more difficult to get them into the room.[129]

Challenges and opportunities for growth arose from having such a culturally diverse ensemble, and they have grown beyond global changes considering the BLM Movement. Today's world recognizes LGBTQIA+ communities, expanding the scope of how diversity, inclusion, and representation appear in opera. Internationally, companies continue to honor humanity by creating awareness and visibility for underrepresented artists, making intentional choices to adapt to evolving social norms. Barendregt and van Holland discussed how FKPSC embraced equality for women and the LGBTQIA+ community: We wanted to have a mirror of this society nowadays. This is who we are; this is how we live together and visualize equality.[130] For example, from the very beginning, we decided that Radamès' Army should not be an army of men. We have always had the vision in mind that both men and women would accompany

[128] van Holland, WhatsApp audio message.
[129] Ingram, personal communication.
[130] Ingram, personal communication.

Radamès into the war.[131] There was even a discussion about "Can a man perform a woman's part?" No, we didn't go for that.[132]

Some opera companies make overtly progressive choices without considering the demographics of their regional audiences. For example, in America, Tulsa Opera boldly cast a trans woman, Lucia Lucas, as Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in 2019. A National Public Radio (NPR) article by Ari Shapiro and Dave Blanchard notes, "Lucas is a transgender woman with a rich Baritone voice and is the first known trans woman to sing a principal role on an American opera stage."[133] The community and donor response were unprepared for such an extreme change. This strikingly divergent DEI initiative and the emergence of the pandemic led to a steady decline in financial contributions amid America's economic downturn. The company filed for bankruptcy, the General Director, Ken McConnell, resigned, and Tulsa Opera canceled its entire Mainstage 2023-2024 Season.[134] This acknowledges that though operatic organizations are making efforts for change, apprehension remains in some communities. Organizations must be attuned to their local community as they impact systematic change.

FKPSC acknowledges and supports authenticity, but doing so comes with learning curves. During the rehearsal period, a specific question challenged Barendregt. "What to tell a binary person when the costume they should wear requires a push-up bra?"[135] Recognizing that,

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[131] Barendregt, email message.
[132] van Holland, WhatsApp audio message.
[133] Ari Shapiro and Dave Blanchard, 'They Know That I'm The Real Deal': Transgender Baritone Makes Opera History," *Deceptive Cadence: NPR*, May 30, 2019, accessed May 30, 2024, https://www.npr.org/sections/deceptivecadence/2019/05/30/727846231/they-know-that-i-m-the-real-deal-transgender-Baritone-makes-opera-history.
[134] Francisco Salazar, "Tulsa Opera Cancels MainStage Productions for 2023-24 Season & General Director Resigns," *OperaWire*, June 23, 2023, accessed May 30, 2024, https://operawire.com/tulsa-opera-cancels-mainstage-productions-for-2023-24-season-general-director-resigns/.
[135] Barendregt, email message.

Barendregt expressed, “We have had good and honest conversations with various people and have learned a lot during the creation process.”[136] Van Holland mentioned that one singer gratefully said, “The best thing I felt in this production is that we were accepted. Everybody was accepted. No matter where you are from, how old you are, man, woman, what you prefer in life, it was accepted. Everybody was allowed to be who he or she is, and she felt like she was in a very safe family.”[137]

As a principal in the cast and member of the LGBTQIA+ community, I believe in uplifting others who deserve to live life embraced in love and honor of their authentic selves. My experience with FKPSCs *Aida* was memorable as there was no point in the run where I felt anything less than seen and equal to my colleagues in terms of sexuality. Outside the theater, progression is still desired in society, as certain prejudices factor in when considering citizenship and race. Internationally, I still experience various forms of targeted oppression. While on tour, the soloist and administrative staff were stopped at a checkpoint en route to Münich, Germany, from Hamburg, Germany. A routine check extended well over an hour as an Asian orchestral member, and I were asked to step off the bus. My own experiences worldwide led me to exclaim rhetorically, “Why? Because I’m Black?” Only to be affirmed by the production assistant in training, “Yes, unfortunately.” Our passports were examined further, and we were questioned about who we were and why we were traveling with FKPSC. This was when the lead production assistant should have stepped in, translated, and advocated on my behalf, but she did not. Gratefully, one of the officers spoke excellent English and shared that she was once a foreign exchange student in Minnesota as a youth. She was also very aware of our production of *Aida.*

[136] Barendregt, email message.
[137] van Holland, Rian. WhatsApp audio message.

Acknowledging that her colleagues assumed we were part of the Aida cruise and were suspicious about why we were on our way to a landlocked location. Being that the minorities were the only ones taken through this process, it does not take much to infer that their suspicions were only with us. This reality remains hard to swallow, but resilience is essential in treading a path to global representation and is why I continue to expand my territory and pursue opportunities of artivism simply by being present in honor of BIPOC representation.

Jules Bledsoe's ceiling-breaking appearance as Amonasro occurred in 1932 at the Cleveland Municipal Stadium (CMS). Persisting down a similar path by joining an international tour of Verdi's *Aida*, I performed in arenas throughout Germany. Unlike Bledsoe's experience, this production of *Aida* uniquely met these times with modern technology and advanced effects: a surround sound system, 106+ wireless microphones, 53+ transmitter packs, 53+ In-Ears, 216 headlights, 2 XXL large-screen projectors, 72 square meter LED wall, 148 speakers, five cameras,16 firework rockets, 20 torches, pyrotechnics, a stage lift, and 20,000 ml of AIDA-Perfume[138] along with multiple CO^2 based fog machines (Dry Ice), creating a dreamlike atmosphere for all the senses—a stark difference from anything you could find in the 1930s. Though technical aspects are rarely documented, CMS was unlikely to use amplification technology in the 1930s. Although loudspeakers existed, technology was limited in its capabilities; large-scale amplification systems were uncommon. At the time of Bledsoe's Stadium Opera Week performance of *Aida*, carbon microphone technology lacked high

[138] "AIDA is...," AIDA: The Arena Opera Spectacle 2024, accessed May 26, 2024, https://aida-opera.live/en/aida-is/.

fidelity,[139] condenser microphones were expensive[140] and best used in concert, and the mere fact that his performance was in an open-air venue would have vitiated the quality of sound within the stadium. It should also be noted that wireless microphone technology did not exist until around the 1950s.[141]

FKPSC's use of in-ears and wireless microphones, though non-traditional for opera, was necessary due to the enormous size of the venues. Managing such technology as an opera singer was fraught with challenges. Barendregt states:

> It took a bit of time for everyone to understand the implications of using all this modern audio tech. But with proper information sharing and enough time, we created an environment where our cast could truly learn to work with the possibilities and advantages of it. Imagine a singer that doesn't need to acoustically reach the last row of seats. He/she can use his instrument with more "Fingerspitzengefühl" (tact) and use the energy for balancing color and timbre instead of just being loud enough.[142]

Maestro Ingram shared his perspective with the understanding that:

> In most opera productions, we, the Artists, are in charge of our own sound. This includes timbre, balance, resonance, etc. In an amplified production like our *Aida*, all of these parameters are handed over to the sound engineers, whom we must trust completely to balance the singers with the orchestra and sound design—and to make us all sound really good. Whoever is willing to give up control and to trust does well. Whoever isn't, goes mad fairly quickly.[143]

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[139] Michael Petterson, "The History of Carbon Microphones and Artifacts from the Shure Archives," Shure, accessed June 4, 2024, https://www.shure.com/en-US/performance-production/louder/the-history-of-carbon-microphones-and-artifacts-from-the-shure-archives.

[140] Michael Petterson, "The History of Condenser Microphones and Artifacts from the Shure Archives," Shure, accessed June 4, 2024, https://www.shure.com/en-US/performance-production/louder/the-history-of-condenser-microphones-and-artifacts-from-the-shure-archives.

[141] Amy Cassell, "The Evolution of the Wireless Microphone," Full Sail University, June 5, 2013, accessed June 4, 2024, https://hub.fullsail.edu/articles/the-evolution-of-thewireless-microphone.

[142] Barendregt, email message.

[143] Ingram, personal communication.

FKPSC arena performances were unique to opera, as this production of *Aida* combined traditional opera techniques with rock techniques, using animation, pyrotechnics, and a life-size custom-made Elephant. All were markedly different from CMS's 1932 production of *Aida*, which included a live elephant and was limited to the technology of their times.[144] Also innovative was the choice to blend roles between the chorus and ensemble.

> We wanted to cross a bridge and do things that brought in elements that were normally not brought in, such as a dancing choir, a really dancing choir. We intelligently did that, mixing dancers with singers and letting them focus on their profession. However, yes, the singers danced, and the dancers sang and created in that way; that was the possibility of using this musical element to make it more dynamic and not only in a static traditional way.[145]

In the spirit of Giuseppe Verdi, who was known as a composer who made music for the people and not the elite, FKPSC did not create Aida only for opera lovers. We have created Aida for everyone and, hence, used many spectacular ingredients to enhance the show experience. With this, we were able to create a spectacle that convinced 30,000 partly new spectators to visit the opera for the first time in their lives![146] We were performing for audiences who had never set foot in an opera house before and who were more likely to know Aida the cruise ship than *Aida* the opera. Almost no one would have had any preconceived notions about the piece or the specific roles.[147] Aligning my work with Bass/Baritone pioneers, Maestro Ingram states, "This was an extraordinary opportunity because they will all now think of you as the quintessential Amonasro. The few audience members who were indeed connoisseurs of opera would immediately have made the Simon Estes connection."[148]

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[144] Bettina Aptheker, "The Passion and Pageantry of Shirley Graham's Opera *Tom-Tom*," *Souls* 18, no. 2–4 (2016): 263–70, doi.org/10.1080/10999949.2016.1230812.
[145] van Holland, Rian. WhatsApp message, May 3, 2024.
[146] Barendregt, email message.
[147] Ingram, personal communication.
[148] Ingram, personal communication.

My Experience of DEI in Opera

Opera traditions, like humanity, continue to evolve. It is the goal of the artist to let the voice speak for itself, devoid of racism or colorism. For example, certain traditions that have survived throughout the centuries that required performers to color their faces (Whiteface or Blackface) in some productions have fortunately changed with the times. White artists now face backlash if they engage in this racially insensitive performance practice.

Through performance, I have personally had the opportunity to explore traditionally White cast roles and to create characters that honor the growth, advocacy, and acceptance of BIPOC artists by way of forward-focused art. However, there remain challenges when it comes to traditional casting. Suzy Woltmann of Backstage explains, "Colorblind casting asks viewers to engage in the willing suspension of disbelief and imagine a reality in which race does not matter. On the other hand, color-conscious casting recognizes the impact race has on the world of a narrative and uses that knowledge to add texture."[149] In higher education and training programs, the pool of artists is limited when casting leans toward color-conscious casting. Thus, institutions of education and Opera companies now must decide what casting practice to adopt as they move toward DEI productions.

[149] Suzy Woltmann, "What Are Colorblind and Color-Conscious Casting?" Backstage, December 1, 2023, accessed April 29, 2024, https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/color-blind-casting-76238/.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The music produced by Black artists has always been at the forefront of change! When I think of the pioneer's legacy, I cannot help but consider the role empowerment, integrity, and dignity played in their sharing of their innate gifts. Their voices spoke to those inclined to hear their heartfelt music without bias.

Their journey signified Black Excellence, opening new avenues by changing societal perceptions of future BIPOC artists. They utilized their platforms for advocacy while broadening opportunities for Black Bass/Baritone opera singers with their extraordinary vocal prowess. Their enduring legacy continues to contribute to equality, highlighting social and civil rights movements fighting for equality. The lasting impact of the original and bridge-pioneering African American Bass/Baritones in classical music reflects their transformative strength and unyielding spirit.

The original and bridge pioneers of African American Bass/Baritones have made significant contributions to classical music by: a) advocating for themselves and future generations of Black Classical Singers through mentorship, training, and academia, challenging discrimination, racial prejudices, and stereotypes; b) expanding the field for Black Bass/Baritone opera singers, opening doors to opportunities, creating space for continued representation, removing barriers to actively pursuing careers in opera; (d) setting pathways into classical music, paving the way for Black Classical Singers acceptance and recognition in classical music, more specifically opera; establishing successful careers, often shattering records being the first to perform traditionally White cast roles in major opera houses domestically and abroad.

For example, from the Fisk Jubilee Singers to the Nappy Roots, Black artists have changed the antiquated, vaudevillian perception of African Americans that was once associated with 18th-century minstrelsy. Every community recital, concert, performance, and recording has expanded the reach of BIPOC artists and, thus, the potential for opening the hearts and minds of audiences globally.

Pioneering Bass/Baritones contributions to the Western music canon are consequential for many reasons: a) the expansion of repertoire, popularization of the Negro Spiritual, bringing awareness to compositions of African American composers, diversifying repertoire that captures a wide array of human experiences; b) challenging racial boundaries in classical music; c) promoting diversity and inclusion for underrepresented artists; d) preserving cultural heritage, ensuring the valuable recognition of America's original folk music, the Negro Spiritual. Their perseverance inspired new works, barrier-breaking, and expanded musical repertoire, leaving an indelible mark on the Western music canon by enriching it with their distinctive voices and diverse perspectives.

Sharing the Legacy of Advocacy and Support

When looking at the barrier-breaking work of previous African American Bass/Baritones, I have found that opera, though not created with those of a darker hue in mind, has created a place for me and those like me to enter the industry.

My contribution as a pioneering artivist has manifested through advocating for emerging BIPOC artists through teaching, leadership, and performance. On December 15, 2013, "The Savoy Series Project" (SSP) launched at the Strathmore Mansion in Bethesda, Maryland. SSP was created to show diversity not only through ethnicity but also through vocal and instrumental versatility. Helping professionally unmanaged artists of color who seek self-promotion through

collaborative experiences present themselves as they are. A platform where artists can present and promote their brand with support, knowing that at each performance, there would be several decision-makers available to possibly cast them for future engagements, all the while being compensated for doing what they do best! This project is a service that has successfully aided organizations in the District of Columbia, Maryland, and Virginia (DMV) with sometimes up-to-the-last-minute recommendations of highly qualified artists. One recent and notable success was the recommendation of Tenor Wayne Jennings to the Kennedy Center's 2023 annual *Messiah* Sing-along when the contracted artist became a "no show" within an hour of the concert! Reflecting on his experience, Jennings stated, "Words cannot describe the feeling when I received that last-minute call to sub at the Kennedy Center to a sold-out audience within an hour of the performance. This will always encourage me to always be prepared."[150] SSP was created out of the need to support BIPOC artists seeking exposure that honors their authentic selves through performance. I continue this project in the spirit of service and BIPOC representation.

I find my work offers a long, warm hug of support for my inner child, the child sitting on the floor feet away from the TV watching Looney Tunes. As a Prince George's County Public School teacher, I met numerous gifted children of color who dreamed of letting their voices free. As an artivist, like the pioneers who preceded me, I have taken up this charge for freeing one's classical voice beyond the classroom and the stage. During the pandemic, I was appointed to the University of Maryland, College Park, School of Music's Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access (I.D.E.A.) Committee for two consecutive years. I diligently worked to highlight Black

[150] Wayne Jennings, email message to VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, June 10, 2024.

graduate voices, creating live and virtual platforms to promote Black Music and BIPOC inclusion while leading a team as a co-producer for Black History Month.

In conclusion, this dissertation has illuminated the original and bridge pioneers' enduring legacy and acknowledged contemporary African American Bass/Baritones pioneers' ongoing work in classical music. Their undeniable contributions and steadfast spirit testify to their revolutionary strength and the broader fight for racial justice. Through their hard work and determination, their voices have enriched the opera world and advocated for diversity, equity, and inclusion. They have also enriched the Western musical canon and inspired Black men in opera to continue to strive for excellence while challenging biases long held in this highly selective field of classical voice/opera performance.

The evolution of opera from its traditional practices to more inclusive and innovative approaches is crucial for this art form's continued relevance and sustainability. By embracing diversity, engaging with contemporary issues, and utilizing modern technology, opera can attract new audiences and remain a vibrant and meaningful cultural expression. However, there is still room for growth. While progress has been made in casting and representation, systemic inequalities persist in the opera industry. More work needs to be done to ensure equal opportunities for artists of color, to diversify creative teams, and to make opera accessible to all communities. Additionally, continued experimentation with new formats and technologies can further expand the boundaries of opera and ensure its continued evolution. Enhancing training with technology, special effects, and larger spaces, such as arenas and stadiums, will effectively prepare the next generation of opera singers. Though financial restraints can impede such progress, I think it is essential that opera singers are trained in the same fashion as singers on reality TV shows like "The Voice" and "American Idol." This type of investment will fully

prepare the following generations of classical singers to engage with communities that would otherwise not have the opportunity to experience opera, thus keeping this ancient craft alive.

We must continue building on the Original Bass/Baritone Pioneers' foundation of advocacy, representation, and social justice. As we uplift these pioneering African American Bass/Baritones, we must remain vigilant in dismantling systemic practices that seek to silence BIPOC voices. We are only a tiny but growing example of African American artists who now drive forth what it means to show continued representation in Opera. Standing on the shoulders of our ancestors, our presence has grown as we use our gifts to create spaces for BIPOC artists and advocacy. We must ensure that our Black Bass/Baritone voices continue to resonate throughout opera stages, concert halls, and arenas worldwide. May the crowning achievements of Black classical artists continue to shape and inspire future generations of Black Bass/Baritones pursuing careers in opera and vocal performance.

Appendix I: Other Pioneering Bass/Baritones

Bass/Baritones Active Before 1950

Baritones

William Franklin (1906 -unknown), Andrew Frierson (1924-2018), Edward Matthews (c.1904-1954), William Benjamin Ray (1925-2019), William Warfield (1920-2002)

Bass-baritones

McHenry Boatwright (1928-1994), Robert Mosley (1927-2002), Kenneth Spencer (1913-1969), Lawrence Winters (1915-1965)

Bass

Eugene Jones (1924-2003), William Horace Marshall (1924 - 2003)

Bass/Baritone Active Between 1950 and 1990

Baritones

Donnie Ray Albert (b.1950), Thomas Carey (1931-2002), Gordon Hawkins (b. 1958), Eugene Holmes (1932-2007), Ben Holt (1955-1990), Bruce Hubbard (1952-1991), Eugene Perry (b.1956), Ronald Richardson (1952 - 1995)

Bass-baritones

Mark S Doss (b. 1957), Benjamin Matthews (1933-2006), Herbert Perry (b.1956), Alvy Powell (b.1955)

Bass

Kevin Maynor

Bass/Baritone Active After 1990

Baritones

Justin Austin, Will Liverman (b. 1988), Lester Lynch, Mark Rucker

Bass-baritones

Ryan Speedo Green, Eric Owens (b. 1970)

Basses

Soloman Howard, Kenneth Kellogg, Morris Robinson (b. 1969)

Appendix II: Community Recital

Sample Tracks

1**. Deep River** arr. by H.T. Burleigh
2. **Witness** arr. by H. Johnson
3. **Ain't Got Time to Die** arr. by H. Johnson
4. **Ride on King Jesus** arr. by H. Johnson
   Duet with Wayne Jennings, tenor

5. **Du bist wie eine Blume** by R. Schumann
6. **Wohin?** by F. Schubert
7. **Von ewiger liebe** by J. Brahms

8. **Riding to Town** by T. Kerr
9. **At the River** by A. Copeland
10. **The Lord's Prayer** by A.H. Malotte

11. **Lord God of Abraham** from *Elijah* by F. Mendelssohn
12. **Pro Peccatis** from *Stabat Mater* by G. Rossini

13. **Alerte! alerte! ou vous êtes perdus!** from *Faust* by C.F. Gounod
    Angeli Ferrette, Marguerite
    Wayne Jennings, Faust
    VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, Méphistophélès
14. **Bess, You is my Woman Now…** from *Porgy and Bess* by G. Gershwin
    Angeli Ferrette, Bess
    VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot, Porgy

15. **Lost in the Stars** from *Lost in the Stars* by K. Weill
16. **Ol' Man River** from *Showboat* by R. Hammerstein and J. Kern

Appendix III: Community Recital Program Notes

Deep River

The prominent African American composer and Baritone Harry Thacker Burleigh (1866-1949) arranged the Negro Spiritual "Deep River." "In 1913, G. Schirmer published his arrangement for unaccompanied mixed chorus, followed in 1914 by versions for men's and women's chorus." G. Ricordi & Co., New York, first published this solo voice arrangement in 1917.[151] Deep River's reception led to the publishing of up to a dozen spirituals that year.[152] "Deep River" reflects the African American experience and struggle for freedom. The lyrics and its simple yet profound melody signify the longing for liberation.

Witness
Ain't Got Time to Die
Ride on King Jesus! (King of Kings)

Hall Johnson was a prominent figure noted along with Harry T. Burleigh, Eva Jessye, and R. Nathaniel Dett for promoting and preserving the spiritual, lending its widespread recognition through performance and recordings.[153] His compositions, such as "Witness," with their profound lyrics, seemingly break the fourth wall, allowing the performer to bring their unique interpretation to the piece while engaging the audience. Written for and dedicated to Robert McFerrin, "Ain't Got Time to Die" reflects performance practices rooted in the oral tradition of

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[151] "Deep River" by Harry Thacker Burleigh, Library of Congress, accessed December 20, 2023, https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200185369/.

[152] "Biography: H. T. Burleigh (1866-1949)," Library of Congress, accessed December 20, 2023, https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200035730.

[153] John Haag, "Hall Johnson," New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified January 12, 2022, accessed December 20, 2023, https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/hall-johnson-1888-1970/.

these songs. “Ride on King Jesus! (King of Kings)” is an uplifting spiritual from his cantata, *Son of Man*, and is characterized by great energy, proclaiming the sovereignty of Jesus Christ.

Du bist wie eine Blume

“Du bist wie eine Blume” from the song cycle *Myrthen* op. 25 by Robert Schumann, composed in 1840 and set to the poetry of Heinrich Heine. *Myrthen* was written as a wedding gift for Clara Wieck and contains 26 Lieder.[154] With its distinctive, simple rising melody, this song exudes the beauty of love as it lyrically compares his lover’s qualities to a flower in purity and fragility. The chordal accompaniment increasingly becomes sonorous and ends with a lovely postlude that marks it as one of the most beloved German lieders.

Wohin?

Set to the poetry of Wilhelm Müller, “Wohin?” is the fourth song from Franz Schubert’s first song cycle, *Die schöne Müllerin*. The poem tells the story of a young miller’s apprentice who loves the miller’s daughter. Its expressive and emotional text is allied by its simple and flowing accompaniment, as it alternates between a melody reminiscent of a lullaby and stanzas that create a sense of longing and regret. Schubert’s arpeggiated chords in the piano and melody evoke the sense of calm serenity associated with the babbling of the brook, symbolizing a path towards understanding. The lyrics’ vivid descriptions create a sense of place and seek to draw the audience into the journeyman’s experience. Schubert effectively paints a picture of self-discovery guided by the allure of nature, embracing the unknown while focusing on enjoying the journey.

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[154] Kelly Hart, “Text Setting and Harmony in Schumann’s *Myrthen* Op. 25: Pedagogical Applications in the Theory Curriculum” (master’s thesis, East Carolina University, 2018), 9, accessed December 20, 2023, http://hdl.handle.net/10342/6740.

Von ewiger Liebe

Johannes Brahms wrote over 200 works and contributed to the development of German art songs. Enamored with folk music, he adopted the style of folk and actual folk verses in his lieder. Composed in 1864, "Von ewiger Liebe" (Eternal Love) is set to a translation of a folksong from the now-lost East German culture of Sorbian (Lusatian) and as written by August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben.[155] The text depicts a young couple navigating the uncertainties and anxieties surrounding their love. The man expresses concern about causing shame to his lover due to the external pressure of societal conformity. Though he offers to end the relationship, the young woman assures him that their lover is external. The melody is haunting and beautiful with a slow, lyrical tempo. Known for his frequent use of hemiola to enhance rhythmic interest, Brahms incorporates this device in the closing line, "Unsere Liebe muß ewig bestehn!" (Our love must endure forever!).

Riding to Town

First published in 1943, "Riding to Town" was composed by African American composer Thomas Kerr, and African American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote the lyrics.[156] Included in the Anthology of Art Songs by Black American Composers, this song speaks about the joy of a wagon ride into town with one's beloved. With its festive rhythms, it paints the picture of riding through hills and taking rough roadways that only lead to the thrill of the ride.

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[155] Gary Hickling, "Von ewiger liebe," in *Lotte Lehmann & Her Legacy Volume 3: Master Classes: Songs* (Lotte Lehmann League, accessed December 20, 2023), https://lottelehmannleague.org/2022/vol-3-table-of-contents/.

[156] Paul Laurence Dunbar, "Riding to Town," Dunbar Music Archive (1895), accessed December 20, 2023, https://ecommons.udayton.edu/dunbar/163.

At the River

Arranged by the American composer Aaron Copland, "At the River" appears in set 2 of Copland's "Old American Songs," initially published in 1952.[157] Its lyrics are based on an 1865 hymn written by Robert Lowry. The piano accompaniment is characterized by its broad and chordal harmonies. Popularly programmed by many artists, this piece remains a staple among American folk songs and was included in the memorial concerts of Copland and Leonard Bernstein.

The Lord's Prayer

Set to the biblical text, "The Lord's Prayer," which was composed by Albert Hay Malotte in 1935. This particular arrangement was the first to be well-received, gaining great recognition despite the text set by many other composers.[158] This piece was dedicated and introduced to the public by Baritone John Charles Thomas.[159] The lyrics come from Matthew 6:9-13 of the King James Version of the Holy Bible and are characterized by its reflective yet solemnly reverent tone.

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[157] Vivian Perlis, "Old American Songs, Set II," in Aaron Copland (Boosey & Hawkes, 1998), accessed December 20, 2023, https://www.aaroncopland.com/works/old-american-songs-set-ii/.

[158] "Albert Hay Malotte Dies at 69; Set 'The Lord's Prayer' to Music," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1964, accessed December 20, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/1964/11/18/archives/albert-hay-malotte-dies-at-69-set-the-lords-prayer-to-music.html.

[159] Robert White, liner notes for "The Lord's Prayer," in *Sure on this Shining Night: The Romantic Song in America*, Hyperion Records, CDA66920 (1997), accessed December 18, 2024, https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/dc.asp?dc=D_CDA66920.

Lord God of Abraham from *Elijah*

In 1846, the Birmingham Festival commissioned Felix Mendelssohn (1808-1847) to compose Elijah.[160] This event served as his introduction to the public as a composer. His impact on English music was like that of George Frideric Handel. The oratorio tells the story of the prophet Elijah from the Old Testament. "Lord God of Abraham" is a Bass aria from the oratorio. Julius Schubring wrote the libretto and combined the story of Elijah as told in the Book of Kings with other biblical texts. Appearing in the fourteenth movement of Part I, the lyrics are a reworded version of Elijah's prayer, "Lord God of Abraham."

Pro Peccatis from *Stabat Mater*

Gioachino Rossini (1792 - 1868) established his career in 1810 and composed 39 operas. Stylistically, his tunes are melodically lyrical and original. "Propeccatis" is sung by a Bass soloist in his setting of the *Stabat Mater*. This work was composed late in his career and initially refused by Rossini as he believed the perfect setting had already been composed by Pergolesi.[161] Though its first public performance was in 1842, Rossini left this work unpublished. Written in D minor, the tempo is slow and deliberate, punctuated by dramatic silences. Propeccatis is one of the original six *Stabat Mater* pieces composed by Rossini. The remaining movements were composed by his friend Giovanni Tadolini.[162]

[160] "Felix Mendelssohn – Elijah," Marlow Community Choir, 2018, accessed December 18, 2024, https://www.marlowcommunitychoir.org/elijah.php.
[161] Allen Whear, program notes for "Bach and Rossini," *Carmel Bach Festival*, accessed December 18, 2024, https://bachfestival.org/bachandrossini/.
[162] Whear, "Bach and Rossini."

Alerte, Alerte vous êtes perdus! from *Faust*

During the 19th century, Charles Gounod (1818 - 1893) was the leading composer of French opera. With over 200+ melodies, he is considered the father of the Melodie." Alerte! Alerte! ou vous êtes perdus!" is a trio from Gounod's *Faust* and is the final scene in the opera. Jules Barbier and Michael Carré wrote the libretto. Set in 16th-century Germany, this opera was first performed at the Théâtre Lyrique in Paris on March 19, 1859.[163] In this scene, Marguerite has been sentenced to death for murdering her baby. Having made a pact with the devil Mephistopheles for eternal youth and pleasure, Faust desperately tries to save Marguerite. Still fearing damnation, she refuses and commends herself to heaven.

Bess, You is my Woman Now… from *Porgy and Bess*

"Bess, You Is My Woman Now" is a beautiful duet from George Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*, with lyrics written by Ira Gershwin. The opera premiered in 1935 and is set in Catfish Row, a fictional African American community in Charleston, South Carolina, in the early 1920s.[164] Porgy is a disabled beggar who takes in Bess after Crown murders Robins during a crap game gone wrong. The duet is a declaration of love between the two title characters. The lyrics relay a heartfelt expression of love through a romantic and flowing ballad.

Lost in the Stars from *Lost in the Stars*

"Lost in the Stars" is a powerful song and centerpiece of Kurt Weill's musical *Lost in the Stars*, with lyrics written by Maxwell Anderson. Premiering in 1949 on Broadway, the musical is based

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[163] Steven Huebner, "Gounod, Charles-François," *Grove Music Online*, January 20, 2001. doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.40694.

[164] History.com Editors. "'Porgy and Bess,' the First Great American Opera, Premieres on Broadway," *HISTORY*, November 13, 2009, last updated November 3, 2020, accessed December 19, 2024, https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/porgy-and-bess-the-first-great-american-opera-premieres-on-broadway.

on Alan Paton's novel "Cry, the Beloved Country" and ran for 281 performances. Set in South Africa, the story takes place during apartheid. It follows the journey of a Black Anglican priest named Stephen Kumalo, who travels to Johannesburg to find his son Absalom. The musical explores themes of race, injustice, and redemption. The song expresses his feelings of despair and hopelessness as Stephen Kumalo mourns the loss of his son. The lyrics are poignant and moving, and the melody is haunting and beautiful.

Ol' Man River from *Showboat*

"Ol' Man River" is a song from Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's musical *Showboat*. It opened on Broadway in 1927, premiered in the West End in 1928, and was reprised in several film adaptations.[165] The character of Joe, created by original pioneer and actor Bass-baritone Jules Bledsoe, has served as a cornerstone for many African American classical Bass/Baritone vocalists. Joe is a Black stevedore who laments the hardships of life on the Mississippi River. The song is a slow and soulful ballad with a deep and resonant melody that is the throughline of the musical, appearing several times with varying arrangements with and without an all-male chorus. It is most notably the most famous song of the show. Paul Robeson's rendition of the song in James Whale's 1936 film adaptation of *Showboat* transformed the song into a powerful statement on the struggles of Black Americans. With his powerful voice and belief in civil rights, Robeson turns the tragic song about the struggles of African American people into a protest song full of strength and defiance.

[165] Marc J. Franklin, "A Look Back at the Original Broadway Production of Show Boat," *Playbill*, December 27, 2020, accessed December 19, 2023, https://playbill.com/article/a-look-back-at-the-original-broadway-production-of-show-boat.

Appendix IV: Community Recital Translations

Du bist wie eine Blume
From Myrthen (1840). Op. 25

Music by Robert Schumann
German source: Heinrich Heine
Translation by Richard Stokes

Du bist wie eine Blume,	You are like a flower,
So hold und schön und rein;	So sweet and fair and pure;
Ich schau' dich an, und Wehmut	I look at you, and sadness
Schleicht mir ins Herz hinein.	Steals into my heart.
Mir ist, als ob ich die Hände	I feel as if I should lay
Aufs Haupt dir legen sollt',	My hands upon your head,
Betend, dass Gott dich erhalte	Praying that God preserve you
So rein und schön und hold.	So pure and fair and sweet.

Wohin?
From Die schöne Müllerin (1823) D795
(Op. 25)

Music by Franz Schubert
German source: Müller, Wilhelm
Translation by Richard Wigmore

Ich hört' ein Bächlein rauschen	I heard a little brook babbling
Wohl aus dem Felsenquell,	from its rocky source,
Hinab zum Tale rauschen	babbling down to the valley,
So frisch und wunderhell.	so bright, so wondrously clear.
Ich weiss nicht, wie mir wurde,	I know not what came over me,
Nicht, wer den Rat mir gab,	nor who prompted me,
Ich musste auch hinunter	but I too had to go down
Mit meinem Wanderstab.	with my wanderer's staff.
Hinunter und immer weiter	Down and ever onwards,
Und immer dem Bache nach,	always following the brook
Und immer heller rauschte,	as it babbled ever brighter
Und immer heller der Bach.	and ever clearer.
Ist das denn meine Strasse?	Is this, then, my path?
O Bächlein, sprich, wohin?	O brook, say where it leads.
Du hast mit deinem Rauschen	With your babbling
Mir ganz berauscht den Sinn.	you have quite befuddled my mind.

Was sag' ich denn vom Rauschen?	Why do I speak of babbling?
Das kann kein Rauschen sein:	That is not babbling.
Es singen wohl die Nixen	It is the water nymphs singing.
Tief unten ihren Reihn.	as they dance their round far below.
Lass singen, Gesell, lass rauschen,	Let them sing, my friend; let the brook babble
Und wandre fröhlich nach!	and follow it cheerfully.
Es gehn ja Mühlenräder	For mill-wheels turn
In jedem klaren Bach.	in every clear brook.

Von ewiger Liebe

Music by Johannes Brahms
German source: August Heinrich Hoffmann von Fallersleben
Translation by Richard Stokes

Dunkel, wie dunkel in Wald und in Feld!	Dark, how dark in forest and field!
Abend schon ist es, nun schweiget die Welt.	Evening already, and the world is silent.
Nirgend noch Licht und nirgend noch Rauch,	Nowhere a light and nowhere smoke,
Ja, und die Lerche sie schweiget nun auch.	And even the lark is silent now too.
Kommt aus dem Dorfe der Bursche heraus,	Out of the village there comes a lad,
Gibt das Geleit der Geliebten nach Haus,	Escorting his sweetheart home,
Führt sie am Weidengebüsche vorbei,	He leads her past the willow-copse,
Redet so viel und so mancherlei:	Talking so much and of so many things:
„Leidest du Schmach und betrübest du dich,	'If you suffer sorrow and suffer shame,
Leidest du Schmach von andern um mich,	Shame for what others think of me,
Werde die Liebe getrennt so geschwind,	Then let our love be severed as swiftly,
Schnell wie wir früher vereiniget sind.	As swiftly as once we two were plighted.
Scheide mit Regen und scheide mit Wind,	Let us depart in rain and depart in wind,
Schnell wie wir früher vereiniget sind."	As swiftly as once we two were plighted.'
Spricht das Mägdelein, Mägdelein spricht:	The girl speaks, the girl says:
„Unsere Liebe sie trennet sich nicht!	'Our love cannot be severed!
Fest ist der Stahl und das Eisen gar sehr,	Steel is strong, and so is iron,
Unsere Liebe ist fester noch mehr.	Our love is even stronger still:

Eisen und Stahl, man schmiedet sie um,
Unsere Liebe, wer wandelt sie um?

Eisen und Stahl, sie können zergehn,
Unsere Liebe muß ewig bestehn!"

Iron and steel can both be reforged,
But our love, who shall change it?

Iron and steel can be melted down,
Our love must endure forever!'

Pro peccatis

From Stabat Mater

Music by Gioachino Rossini
Translation by Susannah Howe

Pro peccatis suæ gentis
Vidit Jesum in tormentis
Et flagellis subditum.

For the sins of His people
she saw Jesus in torment
and submitted to the scourge.

Alerte! alerte! ou vous êtes perdus!

From Faust

Music by Charles Gounod
Translation by www.opera-arias.com/

MÉPHISTOPHÉLÈS
Alerte! alerte! ou vous êtes perdus!
Si vous tardez encor je ne m'en mêle plus!

MEPHISTOPHELES
Take care, or you are lost!
If you tarry any longer, I shall give you up!

MARGUERITE
Le démon! le démon! - Le vois-tu? ... là ... dans lombre
Fixant sur nous son œil de feu!
Que nous veut-il? - Chasse le du saint lieu!

MARGUERITE
The devil, the devil! Can you see him, there, in the dark!
Staring at us with his eyes of fire!
What does he want with us?
Drive him from the holy place!

MÉPHISTOPHÉLÈS
Quittons ce lieu sombre!
Le jour est levé
De leur pied sonore
J'entends nos chevaux frapper le pavé!
cherchant à entraîner Faust.
Viens! sauvons-la! Peut'être il en est temps encore.

MEPHISTOPHELES
Let us leave this dark spot!
It is daybreak;
I can hear our horses
Rap on the cobblestones with their noisy feet!
He tries to drag Faust away.
Come! Let us save her!
We may still have time!

MARGUERITE
Mon Dieu, protégez-moi!
Mon Dieu, je vous implore !

MARGUERITE
Dear God, protect me!
Dear God, I beseech you!

FAUST
Viens, fuyons!
Peut-être en est-il temps encore!

FAUST
Come! Let us flee!
We may still have time!

Appendix V: Community Opera Program Notes

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed over 20 operas and singspiels. Considered one of the greatest composers of all time, Mozart began composing operas at 11. As a master dramatist, he composed some of the finest stage works. He composed opera seria, opera buffa, and Singpiel. When the opera seria's popularity waned, buffa was merely formulaic. Despite this, Mozart was able to write deeply nuanced characters that are humanistically full of vitality.

Stylistically, his music is characterized as rich and chromatic. Using musical material to show dramatic contrasts while completely mastering tonal relationships. Mozart's writings on the voice are superior. His virtuosic melodic writing enhances the audience's understanding of the character and text. A master of large and small musical forms, Mozart's music fleshes out what text cannot—achieving a balance between the voice and orchestra that seems to adapt to classical symphonic styles organically. Lorenzo da Ponte's writings served as the libretto for his most famous buffa operas, *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), and *Così fan tutte* (1780).[166] Director Corinne Hayes notes: "With *Don Giovanni*, Mozart and da Ponte masterfully employed a trendy storytelling form known as dramma giocoso, made popular by playwright and librettist Carlo Goldoni; today, we might call *Don Giovanni* a dramedy."[167]

[166] VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot

[167] Maryland Opera Studio, "*Don Giovanni* Program," University of Maryland School of Music, accessed June 9, 2024, https://theclarice.umd.edu/sites/default/files/program-notes/20230414_Don%20Giovanni_v6.pdf.

Mozart's *Don Giovanni*

The original National Theater in Prague premiered Mozart's *Don Giovanni* on October 29th, 1787.[168] This Opera in Two Acts was built on the legendary story of Don Juan, the rogue fictional character of debauchery and the eventual habitant of hell. I had the privilege to step into the role of Il Commendatore, a pivotal character whose divine justice fuels the opera's climax. Attending the screams of his assaulted daughter, Donna Anna, Il Commendatore is slain in a sword battle by a disguised Don Giovanni. After dying within minutes of the opening scene, Il Commendatore's spirit returns after accepting the invitation to dine with Don Giovanni from the underworld. In the penultimate scene, the statue of Commendatore condemns Don Giovanni to Hell after the murderer refuses to repent for his sins, closing the opera in a typical Mozartian style with a universal message on morality.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

20th-century composer Benjamin Britten is wholly responsible for reviving English opera as a unique and viable institution. Distancing himself from other composers like Vaughan Williams, Britten created a particular style that was unique unto itself. His text is mostly syllabic and set to emotional sentiment versus strict adherence to textual inflection. Britten utilizes florid singing in his operas, a style previously rejected by generations of English composers who felt that it detracted from the text. He shunned the European Avant Garde movement and consciously avoided atonality. Preferring his own tonally accessible style; often incorporating modern elements as needed.

[168] Linda Cantoni and Betsy Schwarm, "Don Giovanni," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, December 6, 2023, accessed June 9, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Don-Giovanni-opera-by-Mozart.

His willingness to compose a melody suited to the mood perhaps led to his great success. He loved children and worked to create English institutions that nurture youth participation (e.g., *Let's Make an Opera* - 1949). Children play a role in central themes in his serious dramatic works, which portray the loss of innocence.

Britten's *Owen Wingrave*

The 1970 Snape Maltings Concert Hall recording of Benjamin Britten's *Owen Wingrave* was broadcast premiered on BBC2 on May 16, 1971, in Snape, England.[169] Partly a response to the Vietnam War, this opera's origins are rooted in a short story by Henry James.[170] Sergeant Spencer Coyle, Military tutor to Owen Wingrave and Lechmere, is a critical figure in the opera. Coyle teaches Owen and Lechmere battle strategies in London. Against the Wingrave legacy, Owen shares his disapproving thoughts about war and voices his right as a pacifist to abandon his family's desire for him to become a soldier. Coyle swiftly reprimands Owen, urging him to adjust his attitude and warning him of the inevitable disapproval of his family. Coyle represents the same institution that Owen despises, the military. Sargent Coyle is an honorable and cherished military veteran. As a well-respected military figure, Coyle is sympathetic and understands Owen Wingrave's stance.

[169] "Owen Wingrave," *BRITTENPEARS ARTS*, accessed June 9, 2024, https://brittenpearsarts.org/music/owen-wingrave.

[170] Tim Ashley, "Skeletons in the Closet," *The Guardian*, March 30, 2007, accessed June 9, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2007/mar/30/classicalmusicandopera.

Nailah Nombeko

Born in New York City, New York, Nailah Nombeko comes from a line of musicians. This African American female composer began training at the Preparatory Division of Manhattan School of Music, graduating from LaGuardia High School and receiving her bachelor's and master's degrees from Mannes College of Music.[171] Her compositions are performed throughout the United States in notable venues such as Symphony Space, Columbia University, The University of Kansas, The University of Kentucky, The International Double Reed Conference at the University of Colorado, National Sawdust, The Annapolis Opera, and The Portland Opera. Her work is performed by many of the nation's leading performers, including Karen Slack, Blair McMillan, Kara Dugan, Curtis Macomber, and Jennifer Sgroe, to name a few. Her commissioned works span beyond Maryland Opera Studio, Ex-Aequo's "Changing the Canon" project, and the Skaneateles Music Festival. Nombeko is a member of New York Women Composers, Vox Novus, and the National Association of Composers USA.[172] As a voice in rare spaces, she serves as a Board member of Orfeo Duo's "What A Neighborhood." In 2022, she was one of nine composers in the National Association of Teachers of Singing Composer Mentorship Program.

Nombeko's *Sunder*

Sunder by Nailah Nombeko premiered on August 28, 2021, with Annapolis Opera at the Maryland Hall in Annapolis, Maryland. This opera was commissioned by the Maryland Opera Studio and Annapolis Opera in response to the death of George Floyd and the rise of the Black Lives Matter Movement. Set in a small town, this opera shares the perspective of a Black police

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"Nailah Nombeko," The African American Art Song Alliance (2024), accessed April 29, 2024, https://artsongalliance.org/composers/nailah-nombeko.

[172] "Nailah Nombeko."

officer, Officer Jones. Jones is one of two officers charged with maintaining social decorum at a protest where White allies fight on behalf of Blacks arrested for petty crimes, receiving unreasonable bail judgments. In this opera, Officer Jones is at a crossroads between race, justice, and morality as he experiences the other side of the Black Lives Matter Movement as a Black police officer policing Whites alongside his White partner, Officer Smith. Supported by his wife and sister, Officer Jones faces the harsh realities of believing in a cause while being assigned to monitor it, a complex struggle around navigating America's racial terrain during highly charged political issues. Jones is suspended after accidentally shooting a young White protester. After learning of Aaron's medical status, Jones bares his soul in a rare moment where he is alone, thanking God the young man survived. Jones questions his desire to remain an officer of the law and acts to bridge his feelings for protesting and policing, eventually choosing to leave the force.

Giuseppe Verdi

Giuseppe Verdi represents the bridge between Bel Canto and Verismo (1813-1901). He composed 25 operas, with his first being *Nabucco* (1842) — Temistocle Solera. His early compositions began closer to the style of Bel Canto and progressively became more characteristically verismo. Verdi's style primarily went unchanged. His gradual refining of dramatic and musical techniques helped him reach the pinnacle of operatic success. Verdi is credited with developing the dramatic declamatory style of *parlante,* which is allied with the orchestra's musically interesting material. Parlante style took over the traditional use of *secco recitative*. Despite his innovative nature, Verdi was no radical. He stayed true to set forms, commonly using an AA'BA" structure for his arias early in his career. His operas are direct, noble, and intense, growing more subtle and expressive throughout his career.

Verdi's *Aida*

Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* premiered at the Khedivial Opera House in Cairo, Egypt, on December 24, 1871.[173] Set in ancient Egypt, the opera is a love story between the titular character, the Ethiopian princess Aida, and the Egyptian military commander Radamès, who is deeply loved by the Egyptian princess Amneris. Aida is the slave of Amneris, who cleverly reveals the affair and vows to win Radamès heart. Amonasro, the Ethiopian King and father of Aida is an integral part of the opera. Amonasro appears among the Ethiopian prisoners in the Second Act, for Radamès's army captured him, unbeknownst to the Egyptians. His daughter discovers Amonasro, Aida, but urges her not to give his identity away. At the same time, he is disguised as an Ethiopian soldier, asking for pity from Il Re, the Egyptian King. Amonasro deceives the Egyptians, telling them that the Ethiopian King has been killed in battle, and Il Re grants the prisoners clemency, ordering Amonasro to stay with his daughter, Aida.

In Act III, Amonasro masterminds a plan for Aida to find out where to intercept the Egyptian army. As Amonasro hides, Aida ultimately betrays Radamès. She convinces Radamès to divulge his army's battle plans. Amonasro immediately appears, revealing himself as Aida's father and the Ethiopian King, promising Aida and Radamès (betrothed to Amneris) freedom to marry and live in Ethiopia in bliss. Amneris catches them and declares Radamès a traitor as Aida and Amonasro escape. The opera ends with Aida and Radamès dying together to spend eternity in the afterlife.

[173] Georg Predota, "On This Day 24 December: Giuseppe Verdi's Aida Was Premiered," *Interlude*, December 24, 2018, accessed May 23, 2024, https://interlude.hk/verdi-aida-premiered-today-1871/.

Appendix VI: Il Commendatore in *Don Giovanni* by W.A. Mozart, April 23, 2023

Maryland Opera Studio
Kay Theatre at the University of Maryland, College Park
College Park, Maryland, USA

1. Act I - *Don Giovanni* by W.A. Mozart - Maryland Opera Studio - 2023
2. Act II - *Don Giovanni* by W.A. Mozart - Maryland Opera Studio - 2023

Craig Kier, conductor
Corinne Hayes, director

Cast

Don Giovanni ..... Henrique Carvalho

Leporello ..... Craig Smith

Donna Anna ..... Rhiannon Vaughn

Donna Elvira ..... Kira Neary

Zerlina ..... Victoria McGrath

Masetto ..... Justin Harrison*

Don Ottavio ..... Lawrence Barasa

Il Commendatore ..... VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot*

*MOS Alumni

Appendix VII: Sargent Coyle in *Owen Wingrave* by Benjamin Britten, June 8, 2021

National Orchestral Institute + Festival/Maryland Opera Studio
Dekelboum Concert Hall at the University of Maryland, College Park
College Park, Maryland, USA

1. *Owen Wingrave* by Benjamin Britten - National Orchestral Institute and Festival - Maryland Opera Studio – 2021

Craig Kier, conductor
Amanda Consol, director

Cast

Owen Wingrave ..... Collin Power

Spencer Coyle .....VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot*

Lechmere ..... Charles Calotta*

Miss Wingrave ..... Sarah Stembel

Mrs. Coyle..... Erin Ridge

Mrs. Julian..... Rhiannon Vaughn

Kate Julian..... Katherine Kincaid

General Sir Phillip Wingrave ..... Matthew Hill*

Narrator ..... Matthew Hill*

*MOS Alumni

Appendix VIII: Officer Jones in *Sunder* by Nailah Nombeko, August 27, 2021

Annapolis Opera/Maryland Opera Studio
Dekelboum Concert Hall at the University of Maryland, College Park
College Park, Maryland, USA

1. *Sunder* by Nailah Nombeko - Annapolis Opera - Maryland Opera Studio – 2021

Jonathan King, Music Director
Amanda Consol, Stage Director

Cast

Officer Jones..... V. Savoy McIlwain* (VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot)

Bev Jones ..... Jazmine Olwalia*

Nomi Jones ..... Zyda Culpepper*

Aaron ..... Matthew Payne

Jake ..... Henrique Carvalho

Michelle ..... Connor Locke

Stacey ..... Clare Lillig

Lynn ..... Francesca Napolitano

Samantha .....Rhiannon Vaughn

Terrance ..... Michael Bulter

Joy ..... Morgan Paige

Officer Smith ..... Casey Germain

*MOS Alumni

Appendix IX: Amonasro in *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi, February 25, 2024

FKP Scorpio/FKP Show Creations
ZAG Arena Hannover
Hannover, Germany

1. Act I - II - *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi - FKP Show Creations 2024
2. Act III - IV - *Aida* by Giuseppe Verdi - FKP Show Creations 2024

Michael Ellis Ingram, Conductor
Rian van Holland, Director

Cast

Aida ..... Yana Kleyn

Radamès ..... Martin Shalita

Amneris ..... Nora Sourouzian

Amonasro ..... V. Savoy McIlwain (VaShawn McIlwain-Lightfoot)

Ramfis ..... Andrew Nolen

Il Re ..... Steffen Bruun

Gran Sacerdotessa..... Ioulia Spanou

Messaggero ..... Joe Ashmore

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