

Black Tenor's Cinderella Story Plays Happy Houses, Nice Ending



Photo Credit: Ken Howard

Interview by Zinta Lundborg

May 20 (Bloomberg) -- Tenor **Lawrence Brownlee** has just finished a run at the Metropolitan Opera as Don Ramiro, the Prince Charming character in Rossini's *Cenerentola*. He's living a Cinderella tale of his own.

A black man who stands 5-feet-6 without his size 10, height-enhancing boots, Brownlee says it hasn't always been easy to pursue his dream.

"Some of my biggest discouragers in this profession were black people," he notes during an interview at Bloomberg's New York headquarters, where he sported a ready smile, a pink shirt and a dark suit.

"Nobody wants to see a black man kissing a white woman onstage," he was told by other black singers who'd had doors slammed in their faces.

There was truth in what they said, according to Brownlee, who feels his race has held him back at times. Even though he had a contract to perform in Vienna as Don Narciso in Rossini's *Il Turco in Italia*, he was fired when a new director came onboard.

"They used code words," he explains, "A 'different idea' of what Narciso is. I know the person who got the role, and he's tall and blond."

Most often compared to superstar Juan Diego Flórez, the 36-year-old Brownlee has a bright and flexible voice, rapid vibrato, effortless high notes and, like Flórez, charming stage presence. They both sing the same showy *bel canto* roles, and Brownlee often finds himself stepping into the Peruvian divo's shoes.

Big Break

"We're actually the same age, but he made his debut eight years before I did," Brownlee says. "I'm not competitive with him, and I don't ever want to be that looming-in-the-background, threatening person in the second cast."

Considering he didn't take his talent seriously until college, Brownlee's star has risen rapidly. His big break came in 2001, when he won the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions on his third try. That got him an agent, who sent a tape of his performance to La Scala.

The following year he was hired to sing Count Almaviva in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* at Europe's premiere opera house. Summoned early to fill in for Flórez, Brownlee remembers it as the worst stage experience of his career so far.

"In the middle of my big aria, I inverted a whole part that was totally wrong. The conductor went completely white and was about to stop the orchestra, when we got back on track," he recalls. "Fortunately, I was not booed off the stage."

Tears at Curtain

Things were different for his Metropolitan Opera debut in 2007. Once again Brownlee sang Almaviva, and, once again, he followed Flórez. This time, it was a triumph, and the lusty ovation at the final curtain brought tears to his eyes.

Now he sings all over the world. This summer, Brownlee tries out two new roles at the Caramoor Festival in Westchester, New York: Nemorino in Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore* and Idreno in Rossini's melodramatic *Semiramide*. He also has two Rossini recordings coming out in the fall: *L'Italiana in Algeri* and an album of songs.

Brownlee lives in Atlanta with his wife, Kendra. They met, appropriately enough, on the online dating service eHarmony and married in December. Finishing up a master's degree in business administration, Kendra manages the financial aspects of a complex international career.

For Brownlee, art has a role to play in breaking down racial barriers, and he accepts his own role as a symbol. A great performance can make a difference, he says, just like a presidential election.

"Some people may connect what I did onstage with opening their minds or changing their views of African-American people."

Brownlee is scheduled to perform the role of Lindoro in *L'Italiana in Algeri* at the Teatro Lirico Giuseppe Verdi in Trieste May 29 and 30, June 3, 9 and 10; and Count Almaviva in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* at the Hamburgische Staatsoper, June 7, 20, 23 and 25. Information:

<http://www.lawrencebrownlee.com/>

(Zinta Lundborg is a writer for Bloomberg News. Any opinions expressed are her own.)

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