

Grand Opera as Racial Uplift: The National Negro Opera Company 1941-1962

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Music

**Chapel Hill
2009**

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ABSTRACT

CHRISTOPHER WELLS: Grand Opera as Racial Uplift: The National Negro Opera Company 1941-1962
(Under the direction of Mark Katz)

For twenty years, the National Negro Opera Company and its founder/director Mary Cardwell Dawson staged large-scale opera productions featuring African American performers. The company performed works by Verdi, Gounod, and African American composers R. Nathaniel Dett and Clarence Cameron White before sold-out crowds in venues such as Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Opera House. Though they sought to match the splendor and spectacle of the Metropolitan Opera Company, they never enjoyed the government and aristocratic patronage normally required to stage grand opera. Based on original archival research at the Library of Congress, this thesis documents the company's history, focusing on the interaction between its artistic mission and strategies for raising funds. The thesis also draws parallels between the company's work and the economic life of black churches, the emergence of a black middle class, and the philosophies of racial uplift articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“It is the hope and dream of all races to attain the highest level in musical expression and culture. The National Negro Opera movement seeks, through organized efforts, to further the realization of the dreams of our racial group.”¹

In 1941, Mary Cardwell Dawson, a New England Conservatory-trained singer and choral director, disbanded her lucrative Pittsburgh music school and founded the National Negro Opera Company (NNOC). Just two years later, the Company performed Verdi’s *La Traviata* in Washington, DC to an audience of over 15,000. More major performances would follow before sold-out audiences at the National Guard Armory, the Watergate, Madison Square Garden, Carnegie Hall, and eventually the Metropolitan Opera House, where the National Negro Opera Company was the *first* outside company permitted to perform. Among the company's homegrown talent were Napoleon Reed, who starred in the Broadway musical *Carmen Jones* in the 1940s, and Robert McFerrin (father of Bobby McFerrin) who in 1951 became the first African American man on the Metropolitan's permanent roster.

Over the next twenty years, the National Negro Opera Company put on large-scale opera performances of and made significant headway for African American singers. However, did they in fact “further the realization of the dreams of their racial group?” Answering this question requires asking another one: what were the dreams that Dawson had

¹ National Negro Opera Company, souvenir program for *Aida*, Pittsburgh, PA, 1941, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 3, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

in mind? Did putting on fancy costumes and singing Verdi arias really improve the lives of black people or did it just feed into what Scott Deveaux described in *The Birth of Bebop* as the black middle class' "exaggerated admiration for white gentility?"²

In the pages to follow, I will assume two fundamental tasks. First, I will draw upon primary sources, including event programs, correspondence, and newspaper articles, to sketch a picture both of the company's important performances, focusing on their performances of works by black composers, and of the social and economic strategies intended to sustain their activities.³ Second, I will place the company's rhetoric and web of socio-economic and artistic activity in dialogue with three aspects of urban black life at mid-century: the black church, the emerging black middle class, and conflicting discourses of racial uplift.

I will argue that the Company's vision of racial uplift was simultaneously cultural *and* economic, and that Mary Cardwell Dawson found in grand opera a unique means of reconciling the tension between the contested paradigms of uplift advocated by W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, the two most influential African-American thinkers of the early twentieth century. To realize her vision, she used the institutional model of the black church and the social ideology of the black middle class to imbue her company with the

² Scott Deveaux, *The Birth of Bebop*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 51.

³ National Negro Opera Company Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC. The collection contains the institutional records, correspondence, programs, scores, photographic materials, and other ephemera pertaining to the National Negro Opera Company and to the earlier work of Mary Cardwell Dawson. This thesis is based on my archival work in the collection from June-August 2008 supported by the University of North Carolina Music Department's James W. Pruett Summer Research Fellowship. During my research, I examined all event flyers and programs, correspondence, newspaper clippings, and photographs surviving in the collection as well as a number of other institutional records.

power to challenge conventional conceptions of class structure and ownership of high culture.

CHAPTER 2

THE NATIONAL NEGRO OPERA COMPANY (1941-1962): A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY

Mary Cardwell Dawson formed the National Negro Opera Company (NNOC) to serve the tremendous talent pool of black opera singers who could find no opportunities to perform in the United States. She had spent years running a successful music school in Pittsburgh and as a choral director and voice teacher. However, Dawson realized that even with excellent training, her students would have relatively few opportunities for careers in performance. A story from the NNOC's 1957 souvenir brochure recounts Dawson's dismay while still in school at finding no black performers in productions at the Boston Opera House.

During intermission, she often went back stage to really observe for herself, hoping eventually to find one of her people there. Actually, she was only to be discouraged, disappointed and finally made to wonder why the omission of her people. ... She thus began to wonder why even she had chosen this field for her life's work. She found the same type of exclusion existing in the Boston Symphony Orchestra, which she often attended on Fridays, as well as operas in other cities from coast to coast. Everywhere, and in every respect, she found complete discrimination or exclusion. This weighed heavily upon that young student of the Conservatory

Her heart and interest were in the cultural development of her race, and although Negroes graduated each and every year "shoulder to shoulder" with members of other races from the best conservatories and universities of America and abroad, she found that they were denied equal opportunity. So Mme. Dawson decided to "test" negro talent to determine its quality on the stage and its acceptance and support by the public.⁴

⁴ National Negro Opera Company, excerpt from souvenir brochure, 1957. National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 3 Folder 7, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

The Company emerged out of Dawson's efforts toward a single production of *Aida* organized for the annual meeting of the National Association of Negro Musicians (NANM). Having been elected president of the NANM the previous year, Dawson sought to demonstrate both to NANM membership and to outsiders that an all African American cast could perform a major opera on the same level as a white company. The performance's program contains a mission statement penned by Dawson (excerpted above as an epigraph) that would form the basis of the group's rhetoric for the remainder of its existence.

It is the hope and dream of all races to attain the highest levels in musical expression and culture. The National Association of Negro Musicians, Inc., seeks through organized efforts, to further the realization of the dreams of our racial group.

It is our hope to see, and to aid the promotion of movements which will lead ultimately to more serious creative efforts in the field of orchestral and operatic music.

Believing such movements must stem largely from basic educational efforts, and programmes, we hope to see our many universities and music schools initiate projects which will lead to the establishment of operatic groups and Negro orchestras of symphonic proportions in our many music centers.

The effort here tonight represents our contribution toward this end; gathered here at considerable cost are many of our talented singers, who have had the opportunity of training in operatic routine. It is our hope that this performance will convince members of our racial group, and our friends among other races, many of whom are already well initiated in operatic culture, of the possibilities of our efforts in this field.⁵

To conduct the performance, Mary Cardwell Dawson hired Frederick Vajda, a former assistant conductor for the Metropolitan Opera, who served as the NNOC's musical director from 1941 to 1945. A white man, Vajda had, for several years before he partnered with Dawson, been interested in producing operas with black casts, owing to his belief that

⁵ National Negro Opera Company, souvenir program for *Aida*, October 30, 1941, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 3, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

musical achievement could aid in African Americans' development as a race, a view he expressed in the program for the company's first production.

When I first considered the undertaking to produce this opera by an All-Negro cast, I discovered that a new world of productivity was opening before me. That the Negro is endowed with the gift of musical expression I was well aware, but that this power could be made to reach such heights as have already been attained, I little guessed.

To his innate endowment are coupled a desire to develop artistically, and a willingness to work against any obstacle, that make the ultimate success of the race in the field of music an almost assured fact.⁶

Vajda was also a proponent of producing Operas in English and supplied the translations for the company's early productions of *Aida* and *La Traviata*.⁷

Every mention of Vajda in the company's programs, letters, and press releases mentions his connection to the Metropolitan. This reflects one of Dawson's most significant strategies for boosting the NNOC's prestige and credibility. Though the casts were either predominantly or exclusively black, Dawson routinely hired white musicians from the National Symphony and Metropolitan Opera Orchestra and booked established conductors such as Vajda, Silvio Insana, and Uriel Nespoli. By doing this, Dawson was able to counterbalance the novelty of an African-American cast with the legitimacy granted by established white musicians and more specifically by European conductors. Dawson also sought to match or exceed the levels of bombast and spectacle achieved by major American and European companies. Each opera included a *Corps de Ballet* and a chorus of hundreds, including the enormous double chorus called for in Verdi's *Aida*. Her explicit goal was to put

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ National Negro Opera Company, souvenir program for *La Traviata*, Madison Square Garden, New York, NY, March 29, 1944, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 7, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

black singers in the same context as whites: same costumes, same orchestras, same conductors, same venues.

At the same time, Dawson sought to ensure her audiences were as broad as possible. Rather than cater exclusively to established opera audiences, she sought to generate broad appeal across lines of both race and class. For that reason, virtually every NNOC production was given in English and at times a narrator would summarize the dialogue before every act.⁸ Dawson also sought to keep tickets affordable, even holding special fundraisers to subsidize youth tickets. “We plan to enable public and high school students to attend Grand Opera performances at moving picture prices.”⁹

Dawson and the NNOC were thus pushing boundaries in two directions. On the one hand, she sought to demonstrate that blacks could succeed at what was, in her view, the “highest and most notably difficult” musical form.¹⁰ On the other hand, she aimed to make that art form a community project that would transcend class and serve as a source of pride and enrichment for both performers and audiences. The opening of a draft article, probably from the mid-1950s, in the NNOC collection effectively demonstrates the impact of Dawson’s strategy in the context of mid-century racial politics.

When artists and historians talk or write glibly about the contribution of the Negro to American culture they generally confine their references to the spirituals, the blues and rock n’ roll and other earthly forms of music ignoring completely the advances made in the field of the classics, grand opera and other orthodox areas.

⁸ Mary Cardwell Dawson, copy of letter to Chicago-area reverends re: *Faust* performance, n/d. [1952], National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 3 Folder 9, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁹ Carbon of “An Invitation to Opera Lovers,” fundraising letter, n/d. National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 3 Folder 7, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹⁰ National Negro Opera Company, *La Traviata* press release, Madison Square Garden, New York, NY, March 29, 1944, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 7, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

This oversight is traceable largely to the fact that because the so-called higher forms of music art indigenous to Europe. Americans generally find it difficult to identify themselves with these forms except in the capacity of conspicuous consumers.

The exorbitant costs of grand opera especially have made it a luxury item placing it well beyond the reach of the low income groups limiting the opportunities for enjoyment and general acceptance on the part of the masses and likewise discouraging development on the part of the participants.

It was to overcome these handicaps and blaze new trails that the National Negro Opera Company was founded in 1941 by Mme Mary Caldwell Dawson and its continued existence has proved a heroic challenge to the misconception that the Negro artist must be confined to a musical “ghetto” regardless of ability or training.¹¹

Meeting these “exorbitant costs” was always the company’s greatest challenge as Dawson’s aspirations came, quite literally, at a steep price. She matched the production values of major national companies, yet lacked the government funding and/or private philanthropy that opera companies nearly always rely on for support. They sold out major venues, and yet the NNOC frequently operated at a loss and was consistently in severe debt. Though they were largely solvent through their first decade, an unfortunate incident in 1949 plunged the company into financial peril from which they were never able to fully recover. That year, two consecutive performances of *Aida* at the Watergate in Washington, DC had to be cancelled due to rain. Since the company had no real savings and relied on ticket sales to make their payroll, they had no money with which to pay the singers, pit musicians, and other professionals contracted for the event.¹²

This incident marked the beginning of a long struggle between the company and the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA). Since its inception, the NNOC had contracted performers and artistic staff through this union in order to have access to the top-flight

¹¹ Ralph [Brothers?], untitled draft of article, n/d., National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 3 Folder 7, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹² Woody L. Taylor, untitled article on Mary Cardwell Dawson, n/d. [1944], National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 7, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

singers and musicians Dawson wanted for her performances. The NNOC's inability to meet obligations after the Watergate incident placed them on AGMA's unfair list, which prevented them from hiring singers and contracting venues through the early 1950s. The correspondence shows at least two instances where Dawson was unable to contract desired headliners due to her difficulties with AGMA. In 1949, the company failed to book Muriel Rahn, the original "Carmen" from Broadway's *Carmen Jones*, when her agent would not let her work with the company for fear of difficulties with the union. In 1952 AGMA agents prevented Dawson from booking Camilla Williams, then the only black woman singing with City Center Opera in New York, when they called her agent to advise him of a dispute between Dawson and the Union.¹³

Dawson repeatedly complained in both private and public that AGMA was actively interfering with her ability to run her company. In correspondence with the union itself, after informing them about a cancelled performance in Pittsburgh, she compared her own efforts, working through AGMA, to those of black companies with no union ties. "The Dramu Opera Co. in Philadelphia has produced opera regularly four or five time a year and does not belong to AGMA, and I understand, never will for the same reason of hindrance that you are giving us. They give opera without being disturbed by your office and do so successfully."¹⁴

Though not the exclusive cause of their financial struggles, the company's issues with AGMA provide a window into the company's larger difficulties establishing stable operating funds. The most revealing document in this regard is a draft of a news article by Woody L. Taylor. In the article, Dawson effectively summarizes the difficulty of the NNOC's position:

¹³ Mary Cardwell Dawson to Howard M. Laramy, June 2, 1952. National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 7 Folder 4, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹⁴ Ibid.

having to pay salaries to the same scale as other companies, but with significantly less outside funding than white opera companies.

Mrs. Dawson stated that no other Opera company is treated by AGMA in the manner in which Negroes are being treated. "We have no large solicitations like many white opera companies and symphonies. We have no large endowments. Each of our performances, from the very beginning must pay for themselves." "Performances have been made by the company in Pittsburgh, Chicago, Washington, and New York, the rent alone is never less than \$5,000 for the opera houses to say nothing about scenery, and many other expenses that go to put on an opera," she said.

"Many times," she continued, "one performance must take up the slack for the other one and in case there is a bad night or two this often is not possible. It is not my purpose to exploit Negro talent for my own personal gain." "It is my sincere aim and desire to make a way for these people, to give them an outlet to sing opera and let the world know that Negroes too can sing something other than spirituals. To open the doors to Negroes that have been closed to them unless they are so outstanding that they cannot be ignored."

"Our work, so far," she continued, "is merely preparing young singers for the opera. Our chorists have had to come from government and other workers and trained so that some day they would be able to express themselves and have an avenue by which they can do so. Yet, with the meager funds with which we have to carry on, AGMA is attempting to close these doors to these young people by forcing us to pay higher salaries than we are able to pay and having everybody in general to hike the ante. The young people themselves, work for the love of the art and are perfectly satisfied to work with me," Mrs. Dawson said. "The very evidence of this fact is because there are those who first started still with the company because they know what we are trying to do for them."¹⁵

In one sense, Dawson's position that AGMA's treatment of the NNOC was somehow unique or discriminatory seems untenable. AGMA's salary scales were consistent and any company unable to make their payroll would, presumably, have been placed on the unfair list. At the same time, Dawson does highlight the institutional racism that constantly hindered her company's progress. Other American companies performing on the scale she desired had endowments and established networks of patronage both governmental and

¹⁵ Woody L. Taylor, article draft, n/d [1944?], National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 5, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

aristocratic; tools no African American institution could easily establish at the time. In order to keep the company afloat despite these hindrances, Dawson had to generate her own system of patronage and fundraising. The company's strategies can best be described as a mixture of African American church and community-based economics and traditional opera fundraising.

Dawson's eclectic patronage network functioned on several levels. The first of these levels was the company's guild system. Upon its incorporation in 1942, the NNOC's incorporators resolved, "that the best interests and main financial support of the National Negro Opera Company will be maintained by the establishing of opera guilds in every city where the Negro population is large enough to require the cultural service of grand opera."¹⁶ Thus, the NNOC operated as a network of confederated guilds in cities with large African American communities: New York, Washington, Pittsburgh, and Chicago. Like other social and professional organizations within African-American communities, guilds collected annual dues from members and created venues for socialization and networking through a plethora of volunteer committees (hospitality committee, women's committee, youth committee, hostess' committee, church committee, etc.) charged with fundraising and doing publicity in the community. Additionally, Dawson hoped committee members would feel a sense of ownership in the organization and that membership would accrue social prestige. For example, the Chicago Opera Citizens' Committee had Congressman William L. Dawson (no relation) as its honorary chairman and members' names were printed in the program to the NNOC's 1952 performance of *Faust* at the Chicago Civic Opera House.¹⁷

¹⁶ National Negro Opera Company Incorporators, typed statement, 1942, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 3 Folder 9, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

¹⁷ National Negro Opera Company, souvenir program for *Faust*, March 29, 1952, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 2 Folder 1, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Guilds were also populated by the company's "performing members," who made up the enormous choruses for the company's productions. Members were occasionally professionals, but were for the most part individuals from all walks of life, the sort of people one would expect to find in a community opera company. Members paid monthly or annual dues and attended regular rehearsals. The NNOC, however, provided its members with opportunities beyond those typically offered by local community opera. In addition to singing in famous venues and with major orchestras, each chorister received AGMA membership and was paid union scale for every performance.

The chorus members thus occupied a nebulous space between amateur and professional in that they were paid for each performance, but still paid dues for the opportunity. The company worked this way because even though most chorus members were not professionals, it was important to Dawson to *treat* them as professionals rather than as amateur volunteers. As she often wrote in fundraising letters, "The word 'gratis' has no place in the vocabulary of the National Negro Opera Company, Incorporated; everyone is paid for his services."¹⁸ Through this unorthodox setup, members received an opportunity that was simultaneously cultural and vocational. Dawson effectively turned the extravagant choruses in Verdi operas into a chance to extend economic opportunity to as many people as possible.

The guild system not only generated reliable revenue for the company, but also gave communities a sense of involvement and ownership in NNOC productions. Dawson relied on guild members to generate ticket sales through their businesses, churches, and social networks. A New York mass mailing, preceding a series of 1944 productions of *La Traviata*

¹⁸ Mary Cardwell Dawson to Ann Cook, carbon copy of typed letter, August 8, 1943, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 8 Folder 10, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

at New York's Madison Square Garden, exemplifies the NNOC's efforts to engage the black community.

The object of the movement is two-fold: To encourage the Negro Opera Singer and to contribute something to racial pride. Among the appearances of the National Negro Opera Company stands out most notably a two-day presentation in Washington, D.C. last summer to which 27000 people attended! It is our desire to even eclipse that record here in New York City because of the greater population. In order to achieve this end it will be necessary to contact every Negro Organization in the community. We are therefore forming a large and inclusive Social Committee to which we should like to have you consent to become a member either in writing or by phone.¹⁹

In order to galvanize the community, Dawson contrasted the NNOC's shoestring budget with the support enjoyed by all-white companies. Department Store mogul Edward Kaufmann's support of the Pittsburgh Opera provided Dawson an excellent foil for her own fundraising literature in 1948.

Edgar J. Kaufmann has agreed to pay any deficit up to \$50,000 for the 1948 season for the Pittsburgh Company which is seemingly for all white musicians; we must work for some recognition there.

Now, I am not asking you to give \$50,000.00 but I am asking if you will please give at least \$10.00 to guarantee Operatic Productions for the National Negro Opera Company in Pittsburgh.²⁰

This is a challenge to the Negroes of Pittsburgh. Let's Pack the House!²¹

Dawson also engaged local businesses by impressing upon them that association with the NNOC was in their interest. Particularly in Washington DC, Dawson was able to procure free refreshments and other amenities for fundraising events by informing

¹⁹ Mary Cardwell Dawson and Eva T. Parks (Chairman of Citizens' Sponsoring Committee for Madison Square Garden performance of *La Traviata*), open fundraising letter, February 24, 1944. National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 7, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²⁰ Mary Cardwell Dawson, fundraising letter, January 13, 1948, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 12, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²¹ Mary Cardwell Dawson, fundraising letter to ministers, January 12, 1948, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 12, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

local businesses of the number of NNOC guild members who lived in their neighborhoods.²²

In addition to engaging local communities, the NNOC sought to bring prestige to the organization by associating it with prominent people. Mary Cardwell Dawson used honorary chairmanships and largely inactive “advisory boards” to get major names on her programs. Eleanor Roosevelt was an NNOC honorary chairman as were black congressmen William L. Dawson and Adam Clayton Powell, famous performers such as Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson, and major philanthropists such as Senator J.W. Fulbright and Mrs. Clifford Heinz.

It is quite unlikely that any of these people had significant interaction with the NNOC. A 1954 letter from Mrs. Clifford Heinz to Mary Cardwell Dawson suggests the company’s practice may have been to “appoint” dignitaries to honorary positions without informing them ahead of time.

I note your letterhead shows me as an Honorary President. This is a real honor – but with honor there is responsibility – so I cannot accept this position on your Foundation. I am trying to divest myself of obligations. And to the best of my knowledge and recollection I am sure that I never gave my consent to this. I am sure you understand my position and know that I shall be just as friendly and interested if you will kindly not use my name in your publicity and on your next letterheads.²³

In a 1959 letter, J.W. Fulbright politely declined an Honorary Chairmanship, which casts into doubt his awareness of his own appearance on NNOC literature years earlier. NNOC attorney Harrison Jackson confirmed the lack of involvement of the company’s honorary officers in a

²² For examples, see Mary Cardwell Dawson to Buckingham Supermarkets Inc., February 2, 1962, Box 7 Folder 27 and Mary Cardwell Dawson to Donahoe’s (restaurant), March 8, 1954, Box 8 Folder 19, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²³ Mrs. Clifford Heinz to Mary Cardwell Dawson, September 13, 1954, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 9 Folder 15, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

1951 letter to Adam Clayton Powell “...I need not state that the duties of such offices are nil.”²⁴

In addition to using prestigious names for status purposes, Dawson sought consistent funding from more wealthy patrons, drawing upon both white and black aristocrats. In a 1953 fundraising plan to establish a permanent foundation, the company wanted to establish a central group of major donors to serve as a Board of Governors.

Immediately following the selection of 50 persons – divided roughly 60% white – 40% Negro – with twice as many women as men – personal letters from the director should go out to each person asking for an appointment at an appointment at a specified date and time.²⁵

These demographics demonstrate two things. First, they reflect the obvious fact that wealthy patrons of high culture were more often white than black. Second, they reflect the greater involvement of women than men in the affairs of the NNOC. I suspect that, like white orchestral players in the pit, white socialites in the audience may have been part of the company’s drive toward a cosmetic “parity” with white opera companies. Dawson also created prestige by offering members a taste of the notoriety afforded upper-class opera patrons. Letters soliciting funds for National Negro Opera Company performances often advertised “Celebrity Boxes” and a “Diamond Horseshoe” section, where those holding higher-priced tickets would be announced over the PA system and followed to their seats by a spotlight.²⁶

²⁴ Harrison S. Jackson to Adam Clayton Powell Jr., April 27, 1951, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 11 Folder 9, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²⁵ National Negro Opera Company, “Outline of Plans for a Promotion of a Sustaining Fund for the National Negro Opera Company,” n/d. [1953 or earlier], National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 20 Folder 11, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

One of the National Negro Opera Company's most significant patrons was Clark Griffith, the white owner of the Major League Baseball team the Washington Senators. Griffith appeared on programs as the Company's honorary president from 1947 until his death in 1955. Griffith's contributions kept the company afloat during the late 1940s and early 1950s, yet this contribution was not financial as such. For one night every summer, Griffith gave Dawson free use of Griffith Stadium, the Senators' home playing field, to stage a benefit concert for the NNOC.

For the most part, the annual Griffith Stadium shows were hybrids of "high" and "low" culture. The NNOC would juxtapose arias and operatic scenes with dance numbers, popular musicians, and even fashion shows. With such a large venue and little overhead, Dawson was able to turn these unique spectacles into a consistent revenue generator that allowed her to pump money into her massive opera productions.

The company's first Griffith fundraiser in 1948 featured Vaudeville star Noble Sissle as MC, tap dancer Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, popular song icon W.C. Handy, a modern dance troupe lead by Bernice Hammond Lewis, and a group of marching bands and drill teams from the Georgetown Patriarchy. The program also included classical performances from NNOC alumni, among them Muriel Rahn and Napoleon Reed, who were then starring on Broadway in *Carmen Jones*.

By 1951, the annual Griffith Stadium Gala had become a major social event for Washingtonians of every race and class; Among the sponsors that year was Harry Truman. The event featured swing bandleader Lucky Millinder and his Orchestra, an "opera ballet,"

²⁶ National Negro Opera Company, advertisement for upcoming productions in souvenir program for *Aida*, October 9, 1954, Syria Mosque, Pittsburgh, PA, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 2 Folder 3, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

and a beauty pageant to select “Miss Sepia Washington, 1951.”²⁷ The event also included the first annual Parade of Queens, a high fashion show featuring “Queens” representing different African diasporic nations (Queen of Haiti, Queen of Ethiopia, Queen of Cuba, etc.) The “Queens” were the NNOC members who had sold the most tickets to the event.²⁸

At the ninth annual Gala in 1955, the company premiered perhaps their most unorthodox production, entitled “The Court of Famous Characters,” an expanded version of a show they had begun performing in black churches earlier in the year. This production, defined by the company as a “pageant,” brought together a variety of operatic numbers with a loose storyline based around court entertainment and Christian moral values.

In keeping with our high aims we are planning to bring to Washington, D.C. for the first time “THE COURT OF FAMOUS CHARACTERS.” This is to be a pageant showing some of the outstanding people in opera, the Holy Bible and real life. If there is some person that you have long admired, why not for the first time put yourself in their shoes?²⁹

Merging the “Parade of Queens” into this dramatic story, the “Court of Famous Characters” framed operatic arias and scenes, with new “happy” endings, as entertainments for a court of “Kings,” who represented different virtues. The concept is best summarized by a draft synopsis presumably written for the 1955 performance.

Intro: The performance this evening will open with a Court of Famous Characters, at which seven future Kings and their Queens will be entertained with arias taken from great operas, the work of the composers which will last forever, but the tragic conditions portrayed in these operas, under which humanity suffers (-ed and are still suffering to a certain extent) will be

²⁷ National Negro Opera Company, souvenir program for “Fifth Annual Music Festival at Griffith Stadium,” Griffith Stadium, Washington, DC, September 30, 1951, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 14, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²⁸ National Negro Opera Company, flyer for “Fifth Annual Music Festival at Griffith Stadium,” Griffith Stadium, Washington, DC, September 30, 1951, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 14, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

²⁹ Mary Cardwell Dawson, fundraising letter, n/d. [1955?], National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 12 Folder 29, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

changed. Therefore, we will visualize a future in which the Love of God will take root in the human heart, and Kings will embody the attributes of God. We shall now announce seven Kings and their Queens into our Court of Fame: the King of Loyalty, the King of Love, the King of Unity, the King of Faith, the King of Happiness, the King of Mercy, and the King of Justice. We will entertain these future Kings with the immortal music of arias from these operas---ending with The Ordering of Moses.

Il Trovatore 1. If King would have had conception of loyalty he would not have caused Leonora to lose hope by forcing her to give up her loves for which caused her death by taking poison which she concealed in her ring.

Faust 2. If real love could have been upheld, Faust would not have succumbed to the temptations of the devil and caused the death of the sweet Marguerita.

Mme. Butterfly 3. We see the lack of unity between the East and West causing a beautiful young Japanese maiden to kill herself due to betrayal by her Western husband.

Oberon. 4. In the midst of disaster and hopelessness, Reiza, the bride of Sir Huton had faith that somehow they would be saved from ship wreck and build their lives together.

Italian Street Song 5. Operetta happiness – The King of Happiness will be entertained with the Italian Street Song.

[The bottom of the page, which presumably contains the final two scenes, is cut off in the draft]³⁰

The Griffith Galas were only the largest of such fundraising concerts. In order to raise money for the operas, Dawson put on a wide variety of other events. In the Company's early years, benefit concerts were limited to single or multi-artist recitals. Before founding the NNOC, Dawson staged many classical concerts to benefit local black churches and social organizations through her Cardwell School of Music in Pittsburgh. In addition to featuring her own students, she booked notable black performers through her side-business, Cardwell Concert Management. In 1938, she brought future NNOC star Lillian Evanti and then 6-year old pianist/composer Phillipa Schuyler to Pittsburgh's Carnegie Music Hall.³¹ When the

³⁰ National Negro Opera Company, draft of plot summary for *The Court of Famous Characters*, August 24, 1955. National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 2 Folder 4, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³¹ Cardwell Dawson Concert Management, program for "Fourth Annual Concert," Carnegie Hall, Pittsburgh, PA, March 31, 1938, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 3, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

NNOC was in dire straits in 1948, Dawson herself returned to the stage giving a number of solo recitals to benefit the company.

Toward the start of the 1950s, owing presumably to the success of the Griffith Stadium shows, the NNOC began to experiment with different types of fundraisers. In May 1950, they put on a midnight “Night at the Opera” in Washington, DC’s legendary Howard Theater, the most famous black theater in the city. The program included “excerpts from the popular Operas and dance groups in costume,” but opened with a “CAVALCADE OF LATEST FASHIONS, from New York and Paris.”³² A month earlier, they had started what would become another annual tradition: a fashion parade through central Washington DC. The first parade in April, 1950 advertised “Glorious Bands; Beautiful Floats; March and Drill Teams; The Elk’s Band No. 85, conducted by Professor Frederick Simpson. FASHIONS, FASHIONS, AND MORE FASHIONS.”³³

In 1955, the company held a “Gala Banquet Ball” in New York “Honoring Stars and Celebrities who have pioneered and made an outstanding contribution to America in Music, Drama and Dance.”³⁴ This event served to raise the profile of the NNOC by associating more celebrities with their cause. At the same time, Dawson had a genuine interest in highlighting the achievements of African American performers, noting that the Gala would “offer

³² National Negro Opera Company, advertisement for “Howard Night at the Opera”, Washington, DC, 1950, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 12, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³³ National Negro Opera Company, advertisement for “Easter Fashion Parade and Symposium” April 9, 1950, John Wesley AME Zion Church, Washington, DC, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 12, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³⁴ Mary Cardwell Dawson, fundraising letter, March 8, 1955, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 2 Folder 4, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

something commendable which our children can read and boast about and be encouraged to emulate.”³⁵

This eclectic array of offerings did not occur early in the company’s history, when their finances were more stable, yet the blend of popular entertainments with scenes from different operas allowed Dawson to engage the community through a more diverse and possibly more accessible set of presentations. Ironically, the Company’s financial disadvantages relative to white companies, and their means of overcoming them, became crucial elements of the company’s unique contribution to the cultural life of northeastern cities. Forced to reach out in every possible direction, the NNOC was able to engage audiences that may have otherwise had little interest in operatic productions.

In 1946, the National Negro Opera Company broke with their tradition of presenting works by major European Composers and mounted their first performance of a work by an African American: R. Nathaniel Dett’s *The Ordering of Moses*, an oratorio based on the Exodus story and specifically on the Spiritual “Go Down, Moses.” The initial production in 1946 was a relatively modest fundraising event in Chicago, but in 1950, Dawson transformed the work into a fully staged opera that became the company’s only consistently lucrative production.

Dawson presented *The Ordering of Moses* at the 1950 Griffith Stadium fundraiser and subsequently took it on the road, presenting the work as a biblical “chamber opera” at black churches in New York and Washington, DC. In 1951, she chose *Moses* for the Company’s debut performance at New York’s Carnegie Hall. The Carnegie Hall production was a near complete re-imagining of Dett’s work. Dawson transformed the oratorio into a fully-staged

³⁵ Ibid.

grand opera complete with ballet and “exotic Egyptian dances,” “beautiful Egyptian costumes,” “Horses! Chariots!,” and one especially flamboyant novelty, in which “the Lee Brothers of Pittsburgh, Pa., florist and chemist will produce an unconsumable ‘Burning Bush.’”³⁶ The costumes rented for the production were valued at \$150,000 and the staging was overseen by a young Dale Wasserman, later of *Man of la Mancha* fame, who at the time worked with dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham. The NNOC billed the event as “the first operatic performance of the work of an American Negro composer.”³⁷

The Carnegie Hall performance was also ground breaking as it was broadcast internationally via the US State Department’s “Voice of America” program. The racial politics of such a move by the state department were lost on no one. The Pittsburgh Courier reported, “This marks the first time such an event has been scheduled for worldwide broadcasting and is a recognition of the importance the state department attaches to the Negro’s contribution to American Musical Life.”³⁸

Following the 1951 performance, *The Ordering of Moses* continued to be a lucrative fundraising tool for the NNOC. Dawson took a scaled-down version of the production to African American churches and would do so until her death in 1962. She established a successful business model where the churches would retain the majority of proceeds from ticket sales, but would pay the company a flat fee up front to mount the production.

³⁶ National Negro Opera Company, souvenir program for recital by Mary Cardwell Dawson, Metropolitan AME Church, Washington, DC, November 4, 1949, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 12, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³⁷ National Negro Opera Company, mass mailing to trade unions, May 28, 1951, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 14, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

³⁸ “‘Voice of America’ to Broadcast Negro Opera Round-the-World,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 9, 1951, clipping from National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 18 Folder 2, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Throughout the 1950s, the NNOC was nearly constantly mounting church productions of *The Ordering of Moses* when not focused on larger projects. These productions not only helped the company sustain itself financially, but deepened their already strong ties to the black church.

That black Christians from multiple denominations connected with *The Ordering of Moses* comes as no surprise since the Exodus has been central to African-American theology since the time of slavery. Religious Historian Albert J. Raboteau considers the Exodus the most fundamental and ubiquitous theme of black theology, claiming the story functioned as a parable for the black experience in America both before and after emancipation. The Exodus was also crucial to black Christians' ability to establish an independent cultural and religious identity more positive and uplifting than any cultural separation forced upon them by the white majority. Raboteau claims that through the Exodus story, "black Christians articulated their own sense of peoplehood, Exodus symbolized their common history and common destiny."³⁹ The National Negro Opera Company recognized this connection and discussed it openly in promoting performances.

This opera has a familiar theme from Biblical drama depicting the Hebrew people's titanic struggle against Egyptian bondage. It is set to music and written in unforgettable Hebrew and Negro spiritual idioms. The story is dear, especially to the hearts of offended peoples.⁴⁰

Though no production notes or scores for the NNOC's unique stagings survive in their archival collection at the Library of Congress, a 1958 review from the *Afro-American*,

³⁹ Albert J. Rabotau, "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," in *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, edited by Larry G. Murphy, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 23.

⁴⁰ National Negro Opera Company, Alleghany High School Auditorium, Cumberland, MD, insert in souvenir program for *The Ordering of Moses*, February 25, 1951, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 14, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Washington's black newspaper, of a performance at New York City's Metropolitan Baptist Church paints a vivid picture of a church performance of *The Ordering of Moses*.

Churchgoers who have been looking for something different in the form of religious entertainment to replace the staid old forms of spiritual and gospel concerts had their wishes gratified in the presentation of 'The Ordering of Moses' at the Metropolitan Baptist Church last week.

Featuring the same stars who have appeared both here and at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, the audience had a chance to see these great artists at close range under intimate circumstances which gave full opportunity for them to perform at their best without apparent strain.

THE SETTING LEFT NOTHING to be desired even in the mass scenes of the exodus of the Hebrew Children from Egypt and the use of the church aisles to depict the crossing of the Red Sea enhanced the dramatic effect. Even the introduction of the ballet in the court of King Pharaoh as performed by Princess Nyoko was done in such subdued and artistic fashion that it could not abuse the sensibilities of the most devout churchgoer.⁴¹

A 1957 letter from Dawson to Mildred Childs at Faith Temple Church in Brooklyn reveals that churchgoers had the opportunity to participate in the productions.

Also, if there are any members of your organization or of the Church that would be interested in participating in the performance as Supers. We will furnish costumes and they would be soldiers, people in bondage or members of King Pharaoh's[sic] Court.⁴²

Sometimes, a local reverend would serve as narrator for the production and as Dawson indicated while raising funds for a 1960 production in Washington DC, "our local singers, dancers, dramatists, supers, hostesses, many many children of Israel and leads taking part in this production come from nearly two hundred negro churches here."⁴³

⁴¹ Ralph Matthews, "'Ordering of Moses' Brings Opera Stars in Thrilling Performance," *The Afro-American*, September 6 1958. Reprinted in National Negro Opera Company, promotional pamphlet, n/d. [late 1950s], National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 3 Folder 7, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁴² Mary Cardwell Dawson to Mildred B. Childs, March 9, 1957, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 8 Folder 8, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁴³ Mary Cardwell Dawson to Dr. Richard Gibbs, December 14, 1959, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 11 Folder 5, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

The NNOC had always had strong connections with black church communities, but Dawson's unique productions of *The Ordering of Moses* brought the spectacle of operatic performance, integrated with a theological message, directly into the church.

Exodus became dramatically real... In the ecstasy of worship, time and distance collapsed, and the slaves became the children of Israel. With the Hebrews, they traveled dry-shod through the Red Sea; they, too, saw Pharaoh's army "get drowned"; they stood beside Moses on Mount Pisgah and gazed out over the Promised Land; they crossed Jordan under Joshua and marched with him round the walls of Jericho. Their prayers for deliverance resonated with the experiential power of these liturgical dramas.⁴⁴

Rabotau articulates the intensity with which enslaved blacks experienced their kinship with the Biblical Israelites. Performances of *The Ordering of Moses* thus revived the practice, from the days of slave religion, of a shared reliving of the exodus story, reviving a very old black spiritual tradition through European high art.

In addition to *The Ordering of Moses*, the NNOC staged *Ouanga*, another religiously themed dramatic work by a black composer, Clarence Cameron White (1880-1960). *Ouanga*, with a libretto by John Frederick Matheus (1887-1983), tells the story of Jean-Jaques Dessalines, a key leader in the Haitian Revolution of 1804 and subsequently emperor of Haiti. White and Matheus took a six-week trip to Haiti both for recreation and to find material for the work.⁴⁵ The primary theme of the opera is Dessalines' attempt to eliminate Voodoo from Haitian life, though he eventually realizes, just before his death at the end of the opera, that Voodoo is crucial to the spiritual life of the Haitian people.⁴⁶ In May, 1956,

⁴⁴ Rabotau, "African Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," 23.

⁴⁵ Michael Largey, *Voodoo Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 147-148.

⁴⁶ Howard Taubman, "Opera: 'Ouanga,' Voodoo on Haiti: Negro Group Presents Work at the 'Met' Boatright and Juanita King Head Cast," *New York Times*, May 28, 1956.
<<http://proquest.umi.com.libproxy.lib.unc.edu/pqdweb?index=12&did=84697541&SrchMode=1&sid=1&Fmt=>

the National Negro Opera Company performed *Ouanga* at the Metropolitan Opera House. This performance, “the greatest achievement and event in our history,” according to Dawson, was historic on two fronts.⁴⁷ First, it was the company’s first performance of an opera written by an African American Composer (Dett’s *Ordering of Moses* was composed as an oratorio.) Second, not only did the company perform on the stage of America’s most prestigious opera house, but they were the first outside company to do so.⁴⁸

How did a black-run opera company manage to be the first other than the Metropolitan Opera Company to perform on that stage? The short answer is: through Mary Cardwell Dawson’s relentless determination. Since the company’s founding, Dawson had been establishing connections with the Metropolitan Opera House. Right from the beginning, she hired Frederick Vajda, whose Metropolitan connections I enumerated earlier. In 1946, she enrolled in courses and studio work at Metropolitan Opera Studios and in 1949 sent her star baritone Robert McFerrin there to study the role of Amonasro from *Aida*. McFerrin, who got his start with the NNOC, subsequently won the Metropolitan Opera Auditions and joined the Met’s regular roster in 1951, the first African American to do so. Also in 1949, Dawson rented scenery from the Metropolitan for her production of *La Traviata* at Madison Square Garden.⁴⁹

10&VInst=PROD&VType=PQD&RQT=309&VName=HNP&TS=1245135343&clientId=15094> Accessed October 7, 2008.

⁴⁷ Mary Cardwell Dawson to “To Whom it May Concern,” March 12, 1956, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 2 Folder 5, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁴⁸ Raul Abdul, *Blacks in Classical Music*, (New York, Dodd, Mead and Co., 1977), 150.

⁴⁹ National Negro Opera Company, ad for recital by Mary Cardwell Dawson, November 4, 1949, Metropolitan AME Church, Washington, DC, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 1 Folder 12, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Though the Metropolitan Opera Association regularly rented its hall for various functions, it had a strict policy that the only opera company that could appear on the stage was its own. They therefore denied Dawson's first request to rent the space. However, she would not take no for an answer. Her response to the Metropolitan's Reginald Allen draws upon the company's reputation and past experience to persuade him to make an exception.

We are making a very special request that the Board alter or waiver their policy and give us there [*sic*] approval to present "Ounga" [*sic*] since it is different to any one of the operas that are in your repertoire.

...The inclosed [*sic*] programs will give you some background of our organization and information as to where our company has presented operas. I should like to state that at this time however, that in 1944 we gave "La Traviata" at Madison Square Garden and paid \$6,000.00 for the Garden and engaged 44 members of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra plus scenery, costumes, props, stage-hands, etc. We have given several performances at the Civic Opera House, Chicago, Syria Mosque, Pittsburgh, Watergate and National Guard Armory, Washington, D.C., so we are well aware of the tremendous cost of opera.⁵⁰

This letter reveals two important points. First, that the selection of *Ouanga* had a strategic importance to the company's goal of a Metropolitan performance as this was a "black" opera that would not compete with any of the Metropolitan's usual fare. Though the part of the NNOC's stated mission was encouraging the performance of works by black composers, the strategic appeal to the Metropolitan may be another reason the company did not choose *Faust*, *Aida*, or another canonic work in their repertoire. Second, the letter suggests that Dawson would have been unable to pull off a performance like this earlier in the company's history, before it had established a strong infrastructure, history, and reputation. Allen wrote back on September thirteenth with a compromise solution:

⁵⁰ Carbon of letter draft, Mary Cardwell Dawson to Reginald Allen, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 10 Folder 21, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

... If, in fact, you feel that your performance must be given on the Metropolitan stage and on no other, we suggest that you rent our house on one of our available mid-winter Sundays and give a performance of OUNGA[sic] in concert form without scenery, costumes and lighting effects. This suggestion will enable you to perform the work in the Metropolitan Opera House and at the same time, as it will be put on in concert form, it will not be an opera production. This will satisfy our standing policy here at the Opera House and at the same time I feel be very much more practical for you.⁵¹

This letter answers the question of how Mary Cardwell Dawson was able to make this unlikely performance happen. It also sheds light on the somewhat bizarre nature of the actual performance, which ended up having singers in concert dress paired with staged ballet performed by costumed dancers. An article from the *New York Amsterdam News* confirms that Dawson was able to persuade the Metropolitan to permit the costumed dancers.⁵² Howard Taubman of the *New York Times* described the performance in his review.

The production was a blend of concert and theatrical styles. The chorus stood in the rear of the stage in oratorio fashion; some of the male principals wore white tie and tails, while the female leads were in evening gowns. There were some ballet numbers done with vigor by dancers in Haitian costume.⁵³

Despite the Metropolitan's position that this production was not an "opera performance" as such, it is clear that Dawson knew exactly what she was doing in securing a performance, any performance, at the Metropolitan Opera House. She understood the significance within the opera world of performing there and that it would be a boost not only to the company, but to the careers of her singers. This is made evident in a short piece on a recital by Evelyn Greene, one of the *Ouanga* cast members, the following year in the

⁵¹ Reginald Allen to Mary Cardwell Dawson, September 13, 1955, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 10 Folder 21, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁵² Paul V. Beckley, "All-Negro Opera for Met May 27," *New York Amsterdam News*, date unknown, clipping from National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 18 Folder 7, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁵³ Taubman, "Opera 'Ouanga' Voodoo on Haiti..."

Chicago Defender; Half of the piece focuses on Greene's involvement with the *Ouanga* performances at the Metropolitan and Carnegie Hall.⁵⁴

For Dawson, the Metropolitan had always been the benchmark of opera in America, the yardstick against which the NNOC had measured itself. Dawson regularly equated African American progress at the Metropolitan with progress for the race in general. In another letter to pastors, this one attempting to raise funds for the Metropolitan performance, Dawson praised progress at the Metropolitan but stressed the urgent need for more opportunities for black singers and composers.

Dear Reverend:

A new day dawned recently when the Metropolitan Opera Company belatedly opened its doors to the internationally famous contralto Marian Anderson. Shortly thereafter the doors of the met swung back just one notch more to give baritone Robert McFerrin a well-deserved chance. These are but two openings, however. Within our race thousands of singers and musicians with rare operatic gifts seek to be heard.

Brilliant composers like Clarence Cameron White and William Grand Still [*sic*], for example, create operas and orchestral masterpieces that remain practically unknown. Instrumentalists of our race enjoy few opportunities in the symphonic orchestras and bands of the nation. Afro-American artists, conductors, stage managers, and stage directors, scenery and costume designers find no outlet for their talents in the realm of opera.⁵⁵

This letter illuminates the fact that Dawson accomplished multiple goals with the Metropolitan performance. Not only did she give her star performers and choristers an opportunity to sing and be heard on the country's most prestigious stage, she also gave a rare performance of an opera by a black composer.

⁵⁴ Untitled article, *Chicago Defender* April 20, 1957, clipping from National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 18 Folder 8, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

⁵⁵ Mary Cardwell Dawson and Lisle Greenidge (Chairman, Committee on Churches,) mass mailing to clergy, n/d. [1955], National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 2 Folder 4, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

The significance of the event was not lost on the local community. In a 1956 article on Dawson entitled “Story of the Guiding Spirit,” John B. Duncan encapsulates the event’s contribution to racial pride.

For the first time, Negroes were at the pinnacle of operatic achievement; were flesh and blood artists on the boards where the immortal Caruso and other operatic giants helped shape America’s cultural history. This event was not just a fortuitous phenomenon. Behind this rare and unprecedented occasion was the indomitable, determined spirit of a rare woman – Mary Cardwell Dawson.⁵⁶

It is somewhat perplexing that White’s opera never saw another major performance after 1956, particularly since a set of 1959 guidelines by the National Association of Negro Musicians declared that “All branches should encourage the use of scenes from ‘Ouanga,’ a recognized opera by a Negro composer and NANM Inc. past NATIONAL PRESIDENT. Dr. Clarence Cameron White.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, with the Metropolitan Opera House performance, Dawson and the NNOC achieved the most perfect singular realization of their vision: a production of an opera by a black composer with a black cast held at America’s most prestigious opera house and covered by the mainstream press.

Unfortunately, the *Ouanga* performances would be the NNOC’s last major achievement. Despite the company’s tremendous potential and early successes, its last five years were filled with disappointment and unfulfilled promise. In the years following their historic 1956 performance at the Metropolitan Opera House, financial difficulties and a number of unlucky breaks prevented the company from putting on the type of elaborate

⁵⁶ Duncan, “Story of the Guiding Spirit.”

⁵⁷ *Recommendations to the National Associations of Negro Musicians Inc*, 2nd Edition, edited by Carl Diton, n/d. [late 1950s], National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 10 Folder 25, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

productions it had in years past. The company dissolved in 1962 following Dawson's untimely death.

Perhaps the company began to wither due to the gradual rupture of the color line in the arts. Thanks to the NNOC's own efforts, the burgeoning civil rights movement, and to the trailblazing of new singers like Leontyne Price, American opera companies were becoming more comfortable with the idea of multi-racial casting. In effect, progress towards integration may have created for the NNOC the same ironic problem it created for historically black colleges and universities; that integration would to some extent erode the need and siphon the talent pool for black-run institutions.

Though this general social trend may have been a contributing factor, the demise of the NNOC can be attributed to a much more specific set of circumstances. First, with the death of Clark Griffin in 1955, the NNOC lost access to Griffith Stadium and with it the ability to stage the lucrative summer fundraisers so vital to their survival. Second, despite the success of the Metropolitan production, the September 1956 Carnegie Hall performances of *Ouanga* were severely undersold, plunging the company into a debt from which they would never recover. Third, the death of Mary Cardwell Dawson in 1962 left the company leaderless. Though many people made significant contributions, the organization thrived under Dawson, who was able to run the company without compensation for twenty years. Even after her first heart attack in 1957, Dawson maintained her breakneck pace giving church performances of *The Ordering of Moses* sponsoring various fundraisers in events in the four cities (Washington, New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh) that still had active NNOC guilds. When Dawson died of a heart attack the Company died with her. Upon hearing the

news of Dawson's death, Nora Douglas Holt, an influential patron and music critic for the *New York Amsterdam News*, wrote Dawson's husband with a poem to be read at her funeral.

Here was a pioneering job which she dignified by her diligent work – by her strong belief that Negroes were destined to become as great as any star who graced a grand opera stage. And she lived to see her dream come true. I am proud.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Nora Douglass Holt to Walter Dawson, March 21, 1962, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 9 Folder 19, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

CHAPTER 3

THE NNOC, THE BLACK CHURCH, AND THE BLACK MIDDLE CLASS

From their fundraising practices, membership, and productions of *The Ordering of Moses*, it is clear that the NNOC had strong ties to a number of black churches. I believe the company's debt to the "black church" as an institution runs even deeper than its associations. I contend that the NNOC's social and economic structure is based on the model of economic liberation and community empowerment developed and advanced by black churches.⁵⁹

For more than a century prior to the NNOC's founding, black churches had served not only as spiritual centers but as catalysts for economic empowerment. Excluded from full participation in the mainstream (white) economy, black communities developed internal networks of trade and commerce fueled to a large extent by the church. Dawson was an active member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and likely found in black church culture the perfect economic model for her opera company. African-American Religion scholars C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mayima's description of the black church's economic position demonstrates its strength as a model of financial stability within the black community.

The Black Church is the most economically independent institutional sector of the black community. It does not depend upon white trustees to raise

⁵⁹ In this section I make frequent reference to the ethos of the "black church" recognizing that this is not a monolithic institution. I am essentially referring to the post-reconstruction liberatory economic and social philosophy and practices of black protestant denominations. Dawson herself was a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, though NNOC documents and the performance history of *The Ordering of Moses* made it clear that the NNOC's performers and patrons were members of a variety of denominations.

funds, for example, as do most of the black colleges. Nor does it depend on white patronage to pay its pastors or erect its buildings.⁶⁰

They describe the black church's intensive social networking and practices of both informal and formal trade as the product of an African American survival strategy. In order to survive abject poverty, they claim, African Americans developed an "extended kinship network of real and fictive kin" that "provided the only real safety net that they knew, from borrowing and lending money, moving in with kinfolk during times of crises, and relying on kin for surrogate childcare while parents worked."⁶¹ Such a system provided poor and marginalized blacks with access to necessary goods and services.

Adopting the model of black churches and fraternities, the NNOC sought to be not only an Opera company, but a focal point of social and economic life for its members. The company's intention was not to replace existing structures, but to integrate itself into the community's economic and social fabric. Indeed, fundraising efforts targeted this network. Dawson encouraged preachers to give sermons on opera and on the company and routinely gave small benefit concerts for prominent fraternities and professional organizations. As I discussed earlier, the NNOC's performing membership drew heavily on church choirs. Furthermore, their "non-traditional" fundraisers, specifically pageants and fashion shows, were common practice in black churches.

Lincoln and Mayima describe the black church's socioeconomic strategy as a dynamic negotiation of two priorities, calling the church "a reflexive institution that moves constantly between the poles of survival and liberation in the political and economic

⁶⁰ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mayima, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 241.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

arenas.”⁶² Faced with hard times, a church’s first priority is survival, seeing to its own security and to the basic needs of its membership. Moving beyond mere survival, liberation advances “self-determination, dignity, and a pride in the African and African American institutions.”⁶³ The links between a theologically grounded strategy of liberation and Dawson’s vision of the NNOC as a self-sustaining venue for cultural and economic progress are clear. The liberation strategy was and remains an active resistance against institutional racism, a means to arm African Americans with the sense of independence and the strong work ethic necessary to make progress in an imbalanced social system.

The Black Church assumed the task of helping black people internalize the ethic of economic rationality that would lead to economic mobility. Black Church leaders were well aware of the role of racism in retarding this mobility, and they knew from experience that they and their children would have to put forth maximum efforts for minimal achievements. To reduce the trauma of these realities as much as possible, the black churches took on economic roles and functions and created institutional vehicles they might otherwise have left to other entities.⁶⁴

I contend that Dawson transferred this sense of persistence, of “maximum efforts for minimal achievements,” into her work as an opera impresario. As such, her efforts can also be seen as a direct contestation of overt and institutional racism marginalizing the presence of African Americans in the arts. Like the black church, the National Negro Opera Company reacted to marginalization and exclusion by creating (at least for a time) a self-sustaining vehicle for community empowerment and liberatory expression.

In *The Black Middle Class*, sociologist Benjamin Bowser offers a more pessimistic interpretation of black social networking. Bowser claims that the social structure of black

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. 244.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

communities in the mid-twentieth century was an expression of political and economic disenfranchisement under Jim Crow, but not a strong tool for opposing it.

Blacks were powerless. Starting any business that could be viewed by whites as “uppity” or too successful was avoided. Most blacks instead turned to purely social activities and to their churches. Powerlessness was channeled into after-church social events, frequent extended family gatherings, church picnics, and excursions to other churches, towns, and recreational sights... In addition to the church, the better-off members of black communities had lodges, fraternities, sororities, burial services, and other social societies.⁶⁵

These “better-off members” to whom Bowser refers made up what he labels the second black middle class, the first having formed after the Civil War and the third during the 1960s. This second middle class emerged out of white society’s aggressive and violent suppression of black social and political advancement. Blacks who would otherwise have achieved greater economic fortunes, Bowser argues, were hampered both by their exclusion from civic power structures and the very real threat of violent reprisal against any black-owned businesses deemed too successful. Thus, Bowser claims that the black middle class never achieved economic parity with the white middle class; rather, in purely economic terms, the black middle class was comparable to the white working class. This leads Bowser to conclude that black class identity in this period was formed not around economics or employment, but around “image, aspiration, values and moral pretense,” fashioning a cosmetic middle class that “blacks in virtually any material condition could be a part of.”⁶⁶

Applying Bowser’s pessimistic appraisal of black class identity to the case of the NNOC paints a very different picture than Lincoln and Mayima’s empowerment model does. Bowser’s analysis suggests that the National Negro Opera Company provided poor and

65 Benjamin Bowser, *The Black Middle Class: Social Mobility and Vulnerability*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007), 49-50.

66 Ibid. 55-56.

working class blacks a means of constructing a middle class identity out of sync with the reality of their economic circumstances. If we read the NNOC as one of Bowser's channels of powerlessness, active participation would serve as a mechanism for coping with the trauma of oppression and would lack the positive overtones of survival and liberation in Lincoln and Mayima's model. The NNOC's large scale productions of European operas as appropriation of "White" high culture would merely provide black audiences the "image, aspiration, values, and moral pretense" to affirm their own "middle class" identities.

CHAPTER 4

RACIAL UPLIFT AND THE NNOC VISION

The NNOC's efforts represent two interrelated goals that fuse the traditionally opposing paradigms of racial uplift: cultural improvement after the model of W.E.B. Du Bois and economic empowerment after the model of Booker T. Washington. On the cultural front, the NNOC demonstrated that black performers were capable of performing and producing opera at the highest level and provided a venue for blacks to accumulate social capital through personal and financial investment in the fine arts. Economically, Dawson used the tremendous scale of her productions as a vehicle to channel resources and jobs into black communities.

At the time of the NNOC's founding, there was already an established relationship between opera and racial improvement, but it ran no deeper than the class identity of the so-called "black bourgeoisie." Musicologist Lawrence Schenbeck finds numerous articulations of this phenomenon in *Chicago Defender's* coverage of black opera patronage in the 1930s. At the time, it was the nation's most influential black newspaper and Schenbeck reports that in the *Defender*, "black Opera patronage, specifically who sat in which section, was newsworthy." Schenbeck observes that the *Defender*, "carefully distinguished between those in the prestigious diamond horseshoe section and those merely seated on the promenade."⁶⁷ Indeed, as discussed earlier, letters soliciting funds for National Negro Opera Company

⁶⁷ Lawrence Schenbeck, "Music, Gender, and Uplift in the *Chicago Defender*, 1927-1937," *The Musical Quarterly* 81 no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 349-350.

performances also advertised an exclusive “Diamond Horseshoe” where patrons experienced the trappings of aristocracy and celebrity including a spotlight and public announcement of their arrival. Schenbeck astutely observes that this type of social exclusivity affirmed the supposed “progress” of the black community. After all, white society was divided into distinct social classes and the presence of these same distinctions in black society must, therefore, indicate progress towards racial parity -- the goal of the project of racial uplift. According to the *Defender*, classical music promoted “uplift” principally through giving blacks “moral improvement, racial evolution, and social status.”

Seeking not only to advance the social position of audience members and patrons, Dawson extended this uplift strategy to the stage itself in providing opportunities for young black singers to demonstrate their ability to perform grand opera, the “world’s best music” in her words, at a level matching or exceeding white performers. It was equally important that the public come to accept that black singers were capable of tremendous achievement in this art form. A 1958 grant proposal to the Ford Foundation demonstrates this element of the project.

The extreme effort pictured here can best be understood when one realizes that the very organizing of the National Negro Opera Company was designed especially to “test” ability of Negro artists and the acceptance of such opera by the public.

Today, we believe that the “test” has been successful; that the public has accepted the Negro people in opera; that unimaginable cultural improvement results from these productions; that opportunity in opera is now afforded all people; and that a last phase in the development of opera among the Negro people of America should now be undertaken and completed.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ National Negro Opera Company, draft of grant proposal to the Ford Foundation, 1958, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 20 Folder 8, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

This is why only full-scale national-level productions of opera could serve Dawson's artistic aims; to do anything less would not have shown that black singers could perform on the same stages and with the same orchestras as whites.

This mindset reflects Du Bois' model of racial uplift where progress manifests first as cultural achievement by a small group of African Americans. This elite group, which Du Bois dubbed the "Talented Tenth," would uplift the black race by matching or exceeding whites in high cultural pursuits, thus disproving claims of racial inferiority and employing their talent and training to "uplift" race's condition as a whole.

Can the masses of the Negro people be in any possible way more quickly raised than by the effort and example of this aristocracy of talent and character? Was there ever a nation on God's fair earth civilized from the bottom upward? Never; it is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground. This is the history of human progress; and the two historic mistakes which have hindered that progress were the thinking first that no more could ever rise save the few already risen; or second, that it would better the unrisen to pull the risen down.⁶⁹

The NNOC's realization of Du Bois' vision for the arts goes beyond mere success at European high art. Du Bois' thought on the role of the arts in black empowerment extended far beyond the simplistic mimicry of white high society advocated by the *Chicago Defender* in the 1930s; he saw the arts as a means of introducing authentic and meaningful representations of the black experience and perspective into the cultural discourse at large. He deplored works that focused exclusively on a sexualized and criminalized portrayal of black life and sought an artistic movement that would portray the positive contributions of blacks to American culture at large. Du Bois' desire to emphasize positive representations draws directly on Frederick Douglass' understanding of historical memory and efforts at

⁶⁹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Talented Tenth," in *The Negro Problem*, (Project Gutenberg, February 14, 2005), <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15041/15041.txt>> Accessed April 22, 2009.

shaping narratives that portrayed the race as equal to white culture. Du Bois saw the world of high art as a vital area where the “talented tenth” needed to lead the race by crafting expressions of a collective cultural memory that would uplift the race. In his work as editor of the magazine *The Crisis*, Du Bois challenged visual artists to both craft a vision for the future and to use blacks’ unique experience of pain to confront injustices in the present. Du Bois’ work often reveals a tension between folk expression and high art. Owing largely to his education in Berlin, he genuinely believed that truth lay in beauty and that cultivating a black aesthetic in the world of high art would uplift the race and cause social change.⁷⁰

Skeptical that blacks could reveal genuine truth while conforming to the expectations of whites, he also sought to develop self-sustaining networks of patronage for black artists. He lobbied the NAACP to support artistic endeavors and developed *The Crisis* as a vital forum to showcase black artists. In addition to black patrons, Du Bois claimed it was vital to cultivate educated black audiences capable of engaging with more refined artistic expression.⁷¹ As we have seen, the cultivation of self-sustaining patronage networks and of promoting engagement with opera among people of all social classes was fundamental to the mission of the National Negro Opera Company. Furthermore, I contend that in programming *The Ordering of Moses* and *Ouanga*, the NNOC furthered Du Bois’ artistic mission by giving a public life to works by black composers that expressed important aspects of the black experience. *The Ordering of Moses* presents an inspiring enactment of an inspirational story vital to the black experience, just as *Ouanga* demonstrates the vital importance of indigenous tradition to the progress of the race. In presenting these works to largely black audiences and

⁷⁰ Amy Helene Kirschke, *Art in Crisis: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for African American Identity and Memory*, (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 2007), 5-27.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 123-129.

through largely black patronage, yet in the context of American high culture, the NNOC gave the black experience a voice on the operatic stage. In doing so, they demonstrated not only that black performers' capabilities were comparable to those of white performers, but that blacks had unique and valuable contributions to make in the world of grand opera.

That said, contributing to cultural memory and historical narrative were not the NNOC's only avenues for benefitting their communities; they also sought to make a more concrete and immediate impact. Dawson's rhetoric was intensely practical as often as it was lofty; she saw in opera not only a chance to give voice to the black experience, but also a means to generate immediate employment and income for hundreds of black individuals and businesses. Dawson's "Appeal to Opera Lovers," which appeared inside the programs of most NNOC events in the 1950s, demonstrates that the NNOC's vision of racial uplift was also deeply rooted in vocational empowerment.

Opera is truly big business from which everybody benefits. The dress shops, the beauticians, the florists, the barbers, the costumers, the taxi cabs, the cosmeticians, and many other businesses, all do a tremendous volume during the opera season. Then the production manufactures, the scenery architects, the technicians, the singers, the dancers, the actors, the supers, the box office personnel, the ushers, even the custodial help, all add up to a staggering payroll, made possible by an operatic performance. In short, opera makes jobs.⁷²

Though populist arguments for mass-access to high culture are relatively common, it is rare that someone frames opera's benefits to the community through the lens of production rather than consumption. What Dawson outlines here reflects a different model of racial uplift than Du Bois' vision, one rooted in Booker T. Washington's vocational, economics-based model of uplift.

⁷² National Negro Opera Company, souvenir program for *Ouanga*, Metropolitan Opera House, New York, NY, National Negro Opera Company Collection, Box 2 Folder 5, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Rooted in the concept of vocational self-help, the Washingtonian uplift paradigm, on its surface, is incongruous with immersion in a bombastic European spectacle such as grand opera. In fact, the temptation is often to focus on Washington's concern about the over-emphasis on cultural instruction in the post-bellum South. Washington articulates this view in key passages of his autobiography *Up From Slavery*. At a speech to students at Tuskegee, excerpted in the autobiography, Washington targets his comments at women, who were often expected to take up "cultural" work in education. Washington claimed that Southern blacks were effectively putting the cultural cart before the economic horse.

Instead of making the most of our opportunities in this industry, the temptation, in too many cases, is to be music-teachers, teachers of elocution, or something else that few of the race at present have any money to pay for, or the opportunity to earn money to pay for, simply because there is no foundation. But, when more coloured people succeed in the more fundamental occupations, they will then be able to make better provision for their children in what are termed the higher walks of life.⁷³

Unlike Du Bois, Washington saw the "premature" engagement of Southern blacks with white high culture as a parasitic drain on genuine progress. One of the most poignant examples of this in *Up From Slavery* deals with blacks' desire for that ubiquitous symbol of arrival in the middle-class: the piano.

There are ... pianos in thousands of New England homes. But behind the piano in the New England home there are one hundred years of toil, sacrifice, and economy; there is the small manufacturing industry, started several years ago by hand power, now grown into a great business; there is ownership in land, a comfortable home, free from debt, and a bank account. In this "Black Belt" [poor southern] community where this piano went, four-fifths of the people owned no land, many lived in rented one-room cabins, many were in debt for food supplies, many mortgaged their crops for the food on which to live, and not one had a bank account. In this case, how much wiser it would have been to have taught the girls in this community sewing, intelligent and economical cooking, housekeeping, something of dairying and

⁷³Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery*, (Project Gutenberg, January 10, 2000), 98-99, <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2376/2376.txt>> Accessed April, 22, 2009.

horticulture? The boys should have been taught something of farming in connection with their common-school education, instead of awakening in them a desire for a musical instrument which resulted in their parents going into debt for a third-rate piano or organ before a home was purchased.⁷⁴

Washington's anecdote is a condemnation of music education in destitute communities in need of basic, subsistence-level economic improvement. Washington's comments are a strong condemnation of surface-level aspirations to cultural standing above one's economic means. This type of economically irresponsible mimicry of upper-class white culture is precisely what Bowser condemns by referring to the "moral pretense" of black middle class identity. One might then read the National Negro Opera Company as a thin veneer of culture siphoning money and labor from more vital economic work.

Yet in the 1940s and 1950s, the northern, urban black communities in which the NNOC functioned enjoyed conditions different than the destitute rural poverty Washington's anecdote describes. With every NNOC spectacle, Dawson highlighted not only the cultural, but the economic progress black communities had made since the turn of the century. Dawson was, in effect, demonstrating that, through decades of hard work, blacks had accrued sufficient "toil, sacrifice, and economy" to support an art form as elaborate and difficult as opera in their own communities and that opera would in turn continue to grow and support local industry.

Dawson's attempt to form a cross-class black audience served a vital role in creating community solidarity. Economist Thomas Sowell argues that the class divisions resulting from the differing circumstances of free and enslaved blacks in the nineteenth century created cultural disconnects that retarded the race's economic development in comparison to other minority groups.

⁷⁴ Washington, 32-35.

There were serious economic consequences of the fact that the black masses and the black educated classes were out of phase by some generations in their respective development. The internal cohesion and the many institutional and informal self-help programs that advanced other ethnic minorities-notably Jews and the Orientals-were much less common among Negroes, and their effectiveness was undermined by the mutual distrust among the different classes of the black population.⁷⁵

I offer that in promoting grand opera to lower class blacks, Dawson created a space of common cultural ground pushing against the sense of disconnect and distrust Sowell describes.

The public nature of NNOC performances was also significant. Whereas successful black businesses often operated only within insulated black communities, NNOC operas were major civic events that received mainstream press coverage. As such, their productions provided a public display of the economic progress and self-sustaining economic life of the black community. Bowser describes the social and psychological impact of economic segregation within a largely capitalist-oriented American culture.

According to Weber, possessing a work ethic that emphasized personal enterprise was the basis of wealth. Blacks were barred from expressing such values outside of their own communities, however, so their aspirations could be expressed only among other blacks. The results were devastating.⁷⁶

Every NNOC performance was, in effect, a public symbol of the black community's strong work ethic and as such a means of furthering inclusive participation in American economic and political culture.

Though Dawson's vision of grand opera as a community-based economic tool was innovative, there were historical precedents for the fusion of music and Washington's self-help doctrine. Industrial, vocation-oriented black universities in the Washington mold often

⁷⁵ Thomas Sowell, *Race and Economics*, (New York, David McKay & Co., 1977), 42.

⁷⁶ Bowser, 51

had strong departments of music. Owing to the fundraising and prestige-building success of Fisk University's Fisk Jubilee Singers, other schools began to see the value in building strong music programs and fielding their own groups of Jubilee Singers. Two such universities were the Virginia's Hampton Institute, Washington's *Alma Mater*, and Kansas' Western University.⁷⁷

Dawson herself was not heavily involved with these institutions, but many of her friends and contemporaries were. Two of Western's most prestigious alumni were Eva Jessye, who Dawson knew through her work as an educator and choral director, and composer/music critic Nora Douglass Holt.⁷⁸ Composers Clarence Cameron White and R. Nathaniel Dett, whose *Ouanga* and *The Ordering of Moses* were NNOC staples, had served on the music faculty at the Hampton institute. Dett, Holt, and White all had a hand in the founding of the National Association of Negro Musicians, of which Dawson was president when she founded the NNOC. Holt had a particularly important relationship with the NNOC. In addition to serving on the society's board of directors, she used her position as a critic and columnist for the *New York Amsterdam News* to advocate publicly for the company's success.

The conflict between Du Boisian and Washingtonian models of racial uplift has gone on for more than a century and continues to impact black communities to this day. Whether she realized it or not, Mary Cardwell Dawson made an important contribution to this discourse. Her insistence on tapping into European high culture to create the most lavish spectacle possible put black performers in traditionally white contexts and her insistence on artistic excellence challenged assumptions of black inferiority. At the same time, Dawson did

⁷⁷ Helen Walker-Hill, "Western University at Quindaro, Kansas (1865-1943) and its Legacy of Pioneering Musical Women," *Black Music Research Journal* 26 no. 1 (2006): 8.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

nothing to conceal the messy business of actually putting on an opera; rather, she made opera's potential to generate economic opportunity a central piece of her vision. In grand opera, Dawson found potential for a seamless synthesis of two seemingly irreconcilable paradigms of racial uplift. Large choruses meant both fulfilling Verdi's artistic vision *and* providing more work for choristers; lavish sets meant elite bombast and pageantry *and* more work for carpenters and stagehands. By reaching across class boundaries and tapping resources throughout the black community, the efforts of the National Negro Opera Company challenge Bowser's claim that black social organizations were channels of powerlessness and vehicles for social exclusivity. Rather, the NNOC affirms both the power of tight-knit social structures as tools to combat oppression and the power of music as a vehicle for social progress.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Faced with a racist system limiting black access to the world of grand opera, Mary Cardwell Dawson formed the National Negro Opera Company as an independent forum to showcase black talent. Lacking the institutional support or aristocratic patronage necessary to sustain large-scale operatic productions, Dawson crafted a cross-class organization modeled on the institutional practices of black churches that encouraged community participation in the company. Church performances of R. Nathaniel Dett's *The Ordering of Moses* strengthened the company's ties to the black theological tradition and sustained the company financially during lean periods, while their single production of Clarence Cameron White's *Ouanga* at the Metropolitan Opera House was their crowning artistic achievement.

In adopting the socioeconomic model of the black church to create a self-sustaining and community-backed organization, Dawson put the work of the NNOC into dialogue with the empowering liberatory mission of black religious institutions. Though participation in a form of white high culture may signify an attempt by members of the "black middle class" to articulate a class identity out of sync with their economic circumstances, the National Negro Opera Company explicitly sought to create access to high culture across class boundaries and used grand opera as a vehicle for both cultural achievement and community economic empowerment. In so doing, the National Negro Opera Company and Mary Cardwell Dawson circumvented the "top down" vs. "bottom up" rift separating Du Boisian and Washingtonian paradigms of racial uplift.

I hope that my findings serve to complicate, even actively dispute, any perception of black participation in cultivated European music traditions as a pretention to whiteness or a delusional performance of aristocratic class identity. The National Negro Opera Company's story should serve as an example of the potentially powerful connection between community engagement with the arts and economic progress, cultural empowerment, and resistance to systematic oppression. This potential can exist not only in the content of specific musical and dramatic works, but also in community-based strategies for mounting and sustaining productions. Finally, I hope that within music scholarship, the National Negro Opera Company's ability to locate potential for both cultural and economic improvement in grand opera may invite exploration in other time periods and repertoires of productive space in the "tension" between music as vocation and music as art.

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