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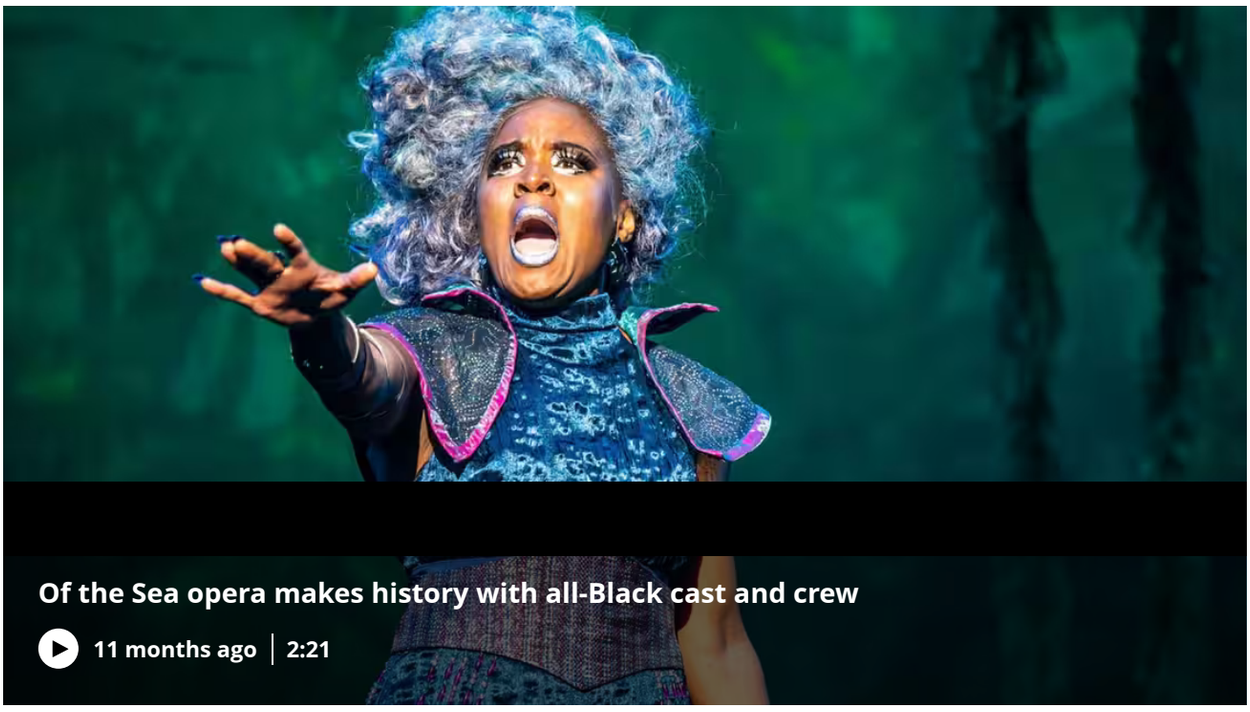
Entertainment

Of The Sea and other Black operas are changing the face of classical music

Production is first-ever large scale opera in Canada with an all-Black performance ensemble

Jackson Weaver · CBC News · Posted: Mar 31, 2023 4:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: March 31, 2023



A new opera in Toronto is making history as the first large-scale production with an all-Black ensemble both in front and behind the scenes. Of The Sea follows a man, his daughter and fellow Africans who are thrown overboard from a slaving ship and now live under the sea.

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Kanika Ambrose is no stranger to attention; as a playwright and librettist, Ambrose has already debuted original work at stages in Canada and the United States, and as a screenwriter she is enrolled in the Canadian Film Centre's Bell Media Prime Time TV Program.

So it might be surprising to note how excited she is on a Wednesday evening for a show already on its second night. But for Ambrose, this performance has special significance.

Suzanne Taffot, centre left, and Jorell Williams, centre, appear in this promotional photo from the opera Of The Sea. It's one of many operas currently putting Black stories, and Black bodies, onstage. (Dahlia Katz)

"I wanted Black folks to see themselves in opera and have space to enjoy opera," she said. "And I hope that's what happens tonight."

At that moment she was at Toronto's St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts for a special showing of *Of The Sea*, an original opera she conceived of and wrote — created through a partnership between Obsidian Theatre and Tapestry Opera. And as the story she developed focuses on enslaved Africans who fell or were tossed from ships during the Middle Passage, organizers set up a performance specifically for a majority Black audience.

While everyone was welcome, the goal was to invite Black theatre-goers into a space they had not typically been welcomed into, catered to or had their stories told onstage.

Performer Chantale Nurse appears in a promotional image from Of The Sea. (Dahlia Katz)

"It's an audience we don't typically see in theatre," Ambrose said, explaining why they organized their Black Celebration Night. "We're missing the friends, the fans, the people who want to see those people on stage, and also the nuance of different lived experiences that can bring so much to an art form."

That idea was the driving force behind *Of The Sea*, which also boasts an all-Black cast and creative team aside from composer Ian Cusson, who is Métis. But it comes alongside a wave of other productions that have begun to do the same: the Canadian Opera Company is soon debuting *Aportia Chryptych* — itself about Portia White, a legendary Nova Scotia opera contralto, and the first Black Canadian concert singer to achieve international fame.

***WATCH | The reinvention of Scott Joplin's opera* Treemonisha**:

A powerful collaboration is the driving force behind bringing new life to Treemonisha, Scott Joplin's groundbreaking1911 opera. Filmmaker: April Aliermo

The COC is also helping to develop *Treemonisha,* a Volcano production in collaboration between TO Live, the Luminato Festival, Soulpepper and Moveable Beast. That opera is a retelling of ragtime composer Scott Joplin's opera — one of the only such productions written about slavery by someone who actually lived through the post-slavery period. It will also feature an all-Black cast and with the first all-Black orchestra in Canadian opera history.

South of the border, New York's Metropolitan Opera is mounting the opera *Champion* in April — a jazz-infused retelling of boxing giant Emile Griffith's complicated life. That opera, by Grammy winner Terence Blanchard, was scheduled in a lightning-fast (for the world of professional opera) decision based on the success of Blanchard's last production — itself the first work by a Black composer to play at the Met.

From 2018, there was Seattle Opera's rendition of *Aida*, where organizers included exhibits and program notes to educate patrons on the history of Black Americans in opera. In 2022, there was the original opera *Omar,* which adapted the only known autobiography by an enslaved person written in Arabic. And just last month, *La Flambeau* debuted in Montreal under the guidance of Haitian Canadian composer David Bontemps.

From the outside, it all looks like a stunning change in the landscape of a rarefied musical domain that has appeared to be either indifferent to — or intentionally exclusionary to — a large part of the population.

Black representation in classical music

While much of American popular music has roots in Black community and culture, classical music — and specifically opera — has appeared less welcoming to their influence and participation.

According to a 2022 study by Opera America only one-fifth of opera administrators in Canada and the United States were Black, Indigenous or people of colour, while a new a new program by that same service organization recently promoted a program that pairs opera companies with historically Black colleges and universities to rectify "historic exclusionary practices against people of colour."

At the same time the underpinnings of Western music theory and the canon of classical music have prompted a number of studies and arguments over the seeming lack of input and acknowledgement of Black composers.

- 2023 BLACK CHANGEMAKERS **This classical musical couple launched Ensemble Obiora to showcase musicians from diverse cultures**
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In his paper Music Theory and the White Racial Frame, Hunter College music professor Philip Ewell found that over 98 per cent of the music written in the United States' seven most popular teaching textbooks was written by white composers — showcasing a lack of importance put on the contribution of Black writers.

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"This stark racial imbalance represents an unambiguous example of the white racial frame belief that the music of white persons represents the best framework for music theory," he wrote.

And in his 2020 piece for the New Yorker, "Black Scholars Confront White Supremacy in Classical Music," music critic Alex Ross wrote that reverence for the largely white, European composers in the country's early days crowded out any possibility for appreciating and elevation Black composers.

"When that tradition was transplanted to the multicultural United States," he wrote, "it blended into the racial hierarchy that had governed the country from its founding. The white majority tended to adopt European music as a badge of its supremacy."

And while more Black composers have been recognized in recent years, he argued that "still, Black faces remain rare in the rank and file of orchestras, in administrative offices, and, most conspicuously, in audiences."

LISTEN All-Black opera looks to the past, and under the sea to tell a transformative story:

Metro Morning 7:27

All-Black opera looks to the past, and under the sea to tell a transformative story

Of The Sea is Canada's largest Black ensemble opera, on now at the Bluma Appel Theatre.

For *Treemonisha* librettist Leah-Simone Bowen, who adapted Joplin's original opera to give more agency to its female lead, that change couldn't come soon enough. Though she is an established writer and podcaster, *Treemonisha* is the first opera she has worked on. And in so doing, she found it was the perfect place to tell similar stories.

"Opera just lends itself so well to Black stories because of its epicness," she said. "Because of its fantastical ability to show the wonder and the power of such big feelings."

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At the same time, she noted Black artists have contributed to the world of classical music for centuries, despite their apparent absence. Like Portia White, American soprano Leontyne Price found international fame and eventually became the first Black leading performer at the Metropolitan Opera, having performed there over 200 times in a career that began in 1952. And making her debut in 1925, American contralto Marian Anderson sang for everyone from kings to presidents — and famously performed to an audience of 75,000 at the Lincoln Memorial.

From left, contralto Marian Anderson stands with U.S. Senator George Stanley McGovern, U.S. President John F. Kennedy, German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and former U.S. First Lady Edith Wilson in Washington, Nov. 1961. (AFP/Getty Images)

But exclusion and ignorance have sometimes made that history hard to find. Famed Black opera singers Theodore Drury and Sissieretta Jones both founded touring companies around 1900, but neither found equal acclaim or attention among white audiences. And despite his success in ragtime, Joplin had to work for years to see *Treemonisha* published — though it was still so little-known during his lifetime he never saw it fully staged.

In an echo of Joplin's struggle, the upcoming film *Chevalier* details another black composer — Joseph Bologne, otherwise known as Chevalier de Saint-Georges. Born in 1745, Bologne was a Black man who became a champion fencer, virtuosic violinist and composer whose works rivaled his contemporary Mozart — earning him the title of "the most accomplished man in Europe" from John Adams, the second U.S. president.

The film itself looks at Bologne's rise to fame, but also at his attempts to write an opera, and become director of the Paris opera itself. In real life, Bologne has been largely unknown as much of his work was destroyed and his songs banned during the French Revolution and after slavery was reinstituted in France and its colonies.

Kelvin Harrison Jr. appears in a still from the upcoming film Chevalier. (TIFF)

So for a variety of reasons, seeing Black stories and performers take the opera stage is a powerful thing to witness. Jorrell Williams, who plays the lead role in *Of The Sea*, says it's something he doesn't take for granted.

"Being able to share the stage and being represented with people who look like me, is such a special thing," he said. "This is now in the canon and can be in the canon of grand scale opera. To be able to have representation in the biggest form — it's really amazing."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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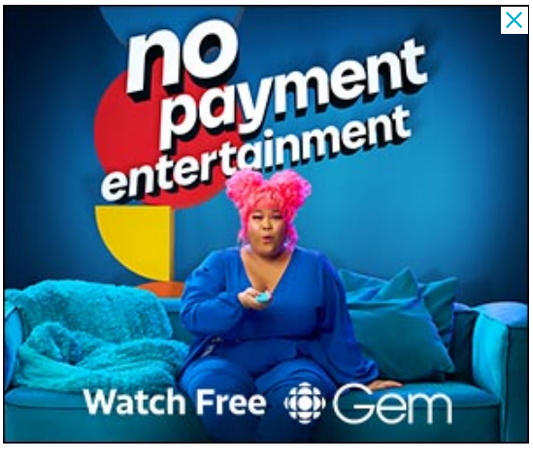

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It's not Black music, it's just music.

If you feel you have to add on the adjective, it's usually because you want to use that Black to sell that music, and that's where it starts to get ugly. Are those who are Black supposed to buy into it out of some weird tribal obligation? Are those are not Black supposed to avoid it because they don't want to be seen as co-opting or fetishizing the performance because of the Black aspect?

There's a word for people who only hire those who look like them and promote their products around that appearance.

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