

The Iva Dee Hiatt Memorial Oratorio 2020 took place in John M. Greene Hall on March 7th. It was the last public performance of the academic year on campus and one of the last public performances in the U.S. One week later almost all of the major performing arts centers began to cancel performances. Sadly, they have not resumed.

Working with Robert Isaacs, Director of the Cornell University Glee Club, our partner ensemble this year, we realized during the summer that a full length choral orchestral work would not be possible due to logistical reasons. Uniting two of my main activities at Smith, classical music and equity and inclusion work, while on vacation the concept formed: "A Night at the Opera: Celebrating the Achievements of African American Singers."

Frequently, I struggle because classical music is decidedly eurocentric and white. I want everyone to love this music, no matter who they are and where they come from. Although the vast majority of classical music audiences are white (and older), this does not describe everyone who enjoys this art form.

In the world of opera there is an older generation of African American singers who became fixtures on world stages. In several cases, some of the most famous opera excerpts are directly associated with megastars such as Leontyne Price and Jessye Norman. These women, along with Grace Bumbry, Shirley Verrett, and George Shirley became role models for future generations. Why particularly is this true of opera and not other genres of classical music? These thoughts and questions led me to explore the idea of what became the 2020 Oratorio.

My first call was to my dear friend Timothy Jerome Jones, a fabulous bass-baritone who has sung with major orchestras of the U.S. and in many of this country's opera houses. Thanks to our friendship he has also sung at Smith several times. I wanted to know if he thought the idea was worth pursuing. I knew that if he did I would ask him to put me in touch with his teacher, George Shirley. Soon after, I spoke with Mr. Shirley about the possibility of narrating and emceeding the event. As the first African American tenor to sing a leading role at the Met (and virtually the only African American tenor of his age to have a worldwide career), Mr. Shirley was the perfect person for us to invite to campus. He wanted to tell his story and we are so grateful to be able to hear it. In the end, it turned out the concert was the same night as his wife's 85th birthday, a milestone he reached weeks later, so we agreed that we would use technology to bring him to campus.

I asked a retired musician with time on his hands (thanks Dad!) to gather some data from the Metropolitan Opera archives. Identifying the roles frequently performed at the Met by the aforementioned pioneers, a list of operas took shape. I chose the repertoire for the program from these masterpieces. In fact, some of the very excerpts made famous by these singers are included on the program. Thanks to these trailblazers, the opera world is far more open to people of color. We are fortunate now that stars such as Eric Owens, Pretty Yende, Angel Blue, and Lawrence Brownlee, to name just a few, regularly perform leading roles worldwide.

As this experience for the students might be the first, and potentially, the last exposure to opera, it was crucial that the repertoire be only the very best excerpts, sung by unforgettable soloists. Mr. Shirley's first recommendation was that I call the incomparable tenor Rodrick Dixon. I was thrilled to be connected to dramatic soprano Karen Slack, who, just weeks before our concert, had sung Serena in *Porgy and Bess* at the Met. Of course I asked my wonderful Smith colleague Kate Saik to perform. Alan Schneider, our friend and local go-to tenor, rounded out the cast.

I knew that in order to make this event most meaningful for the students and the campus we needed to include a panel discussion giving our guest soloists the opportunity to discuss their experiences. We needed to hear from them so we could hear frank discussions about racial bias in opera and other issues. It is this discussion, moderated by Daphne Lamothe, Professor of African Studies (and violist in the orchestra), that we reprise this month.

I would like to share another anecdote that increased my passion for this project. About six weeks earlier than the oratorio, in late January, I conducted *The Barber of Seville* for Panopera, our local company. My son, Eli, eighteen years old sang in the chorus. The performances were terrifically funny and musically well executed. Leaving the theater after the final matinee, I said to Eli that I was very happy with how things went over the weekend, but I was disappointed that in this culturally rich area we could not sell out the house twice, a total of 1,600 tickets. Eli said, "Dad, maybe the world is over opera. It's pretty white." True enough, son. I was now further galvanized toward making the experience unforgettable for the college students involved. I don't give up easily.

You will see that the concert was a musical triumph for Smith College, one of the best concerts of my career. The students were blown away by the emotional power of the music, by the passionate delivery of the soloists, and, for those who were able to attend, the eye opening histories and anecdotes shared during the panel discussion. I wish we had recorded that discussion, but it occurred shortly before zoom became a regular fixture in our daily lives. I wish we had more professional lighting in JMG so the video looked better. Despite the bad lighting, I am grateful that we can show you the performance and that you will hear the soloists talk about their careers.

I must thank the following people without whom this would not have been possible: Maya Sposito for editing the video; Olivia Brady and Lily Lothrop for all their behind the scenes work and especially the supertitles; librarians Jessica Yoder, Taegan Mullane and Mai Klooster; Daphne Lamothe for being a wonderful colleague and a thoughtful moderator of the panel; the panelists and soloists, and especially the student performers for all their efforts. Finally, thanks to Joel Pitchon, Music Department Chair, for his caring leadership, and Jaz Dand, Anna Goudreau, and Shelley Latham for their administrative support.

Today, on June 4th, the theme of this performance has significantly more meaning. A pandemic has divided the world, hitting particularly hard in African American communities. And we have

witnessed many protests against the history of racially motivated police brutality, which this country cannot seem to put behind it.

If you are able to view the virtual panel, you will hear me speak briefly. I include this here in case you are not able to join us. I had not intended to speak on the panel, preferring to leave the narrative to others, but tenor Rod Dixon, with whom I now, gratefully, have a budding friendship, has helped me to see why it is important that my voice be heard. He wrote to me:

Only the conductor/educator can testify to that life-changing weekend. The gleam in [the students'] eyes, the energy in their walk and the passion in their playing. Something happened that weekend and you saw it!! You watched them leave the campus with perplexed looks in their eyes, uncertainty showing up like a long lost cousin and fear becoming their personal friend. You saw them thrown into a world of isolationism. What a juxtaposition to ponder! You and I both know that the discipline of classical music is needed more now than ever. It's not applied science. If you play and sing the notes...it transforms you!! It demands excellence, discipline, passion and a creative spirit to flush out the nuances of beauty. What's more beautiful than people coming together? You conducted them for one purpose....to enlighten them to the power of music over them. The success of that weekend girded the students in a way to walk into this new world differently. I believe you succeeded in your quest. Classical music is important and it's not only about art, but a sense of all things beautiful done together!! Your testimony of being with the kids that weekend will speak to the current environment seeking enlightenment about the new normal.

Here's to a better world, with opportunities for all to succeed and thrive, in health and happiness, no matter the color of their skin or the neighborhood where they live.

May the music we love be a balm for the wounds of today.