



Pictured here with students at Kleinhans Music Hall in Buffalo, New York, Angela M. Brown works to ensure opera's future through her unique outreach program.

photo by Will Jones

EXPOSURE, EXPOSURE, EXPOSURE

BY GREG WAXBERG

Superstar soprano Angela Brown tells why she started her one-woman show designed to draw new and younger audiences to opera.

On more than one occasion during the past nine years, high school students have told internationally acclaimed soprano Angela M. Brown that they had never heard someone sing as beautifully as she does and that they never knew a person *could* sing so beautifully—and, equally significant, they were able to give her this feedback in person.

This interaction with audience members, specifically younger audience members, is one of the goals of “Opera from a Sistah’s Point of View,” a one-woman recital program that Brown has been touring since 2001 to expose diverse audiences to opera as an art form for everyone and to knock down myths associated with opera. She firmly believes that exposure and audience-building are the keys to ensuring opera’s future, and she has been concerned about dwindling audiences for as long as she has been singing.

“I wanted to find out why there wasn’t more diversity among opera audiences,” Brown says. “I wanted to break down those barriers and let the public know

that people just like them are on the stage and that many opera plots concern people of their background. I want to build new audiences with people who have never seen opera or been interested in it.”

Each show’s content varies depending on the audience, with Brown adding more humorous elements and shortening the presentation to about 40 minutes for children, while adding more details for older audiences (she is always sensitive about the degree to which she explains risqué plots for younger audiences). In a typical performance, she provides a short synopsis of an opera, introduces an aria, describes its context within that opera’s plot, and sings the aria. The arias in the show are culled from her current repertoire, so she adds arias to the show as she learns new roles.

Currently, she rotates “Pace, pace, mio Dio!” from *La forza del destino*, “Dich, teure Halle” from *Tannhäuser*, “Vissi d’arte” from *Tosca*, “Ritorna vincitor!” and “O patria mia” from *Aida*, “O mio babbino caro” from *Gianni Schicchi*, “Tacea la notte placida” from

Il trovatore, “Morro, ma prima in grazia” and “Ecco l’orrido campo” from *Un ballo in maschera*, and “Summertime” and “My Man’s Gone Now” from *Porgy and Bess*. Brown also offers art songs, spirituals, and some light Gospel.

As for the myths, Brown attempts to negate the ideas that Blacks do not sing opera, that Blacks do not like opera, and that opera is intended for elitist audiences. Her conviction is that all the public has to do is attend a performance and read the synopsis. “It’s not brain surgery—it’s entertainment,” Brown says. “Over the years, opera has been built up to this big thing for which ‘you have to be in the know to really want to go.’”

Her urging of people to “just go” raises the question of how the public should cope with ticket prices. “There are other opportunities to see opera besides [sitting in seats with] high ticket prices. Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” she says, mentioning alternatives that include dress rehearsals, rush tickets, partial-view seats, balcony seats, standing room, and special prices for students and senior citizens.

Considering her busy international schedule, one might wonder how Brown balances performances of “Opera from a Sistah’s Point of View” with her singing engagements. “I try to always maintain the integrity of a contract,” she says. “‘Opera from a Sistah’s Point of View’ is not an easy show [to perform] because I’m talking a lot and singing, and I’m adding air travel. You can get tired or sick. You can be delayed. Anything can happen to keep me from doing my original job, so I try to find creative ways to do the show that will let me keep my sanity and not tire me out to the point that I’m no good to anybody.”

Even though the show is booked separately from her singing engagements, those “creative ways” almost always center on performing the program as a supplement to the primary singing engagements. For example, an opera company or orchestra might engage Brown for a recital and request a presentation of “Opera from a Sistah’s Point of View” for children at a local school. Her venues have

ranged from churches to universities to concert halls.

Among the other reactions that Brown has heard from high school students, they feel more validated about liking opera, and they feel better about liking it because they see someone else who likes it. The youngest audiences (third grade students) have been excited about the exposure, and many adults have told her that they never even considered going to an opera, but now they want to go and take their children.

In 2005, while Cincinnati Opera was preparing for its premiere performances of Richard Danielpour’s and Toni Morrison’s *Margaret Garner*, in which Brown sang the role of the title character’s mother, she presented “Opera from a Sistah’s Point of View” at a local church, and the event was sold out. “It was a wonderfully diverse audience—members of the congregation, supporters of the opera, and a broad array of communities, young and old, black and

white,” says Cincinnati Opera Artistic Director Evans Mirageas.

“What impresses me about the show,” he continues, “is Angela Brown’s ability to demystify opera. She has an extraordinary ability to clearly explain the human emotions and interactions that motivate any great opera, and she offers compelling musical ‘proof’ of her convictions.” Mirageas has since seen the program in two other locations and reports that everyone he has spoken with has given overwhelmingly positive feedback.

More recently, in September 2009, when Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis celebrated its 40th anniversary, Brown performed for over 800 middle and high school students. “Capturing the attention of middle and high school students for 90 minutes is quite a feat, and some of the boys left the theater humming ‘Summertime,’” remembers Glenn White, managing partner of Prism West, LLC-Consulting Services. “Angela



The poster features a blue background with white stars. At the top left is a logo consisting of a white square with a stylized sunburst or fan shape. To the right of the logo, the text reads "OPERA IN THE OZARKS" in large, white, serif font, with "IN THE" in smaller font between "OPERA" and "OZARKS". Below this, it says "AT INSPIRATION POINT" in a smaller, white, sans-serif font. Further down, the location "Hwy. 62 West • Eureka Springs, AR" is written in white. In the top right corner, a blue banner with white text says "61ST SEASON" and "JUNE 24 - JULY 23". The bottom half of the poster is filled with several photographs of opera performers on stage in various scenes. At the bottom, the text "Auditions - Staff positions" is written in a large, white, serif font, and below that, "Visit us online at www.opera.org or call 479-253-8595" is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

is helping to inspire future performers and intrigue future audiences through 'Opera from a Sistah's Point of View.' It fills a void found in too many young people's lives."

A few months later, in March 2010, as a result of her CNN interview about "Opera from a Sistah's Point of View," Brown performed at Kleinhans Music Hall in Buffalo, New York, for over 2,000 elementary school students. That appearance was part of the inaugural event for Cultures of Giving Legacy Initiative (CGLI), a philanthropy initiative established in 2008 to create new experiences for young people who live in low-income communities of color. "It was clear that the mission of the CGLI and the hearts of our members were aligned with Angela's efforts to reach minority youth and make a difference in their lives," says CGLI Co-Chair Jennifer J. Parker.

Then, in April, Oberlin College and Conservatory hosted a conference to

celebrate Black music and recognize artists' efforts to make the fine arts more accessible to communities of color and low-income communities. Also having seen her CNN interview, Oberlin's Black Musicians' Guild decided to engage Brown for the event. In addition, she performed for about 100 students at a nearby music school, The Arts Academy.

"Several singers thanked me for bringing her to Oberlin and said she is hilarious and gave wonderful advice about how to market themselves for an operatic career. One woman in the audience said that she 'hates' opera and thinks it's quite 'boring' but, after seeing Ms. Brown's show, is motivated to give it another chance," says Rebecca Hargrove, a junior voice performance major and chair of the Oberlin College Black Musicians' Guild.

Most recently, on October 16, 2010, a live video recording of "Opera from a Sistah's Point of View" took place at

Brown's alma mater, Indiana University, in the acoustically renowned Musical Arts Center.

The success of Brown's show is partially due to her own background. In the mid- to late-1970s, while watching *Schoolhouse Rock!*, she saw a public service announcement on television in which Leontyne Price promoted the United Negro College Fund. Even though she was aware of Marian Anderson's achievements, and even though her mother was a singer, that PSA was the first time Brown realized that a Black operatic soprano could be a star and could appear in mainstream television programming. "She was singing at the top of her lungs. I remember running through the house, mimicking her," Brown says.

However, at that young age, she was not yet interested in opera and did not consider an operatic career until her peers and professors in college encouraged her.

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Brown performing at Fickling Hall, Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, for 2,000 students at Alexander II Elementary School.



photo by Will Jones

Because of that initial skepticism, she is keenly aware of what her audiences for "Opera from a Sistah's Point of View" are probably thinking when the curtain rises.

Of course, since pursuing an operatic career, Brown has achieved one success after another. In 1997, she was a winner in the Metropolitan Opera's National Council Auditions, and she made her Met debut seven years later as Aida. Following that debut, Danielpour wrote a song cycle for her titled *A Woman's Life*, a setting of seven poems by Dr. Maya Angelou; the cycle received its world premiere performances with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra in October 2009. Also in 2004, Brown released a CD called *Mosaic: A Collection of African-American Spirituals with Piano and Guitar*. She also appears on

an album with the late Erich Kunzel and the Cincinnati Pops, featuring selections from *Porgy and Bess*, the original version of Gershwin's one-act opera *Blue Monday*, and the world premiere of "Lonely Boy," a duet that was cut from *Porgy and Bess*.

Among her other career highlights since 2004, Brown returned to the Met as Aida in 2007 and as Amelia in *Un ballo in maschera* in 2008, and she made her debuts at the Vienna State Opera, Hamburg State Opera, Cape Town Opera in South Africa, National Opera of Paris, and Deutsche Oper Berlin, as well as Florida Grand Opera and the Atlanta Opera. She has also made debuts with the Madrid National Symphony, Latvian National Symphony, Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and Cincinnati May Festival.

This past July, Brown was invited to perform at the World Expo 2010 in Shanghai as a guest of the USA Pavilion and the United States Consulate. She was the only opera singer presented by the USA Pavilion and, as part of the pavilion's official protocol ceremony on National Day, sang the national anthem. Brown also sang in recitals at the Shanghai Conservatory (for a full and very enthusiastic audience) and the Music Club, a concert hall on the site of the World Expo.

For these two recitals, she titled her program "We Are One" to reflect the World Expo's theme of unity and global cooperation. Brown sang arias from international opera (Verdi and Puccini) and American opera (Gershwin and Danielpour) to try to demonstrate that opera is for and about everyone, and she sang spirituals about unity and living and working together as one community.

"China was amazing," Brown says. "It was my first trip to an Asian country. The World Expo was great, and I felt honored just to have been invited to perform. As the only opera singer presented by USA Pavilion, I was thrilled they included opera—through me!"

Greg Waxberg is a writer and magazine editor for The Pingry School, a freelance writer specializing in classical music and opera, and a program annotator for opera companies. He can be contacted at GregOpera@aol.com.

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