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Top Notes That Shatter The Glass Ceiling

By Vivien Schweitzer

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After performing in a high school music competition, Lawrence Brownlee was approached by an audience member who suggested he sing opera. Mr. Brownlee, who had had no exposure to classical music growing up, responded: “Me, opera? Are you crazy?”



Ruby Washington/The New York Times
The tenor Lawrence Brownlee with Renée Fleming
in the Metropolitan Opera production of Rossini's *Armida* last month.

An affable football-loving 38-year-old from Youngstown, Ohio, Mr. Brownlee is now in demand as a *bel canto* tenor. He described his jet-setting operatic life as an “alternate universe” in relation to his roots as one of six siblings in “an industrial, down-to-earth blue-collar family.”

On Sunday Mr. Brownlee will be the guest artist at the Metropolitan Opera’s National Council Grand Finals Concert, a competition he won 10 years ago, singing arias by Rossini and Donizetti.

“I was this anxious little, very short, African-American man,” Mr. Brownlee said during a recent interview in the Met’s press room. “Deborah Voigt, the announcer, asked if I was O.K. I said, ‘I just want to get out there.’ And before I walked off the stage, I said: ‘This is not the last time. This is my dream, to sing here.’ ”

That dream came true for Mr. Brownlee, now a regular not only at the Met, where his performance was the highlight of the recent run of Rossini’s *Armida*, but also at La Scala in Milan and other important European and American houses.

Mr. Brownlee's agile, expressive voice has a sweet timbre and strong, lustrous top notes, which he will demonstrate on Sunday with the aria "Ah, mes amis" from Donizetti's *Fille du Régiment*. The heading on a YouTube upload of the aria, "Tenor Lawrence Brownlee outsings Juan Diego Flórez!!!," refers to the Peruvian tenor who is Mr. Brownlee's main competitor in the *bel canto* genre.

"There are other singers that sing this repertory very well, but I don't think anyone else has quite as beautiful a sound and as rounded a tone," said Speight Jenkins, the general director of the Seattle Opera, before praising Mr. Brownlee's "incredible top notes."

"He did the high F four out of five performances," Mr. Jenkins added of a run of Bellini's *Puritani* in Seattle. "With him it's not a scream, it's a beautiful sound."

"I've felt that there are quite a few African-American males who haven't gotten the shot they deserved," Mr. Jenkins said. Black female opera singers have long been accepted, he noted,

unlike black tenors hoping for romantic leads. While acknowledging the success of performers like Vinson Cole and George Shirley, Mr. Jenkins said he had immediately sensed that Mr. Brownlee, with his star potential, could permanently shatter the glass ceiling.



Ruby Washington/The New York Times
Mr. Brownlee as Rinaldo in *Armida* (with Barry Banks in background) at the Metropolitan Opera.

That certainly seems to be the case, although there have been hurdles. After Mr. Brownlee won the Met auditions, a friend told him that an agent claimed that his height and race would consign him to small roles. Robert Mirshak, his manager, heard similar comments after adding Mr. Brownlee to his roster, as well as less direct remarks like, "He's not who our idea for the role is."

Many companies are hiring based at least in part on looks these days. "It's getting more like Hollywood and musical theater," Mr. Mirshak said. "Looks are always an issue with all my artists. If you're shorter, Asian or African-American, it's always an issue. But you have to go beyond by being better. Larry is the best in the world at what he does."

Stereotyping still affects black artists who perform opera and classical music. During a recent interview on WQXR radio in New York, Anthony McGill, a principal clarinetist of the

Metropolitan Opera, and the bass Morris Robinson said they had been mistaken for building maintenance workers, harassed by security guards at prominent houses and received squirm-inducing comments from patrons.

Mr. Brownlee, who hopes to attract more black listeners to opera, cited similar experiences. "People will come and support it when they see people onstage who look like them," he added.

Growing up, Mr. Brownlee would immediately switch channels if he stumbled across opera on television. He sang gospel regularly in church in a part of Ohio he described as "nothing but cornfields and high school football." His father, long a factory worker, now has a small engine-repair shop; his mother is a homemaker. The whole family, he said, is "very musical."

The "free, melismatic" style of gospel was good practice for *bel canto* singing, Mr. Brownlee said. Faith remains part of his DNA, he continued, and he views his talents as "a gift that could be taken away from me at any time, so I want to be grateful."

Mr. Brownlee initially wanted to be a lawyer: "I would see the guys on TV and think: 'They wear suits and make money. It's like doing a show. They get to be in front of people and be expressive.' "

He went to Anderson University in Indiana for his undergraduate degree, majoring in general studies and taking prelaw and voice lessons. He then attended Indiana University on a scholarship and studied with the soprano Costanza Cuccaro. He had his heart set on the Juilliard School for graduate work but wasn't invited to audition, a rejection he described as humbling but one that inspired him to work harder.

Mr. Brownlee has focused "90 percent" on Rossini, he said, and his signature role has become Count Almaviva in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. The mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato, who sang Rosina in Mr. Brownlee's debut run at the Met in 2007, applauded his "generosity and honesty as a performer and colleague."

"He is always in service of the music," she said. "His natural instrument is just incredibly beautiful. The word 'honey' comes to mind. He also has technical prowess and agility."

Since he doesn't have a particularly large voice, areas of the repertory are out of Mr. Brownlee's reach, but he said he would like to explore Mozart, Handel and French works. Prominent coming appearances include Lindoro in Rossini's *Italiana in Algeri* at La Scala this summer and a house debut with the Canadian Opera Company as Don Ramiro in Rossini's *Cenerentola* in April. Next season at the Met he sings Tonio in *La Fille du Régiment*.

A passionate Pittsburgh Steelers fan, Mr. Brownlee is also a budding photographer, an avid salsa dancer and a collector of rare Latin music. He's also an occasional D.J. in Atlanta, where he just bought a house with Kendra, his wife of two years. The two met on an Internet dating site and traveled together during their first year as a couple, "so we could build up our temptation resistance," Mr. Brownlee said. Maintaining a relationship in which one partner travels a lot is tough, he added. "When you get married, you don't cease being a man or woman. Temptation is all around. But fidelity is important to me."

He returns to Atlanta whenever he can to spend time with his wife and their son, Caleb, born in September, on his wife's birthday. Mr. Brownlee was away at the time, singing in *L'Italiana in Algeri* at the Paris National Opera, so he watched the birth on Skype. Such are the sacrifices of an operatic career.

Mr. Brownlee tries to keep the quirks in perspective. "You can go onstage and have success and bravos," he said, "but half an hour later you're in your hotel room by yourself, watching TV. The glory is gone, and it's just you. I of course want to do my job as well as I can, but I don't put so much stock in it that I forget that I'm just another guy."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/arts/music/tenor-lawrence-brownlee-mets-grand-finals-concert.html>

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