

## HBCU Opera and the Archives:

### Building on the Past to Maximize the Future

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#### HBCUs and Opera: A Hidden Narrative

Recent trends within the opera industry have indicated a revitalization of Black voices in the repertoire selected for the stage, leading to a broader audience for opera companies. Many of these productions showcase the adapted true stories of Black protagonists, such as the recent Metropolitan Opera productions of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* by Terrence Blanchard and Kasi Lemmons in 2021 and 2024, and *The Life and Times of Malcolm X* by Terrence Blanchard and Anthony Davis in 2023. Some recent productions highlight pioneering Black figures within opera, such as the musical play *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson* (2021) by Carlos Simon and Sandra Seaton, which tells the story of the Negro Opera Company.<sup>1</sup> While these works represent a rise in innovation and opportunity for Black performers, composers, and audiences within the world of opera (and, to some extent, musical theater), the contributions of institutions that have championed this kind of work for over a century are largely overlooked. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are examples of spaces that have nurtured opera performance and pioneering artists within the field but are frequently excluded from this evolving narrative.

Several HBCUs boasted opera production as part of their groundbreaking music curricula in the early twentieth century. The treasured tradition of operatic performance at HBCUs has graduated international superstars who crossed the color line, such as Mattiwilda Dobbs (Spelman College, Class of 1946). Dobbs was the second African American woman to have a principal role at the Metropolitan Opera, the first African American to have a lead contract with the same company, and the first African American to have a lead role at the famous Milan opera house, La Scala.<sup>2</sup> Other well-known HBCU opera alumni who broke racial barriers include

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<sup>1</sup> “Overview: The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson Digital Program,” Glimmerglass Festival, last modified August 2021, <https://glimmerglass.org/the-passion-of-mary-cardwell-dawson-digital-program/>.

<sup>2</sup> Ernie Suggs, “The Legend of Mattiwilda Dobbs,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, February 2, 2024, <https://www.ajc.com/news/atlanta-news/the-legend-of-mattiwilda-dobbs/HUWHVUYVRJAFLHWEJTPWFSR6XI/>.

Jessye Norman (Howard University, Class of 1967), Camilla Williams (Virginia State University, Class of 1941), and the indomitable Leontyne Price (Central State University, Class of 1948). HBCUs have also provided space for the performance of operas by prominent Black composers like William Grant Still, Ulysses Kay, and Clarence Cameron White. One shining example of HBCUs providing space for Black opera composition is Scott Joplin's unfinished 1911 opera *Treemonisha*. Joplin's opera had its world premiere in 1972 at a Morehouse College-sponsored concert that counted many Atlanta University Center students and alumni among the cast and chorus.<sup>3</sup> In 1976, Xavier University of Louisiana produced the mid-south premiere of the work.<sup>4</sup> Most recently in November 2024, Morgan State University's opera program presented *Treemonisha* in a collaborative production with Opera Ebony.<sup>5</sup> The aforementioned singers, productions, and composers are but a few shining examples of the foundational training and performance experiences provided through HBCU music programs and their wider impact.

Despite this illustrious history, much of this information is unknown to current HBCU students, creating a disconnect between them and their institutions' operatic legacies. This detachment presents challenges for recruitment, funding for productions, and community engagement. How can this disconnect between contemporary campus communities and operatic legacy be addressed? How can the legacies of HBCU opera programs be restored to present a more holistic history of Black musical and theatrical activities in the US?

## Opera and the Archives

This article addresses these questions by exploring different applications of archival research to enhance opera production and community engagement. The exploration of archival evidence of HBCU opera programs lends itself to unearthing what musicologist Naomi André calls "shadow opera cultures."<sup>6</sup> André defines a shadow culture as one that illuminates marginalized historical facts and offers a new, more holistic perspective of mainstream history. She further explains that a shadow opera culture "...traces different terrain and addresses different questions..."<sup>7</sup> compared to dominant opera narratives. Her central assertion is that shadow opera cultures developed in Black communities at the same time that historically centralized opera traditions were evolving; however, Black opera narratives were obscured due

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<sup>3</sup> Larry Melton, "Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*: The First Stagings Remembered," *The Syncopated Times*, March 29, 2019, <https://syncopatedtimes.com/scott-joplins-treemonisha-the-first-stagings-remembered/>.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Stelly, "Treemonisha Slow to Blend," *New Orleans Xavier Herald* no. 3, November 1976, Digital Archives, Xavier University of Louisiana.

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Morgan State's opera program is an example of an HBCU whose alumni have achieved international success in opera within the last two decades. These alumni include soprano Leah Hawkins, bass Solomon Howard, bass-baritone Kevin Short, tenor Issachah Savage, and soprano/composer Jasmine Barnes.

<sup>6</sup> Naomi André, *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement*, (University of Illinois Press, 2018), 10.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

to the routine marginalization of African descendant perspectives.<sup>8</sup> On a microcosmic level, this concept can be applied to the lack of knowledge about HBCU opera history as these legacies are often overlooked in favor of more popular traditions (band, choir, other disciplines, etc.). While this knowledge is now seldom recognized, the evidence of engagement with opera at HBCUs is still present in the archives. By strategically publicizing related archival materials, the significance of HBCU shadow opera cultures can begin to re-emerge and lay the groundwork for community reinvestment in the art form.

The second application of archival research involves directly using information found in the repositories in instructional methods and production design. The general practice of using archival research to reconstruct "lost" narratives of Black experiences has gained traction in historical research methodology over the last decade, led by pioneering scholar Saidiya Hartman and her method of "critical fabulation."<sup>9</sup> Hartman puts forth critical fabulation as a writing method that engages with archival materials through "re-presenting the sequence of events"<sup>10</sup> of accepted historical phenomena in a way that privileges the silences within the archives and those historical figures that are either hidden or erased. Hartman's method does not pretend to provide all the details missing from marginalized (or shadow) narratives but instead focuses on the potential for storytelling within these narratives to provide an informed and more holistic idea of lived experiences. Similarities can be drawn between Hartman's method of critical fabulation, André's concept of shadow opera culture, and Jean Christophe Cloutier's work on shadow narratives, the latter which focuses on the novel as a site in which history is preserved by Black writers engaging with the archives. Cloutier also argues that "...[archival documents] can be put to new, unpredictable uses and form the basis for new interpretive and narrative acts."<sup>11</sup> Cloutier's argument can be interpreted as advocacy for the active use of the archives in the creative process to disrupt standardized historical narratives. In the context of opera, the production itself would be the storytelling vehicle that provides an opportunity for shadow culture narratives to be placed "downstage,"<sup>12</sup> or at the forefront.

Within the last five years of US operatic performance, audiences and critics alike have responded positively to productions that employ these principles of active engagement with the archives espoused by André, Hartman, and Cloutier. This interest is evident in the recent success of projects such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning opera *Omar* by Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels, which premiered in 2022 and incorporated archival resources in the libretto and

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<sup>8</sup> André, *Black Opera*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Christophe Cloutier, *Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature*, (Columbia University Press, 2019), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Naomi André, *Black Opera*, 9.

production design.<sup>13</sup> In the case of *Omar*, Naomi André contends in a short essay that the use of archives to center Omar ibn Said's lesser-known perspective of enslavement compelled audiences to "feel a deeper sense of the humanity of the enslaved."<sup>14</sup> In other words, the application of archival research in this opera production resulted in the audience establishing a more profound connection to both the work and the history that it represents. André also asserts that this outcome is beneficial beyond entertainment in that it serves to bridge the gap between a contentious national past and a more intentional path to the future. These outcomes of connecting with audiences and building bridges across cultural gaps directly apply to HBCU opera programs needing revitalization.

To demonstrate the potential of archival research in revitalizing HBCU opera programs, I ruminate on the 2024 production of *The Pirates of Portsmouth*, produced by Xavier's Opera Workshop. Thus, I show the impact of how archival research was applied to the production design and the pedagogical training associated with the operetta. To grasp the significance and effectiveness of these concepts within the production, however, it is first essential to understand the role of opera at Xavier University of Louisiana.

### **Xavier Opera: A Brief History**

The Xavier University of Louisiana opera program was founded in 1934 by Sister Mary Elise Sisson, Sister of the Blessed Sacrament (S.B.S.). New Orleans was no stranger to opera. It was the first city in the continental US to host regular performances in the late eighteenth century. In its early history, New Orleans opera houses counted Whites, Free People of Color, and even the enslaved among their audience members.<sup>15</sup> This diversity of patronage changed drastically with the introduction of Jim Crow law in the 1890s, which limited Black involvement in New Orleanian opera culture.<sup>16</sup> This exclusion of Black communities eventually provided the central catalyst for the establishment of opera at Xavier. Under the leadership of Sister Elise,

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<sup>13</sup> Naveed Moeed, "In Conversation with the Creators of Historical Opera Omar," *Chatham Life and Style*, February 24, 2023, <https://chathamlifeandstyle.com/features-%26-reviews/f/in-conversation-with-the-creators-of-historical-opera-%E2%80%9CComar>.

<sup>14</sup> Naomi André, "Sounding the Shadows as Omar Engages the Past and Present," *Southern Futures California Performance Arts*, last accessed January 31, 2025, <https://southernfuturescpa.org/sounding-the-shadows-as-omar-engages-the-past-and-the-present/>.

<sup>15</sup> Givonna Joseph, "The DNA of Opera in the Creole Community and the Legacy of Edmond Dédé," *La Créole* 15, (2022): 48.

<sup>16</sup> Michelle Miller and Kerry Breen, "Morgiane, a forgotten opera completed by Black composer in 1887, performed for the first time," *CBS News Saturday Morning*, last modified February 20, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/morgiane-opera-edmond-dede-new-orleans/#:~:text=%22Morgiane%22%20was%20the%20magnum%20opus,curtain%20is%20Dede's%20remarkable%20story>.

Xavier became the first HBCU to produce fully staged grand operas with an orchestra in 1949. Xavier was also the first collegiate opera program in New Orleans (followed by Loyola Opera in 1954) and the only local institution producing operas in the city before the New Orleans Opera Association was founded in 1943. Finally, Xavier opera productions were performed for integrated audiences during the height of the Jim Crow Era, the first and only program to do so for almost a decade.<sup>17</sup> Distinguished alumni from Xavier's opera program include Lavergne Monette (Class of 1958), who was the first singer of color to have a title role in a New Orleans Opera Association production. Baritone Frank Davis (Class of 1952) was a soloist on national radio and television broadcasts under bandleader Fred Waring. Wagnerian soprano Gail Gilmore (Class of 1972) was a mezzo-soprano. Debria Brown (Class of 1958), soprano Anabelle Bernard (Class of 1956), and more recently soprano Dara Rahming (Class of 2004).

Between the 1930s and 1970s, Xavier's opera program grew to be regarded as a central cultural institution both on campus and throughout the city of New Orleans.<sup>18</sup> Although the opera program at Xavier has continued to thrive for the past ninety years, the tradition of fully staged performances for which it gained notoriety began to decline in the 1980s, leading to a decrease in the program's communal impact and reputation.<sup>19</sup> Alumni from the 1960s and 1970s still recall Xavier's opera program as a central part of campus life; however, more recent students and community members are largely unaware of this history.

The lack of communal awareness and generational disconnect with Black and institutional histories of opera, combined with the general lack of funding for such programs at small liberal arts institutions, are all considerable obstacles to the sustenance of Xavier's opera legacy. While current funding and community awareness is low, some assets can be considered cultural capital: the ninety-year history of opera at Xavier, nostalgia about the program that still carries weight with older generations, and the plethora of historical artifacts available in archival repositories waiting to be discovered. By capitalizing on these non-monetary assets through the application of archival research to both instruction and production design, the Spring 2024 production of *The Pirates of Portsmouth* simultaneously uplifted Xavier's shadow opera culture while utilizing principles of critical fabulation to create a production that successfully engaged the Xavier community.

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Belsom, "The Early Years: A History of Opera in New Orleans," *New Orleans Opera Association*, effective 2023, New Orleans City Archives & Special Collections, [https://archivesnolalibrary.as.atlas-sys.com/repositories/3/archival\\_objects/83424](https://archivesnolalibrary.as.atlas-sys.com/repositories/3/archival_objects/83424).

<sup>18</sup> "Playbill: Faust," 1959, Xavier University of Louisiana Archives and Special Collections, accessed on September 4, 2024.

<sup>19</sup> This decline of visibility of Xavier's opera program, starting in the 1980s, is currently the subject of ongoing collaborative research conducted as part of Xavier University's GradStar Scholars program.

## The Pirates of Portsmouth

*The Pirates of Portsmouth* is an adaptation of the Gilbert and Sullivan classic *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879). Categorized as a comic light opera, or operetta, the original work is commonly included in young artist programs and opera seasons across the US due to its accessibility of language, musical content, and easy humor. It is also a very Eurocentric show that, in its original context, does little to directly engage or reflect the realities of a typical HBCU community. The challenge for the Xavier University production, therefore, was to take a work that was a viable training tool for opera students and transform it into a project that could also be considered culturally relevant programming and attract Xavier community members. The first significant change was to alter the time and location of the plot from nineteenth century England to the more familiar setting of the mid-1940s in the Tidewater region of coastal Virginia. These changes increased the possibility for audiences to be able to relate to the context of the show by decreasing the distance between historical periods. The second necessary change to address this challenge was the use of various HBCU archival repositories to adapt the original libretto in a way that highlighted histories and cultural traditions at HBCUs.

As the director of this production, I drew inspiration for *The Pirates of Portsmouth* from several HBCU legacies, including the choral traditions of all-women HBCUs Bennett and Spelman Colleges, the prominence of the Hampton University Pirates football team, the presence of pioneering Navy ROTC members and sailors during and after World War II on Hampton's campus, and Xavier's own former football and marching band program. Faculty and student researchers drew inspiration for costume design, set design, and character development through these institutions' online archival repositories and in Xavier's on campus archival space. While these HBCU legacies are well-known in some circles, they are not often part of the standard curriculum and are not present within the standard operatic repertoire. For this reason, rehearsal processes for ensembles and individual coaching sessions were rooted in conversations that consistently educated students about the historical context of the show provided through archival research. Students were also simultaneously encouraged to make connections between the historical fact to which they were exposed and their own knowledge of African American culture for the sake of character development.

Alongside the direct application of the archives to the production process, as director, I consistently gave presentations that emphasized Xavier University's unique opera history while promoting the show during interest meetings, course lectures, and scaffolding performance projects. The projects often included miniature exhibits of images from Xavier's past opera productions for public-facing events like conference presentations, as well as private performances for donors. These small events helped to connect current students with older alumni who held more of the memory of operatic activity at Xavier. The displayed images sparked nostalgia, often compelling older alumni to informally reminisce with current students and faculty about the operas they attended on campus and what those experiences meant to them.

as Xavierites. Several alumni also remarked that these events were a positive example of returning opera to Xavier.

These events used archival materials to capitalize on the assets of communal memory and highlighting histories that directly reflected the Xavier experience; as a result, members of the campus community (student performers, crew members, staff, and alumni) became increasingly invested in the success of *The Pirates of Portsmouth* and worked to advertise the production using word of mouth and, eventually, citywide press releases. This widespread communal investment led to the production attracting packed audiences, which had not been attained since before the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. Regarding learning goals and outcomes, student performers and technical crew members who completed the production left with a broad understanding of Xavier's operatic history and various other HBCU legacies. These students also expressed keen interest in returning to work with the opera program for the upcoming season, and some were invested enough in the potential of operatic performance to contribute ideas for and design future productions.

It may seem difficult to connect the resultant success of *The Pirates of Portsmouth* to the use of archival materials. For example, no survey was conducted among audience members or student participants that quantitatively confirmed a direct relationship between the response to the production and the research that informed it. Therefore, the following methods determine the connection of the response to the production with archival sources. First, observations of positive student and alumni reactions to the shift of the show's topic during information sessions and small-scale "teaser" performances confirmed interest in the HBCU setting. Second, audience reactions to text altered in the libretto to fit the adapted context were positive and engaged during both performances. Most objectively, however, there are similarities in method and outcome between the productions of *The Pirates of Portsmouth* and *Omar*. While *The Pirates of Portsmouth* used archives to inform an adaptation of an existing work and *Omar* used archival sources to create an original composition, both projects utilized archival resources to illuminate marginalized and forgotten histories and engage new opera audiences. In the case of the Xavier production, the incorporation of these resources resulted in the reinforcement of an often-overlooked institutional legacy for both current Xavier students and alumni, bridged the gap between younger and older generations, increased current student investment and interest in Xavier's opera program, and successfully reengaged community members with the performance of opera at Xavier.

The success of *The Pirates of Portsmouth* production showed that working with the archives to expose shadow opera culture within HBCU history and influence production design has the potential to yield a well-received production that could aid in the revitalization of an opera program. The *Pirates* production received multiple verbal accolades from the Xavier University community and created increased visibility for Xavier's opera program. It also

increased interest in student participation in opera productions and community members' anticipation for future productions. One of the most significant examples of the production's impact on the Xavier community was that it was featured in a Fall 2024 publication of the Xavier alumni magazine, *Xavier Gold*.<sup>20</sup> The positive cross-generational response from current Xavier students and older alumni conveys the potential of the use of archival research in programming to build community support. Examining this production highlights the importance of utilizing the extant resources of archival materials to increase community investment, which historically helped to sustain programs like Xavier Opera and lay the foundation for a prosperous future for opera programs at HBCUs.

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<sup>20</sup> Alisha Tillery, "Reviving a Deeply Rooted History: Opera Returns to Xavier," *Xavier Gold*, October 9, 2004, [https://issuu.com/xualumni/docs/xavier\\_gold\\_2024](https://issuu.com/xualumni/docs/xavier_gold_2024).



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