



"WINTER BREAK"

DYLAN STANTON, 2025

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FREE

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BAENDAN LATIMER, WRITER & PUBLISHER



# Opera Noises

VOL. 2, ISS. 2

Letter

From

## TO OPERA ADMINISTRATORS!

Cactus spines sprout from cream colored cushions called areoles. They can be thick, thin, short, curved, or straight; they can resemble zip ties, barbed wire, toothpicks, or medieval daggers. They can be straw yellow or brown, orange or red, silver or severe black. Often, spines grow in gradients. In sunlight these appear to contain a dark kernel encased by a lighter colored spine, with an opacity of syrup or sea glass. They are simply sublime. Some spines are entirely red. These plants are being scorched to death.

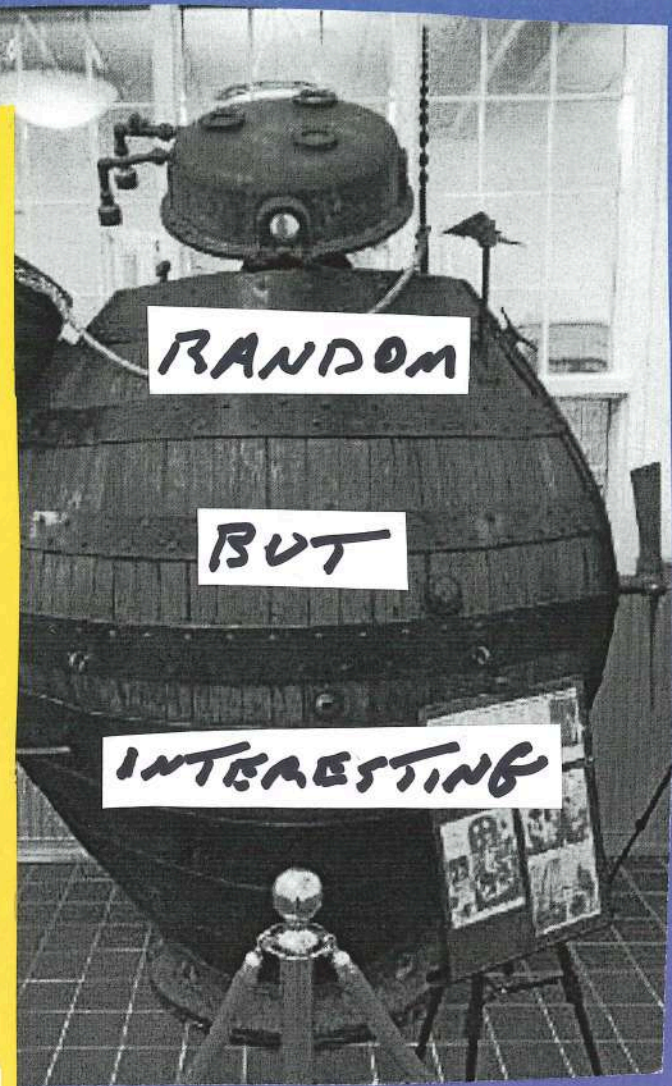
In Chile's Atacama Desert, one species, called *copiapoa marginata*, survives on coastal fog, catching droplets in their spines and drinking them as they fall. If a cactus drinks too much water it will drown. Rot spreads like a hungry fasciitis: their skin yellows; their roots emit a foul odor; and finally, heavy under their own rot, they collapse. The only way to contain the spread is radical amputation.

Handling these creatures – I call them creatures, because anything that fights back is no plant – is a delicate business. Once, as I was transferring an *opuntia macrocentra* into a new pot (a “double lung transplant,” I called it), when its paddles, fat from rain, fell onto my chest, neck, and arms, covering me thousands of nearly invisible, fiberglass-fine hairs with barbed tips, called glochids. I threw the plant off me, screaming, as if I'd just put my face into a nuclear reactor. I was pulling out those hairs for weeks.

In 1776, with the British laying siege to New York Harbor, Westbrook resident David Bushnell, who grew up on a farm near the intersection of Essex and McVeagh roads, came up with a plan. Bushnell designed a secret weapon: a submersible that could be deployed at night to attach a bomb to the bottom of an enemy ship. The invention, named the Turtle, was America's first submarine and the first to be used in war.

The Turtle was launched on three missions, all ultimately unsuccessful, before it was eventually sunk. While the missions might not have been successful, its legacy was significant. According to the Connecticut River Museum, even George Washington in a letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1785 praised Bushnell for his design. “Bushnell is a man of great mechanical powers, fertile in inventions and master of execution ... I then thought, and still think, that it was an effort of genius,” Washington wrote.

The selectmen noted that Westbrook's 250th committee is planning for events earlier in the 2026 summer, so the request to display it in New York in September wouldn't interfere with Westbrook's planned celebrations. The selectmen also said that they were intrigued by the idea of getting the town some publicity in New York, where the Turtle's legacy was born.



“It would be fun to tell Westbrook's story in lower Manhattan,” Allen said.

– Eric O'Connell, from “The Turtle Could be on the Move,” *The Harbor News*, 10/20/2025

# UPCOMING SHOWS

"To know ourselves," Anchorites (vocal quartet). A cappella selections spanning from the Renaissance to the 21st century, illuminating how humans have sought meaning through love, lust, devotion, and isolation. Tuesday, February 10, 2026

6:00PM 7:00PM, Emmanuel Episcopal Church, 811 Cathedral Street Baltimore, MD, 21201

"Queen of Hearts" (music by Purcell, Monteverdi, and others.) Thursday, February 12, 2026, 7:30pm, St. Francis Hall (1340 Quincy St NE), (Opera Lafayette)

*Intelligence*, by Jake Heggie. Saturday, February 14 at 7:30 PM and Sunday, February 15 at 2:00 PM in the Center for the Arts Concert Hall at George Mason University's Fairfax campus, 4373 Mason Pond Dr, Fairfax, VA. (Virginia Opera)

"New Voices in Opera": *Oshun and Kandake*. February 28, 2026 | 7pm. Grace United Methodist Church. 5407 N Charles Street | Baltimore, MD 21210. (Maryland Opera)



(Caricature by Winnie Jakob.)

Mirella Freni as Mimi, 1963.

The

Editor

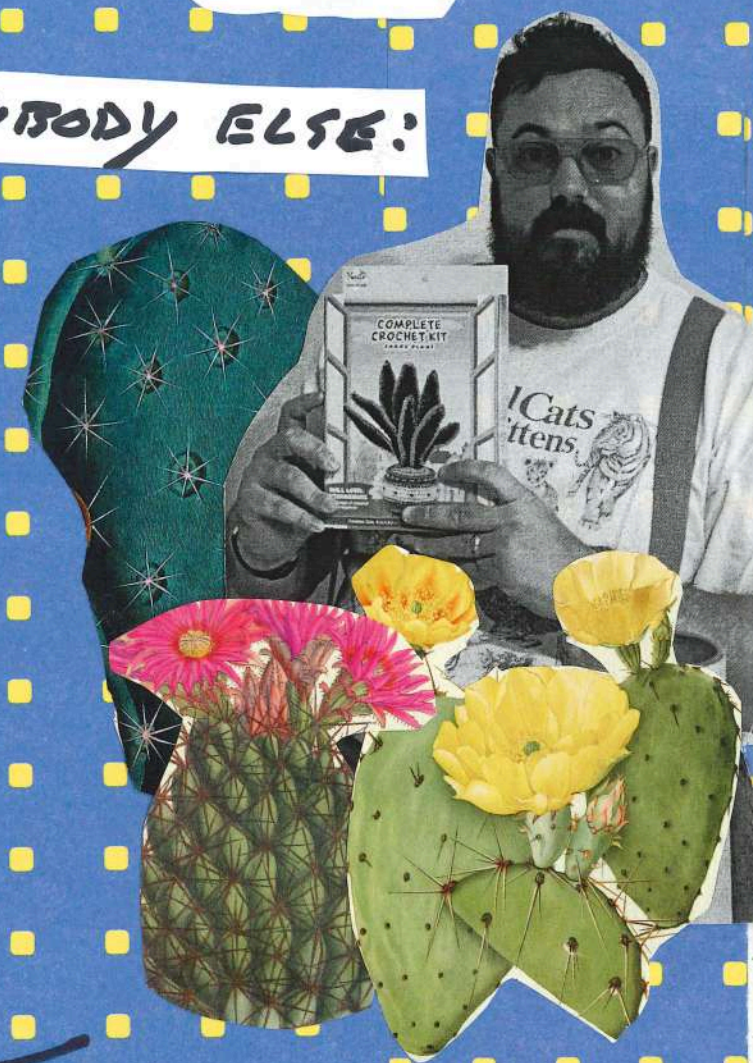
## TO EVERYBODY ELSE:

This month we're celebrating the queen, Ms. Leontyne Price, who turns 99 on February 10th. On page three and four we have an expressionist woodcut accompanied by prose from Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha*; page five and six reflects on Poulenc's searing masterpiece, *Dialogue des Carmelites*; page seven and eight showcase a stunning art piece by Sophie Ziner; on page nine and ten, two great singers reflect on Price's impact; on pages 11-16, we're honored to have poetry from Kevin Simmonds (reprinted with permission from the author) alongside QR codes that will take you to some great moments in Price's career; on 17, we'll go over upcoming shows in the DMV; and finally, Eric O'Connell gives us an amphibian "Random but Interesting" on page 18. The back cover is a photo by Dylan Stratton (@dr\_strat).

If you'd like to contribute to the cause, you can Venmo me directly here:



venmo



Truly,  
Brandon  
Latimer



3  
UNTITLED, CONRAD FELIX MÜLLER, 1917



Price's artistry is her only absolute. Watch her interviews to witness a remarkable singer—thoroughly guarded and self-conscious—twist into cliché, incomprehensibility and aloofness.

The rolled *r*s, the European words and phrases dropped whole into a homespun molasses sound accented as if she'd never left Laurel, Mississippi, as if imitating an impersonation of a diva. It's full-on drag.

Every answer, every gesture, painstakingly manufactured—self-deprecation, pretension, warmth and the delirium of her own mythology. She's oblivious to how she needn't work at the charade. Her voice—alive in memory, on vinyl, plastic or digital file—had long ago sealed our devotion. We come for the voice but also for the fevered delirium of her own mythology. She knows this.

For us, she plays the turban-helmeted, wooden and ceremoniously repellent diva who's also disarmingly self-deprecating, warm, bracing.

As soprano Grace Bumbry put it to me about Price's carrying-on decades ago: "That voice excused everything."

With the way things turned out, regret became my most reflexive and muscular emotion, the focusing instrument to know what someone or something means in relation to me, and me to the world.

Whenever I hear or think of her, I regret that I'll never make sound others can hardly bear, which is an agony and a consolation.

America,  
I couldn't have sounded like this  
anywhere else

Grooves cut down to bone  
a terror

a reprieve

I constitute an order  
through sound men imagine  
but could never make

What you hear

is an *other* matter yes  
technique as ladder

but already  
the summit  
of my sound

Listen with Me



Price sings "O patria mia"  
Her final Met performance  
*Aida*, Verdi

Maud Martha went east on Thirty-fourth Street, headed for Cottage Grove. It was August, and Thirty-fourth Street was all in bloom. The blooms, in their undershirts, sundresses and diapers, were hanging over porches and fence stiles and strollers, and were even bringing chairs out to the rims of the sidewalks.

At the corner of Thirty-fourth and Cottage Grove, a middle aged blind man on a three-legged stool picked at a scarred guitar. The five or six patched and middle-aged men around him sang in husky, low tones, which carried the higher tone-ungarnished, insistent, at once a question and an answer of the instrument.

Those men were going no further and had gone nowhere. Tragedy.

She considered that word. On the whole, she felt, life was more comedy than tragedy. Nearly everything that happened had its comic element, not too well buried, either. Sooner or later one could find something to laugh at in almost every situation. That was what, in the last analysis, could keep folks from going mad. The truth was, if you got a good Tragedy out of a lifetime, one good, ripping tragedy, thorough, unridiculous, bottom-scraping, not the issue of human stupidity, you were doing, she thought, very well, you were doing well.

Excerpt from *Maud Martha*, Gwendolyn Brooks

# DESERT ISLAND DISC

## DIALOGUES DES CARMÉLITES

*Dialogues des Carmélites* is based on the true story of 16 martyred Carmelite nuns who, in 1794, refused to renounce their oaths before the new secular French government. They were guillotined just 16 days before the execution of Robespierre and the close of the Reign of Terror. Perhaps as interesting is Poulenc himself; one critic described him as both monk and rascal, combining religious music with a sensuousness that gives the orchestration a peculiar glow. But that is a story for another time.

There is a queasy undertow throughout the score. Poulenc's music, woozy, recalling – to my ear – the sweeping Hollywood scores of the period, but also poignant and luminous. (I didn't mean to make this a Catholic zine, but...here we are! What did Wilde say – “Catholicism is the only religion to die in?” Etc.) All of the singing in this opera is recitative. While I usually prefer a long, luscious vocal line, there is an ascetic beauty to the recits, brutal and bare, and as sung drama I have hardly seen another piece so challenging to look away from as *Dialogues des Carmélites*.

Photo: “Nun in Courtyard,”  
Jacques Lowe, 1960

FRANCIS POULENC, 1956



Take a look at 47:32 at the agonizing death throes of Mother Superior for an example of the kind of relentless ratcheting of tension of which Poulenc is capable. There is, finally, the famous “Salve Regina” scene at 2:36:00, with its chilling mix of ponderous low strings and shimmering harmonies. It is one of the most shocking and spine tingling scenes in opera, punctuated by the rolling thunk of the guillotine offstage as each sister walks into the darkness to their fate.

On opera that will change you. An opera I will come back to.

Listen with Me



*Dialogue des Carmélites*  
Poulenc (Met HD 2019)

The famed Italian singing teacher Francesco Lamperti proclaimed, “Chi sa respirare ... saprà ben cantare” (“One who breathes well, sings well”). Singers must master breath. Without it, there's no voice.

At inhalation, the ribcage, abdomen and back enlarge to create a vacuum that rushes oxygen into the lungs. With their sternums held unnaturally erect, singers ride upon a cushion of breath. (Hence, the caricature of the ballooning and barrel-chested opera singer.) The exhaled air passes through the vocal folds to produce the sound we call singing.

Seldom do people ask how it feels  
to be on fire and feed it

Stand there a valve  
a filter a veil

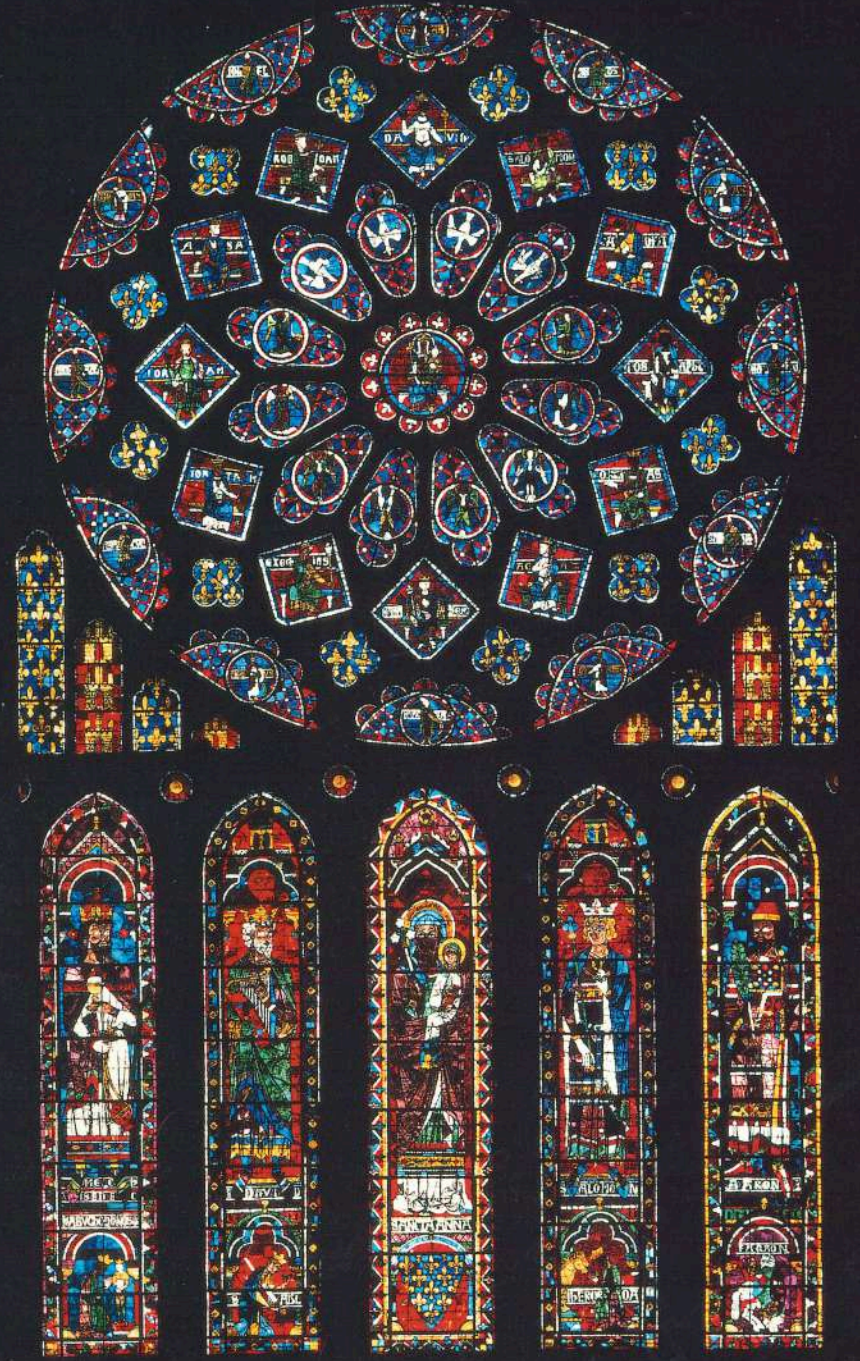
and contain what should bust me  
wide open

as I swim the depths  
breath imperceptible

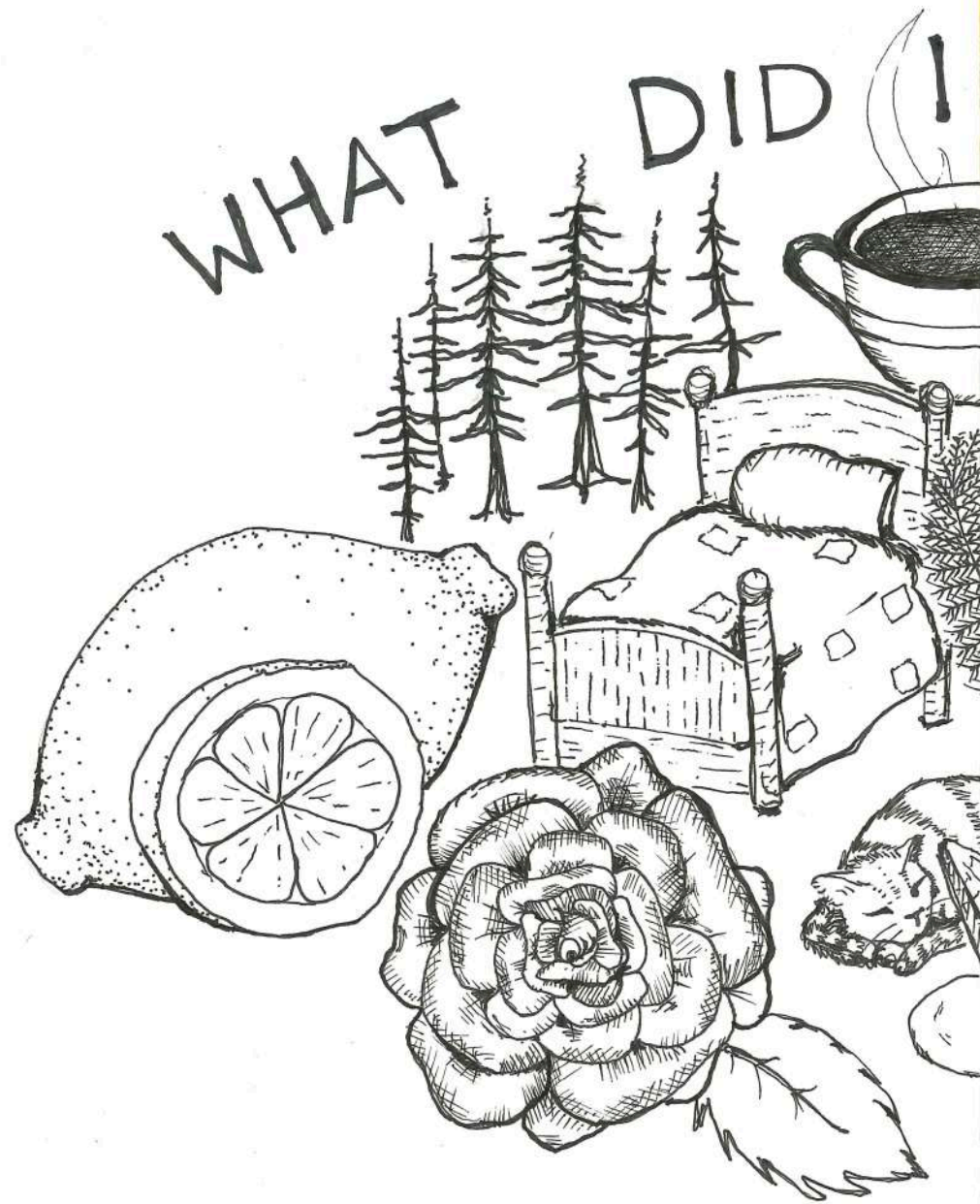
A *monstre sacré*, formed and deformed by her monstrous business, what did it cost her, a Black woman who traveled uncountable distances—from a Southern family without much education or financial resources to the world's most coveted stages? On the wing of a European art form never before so closely associated with a Black singer?



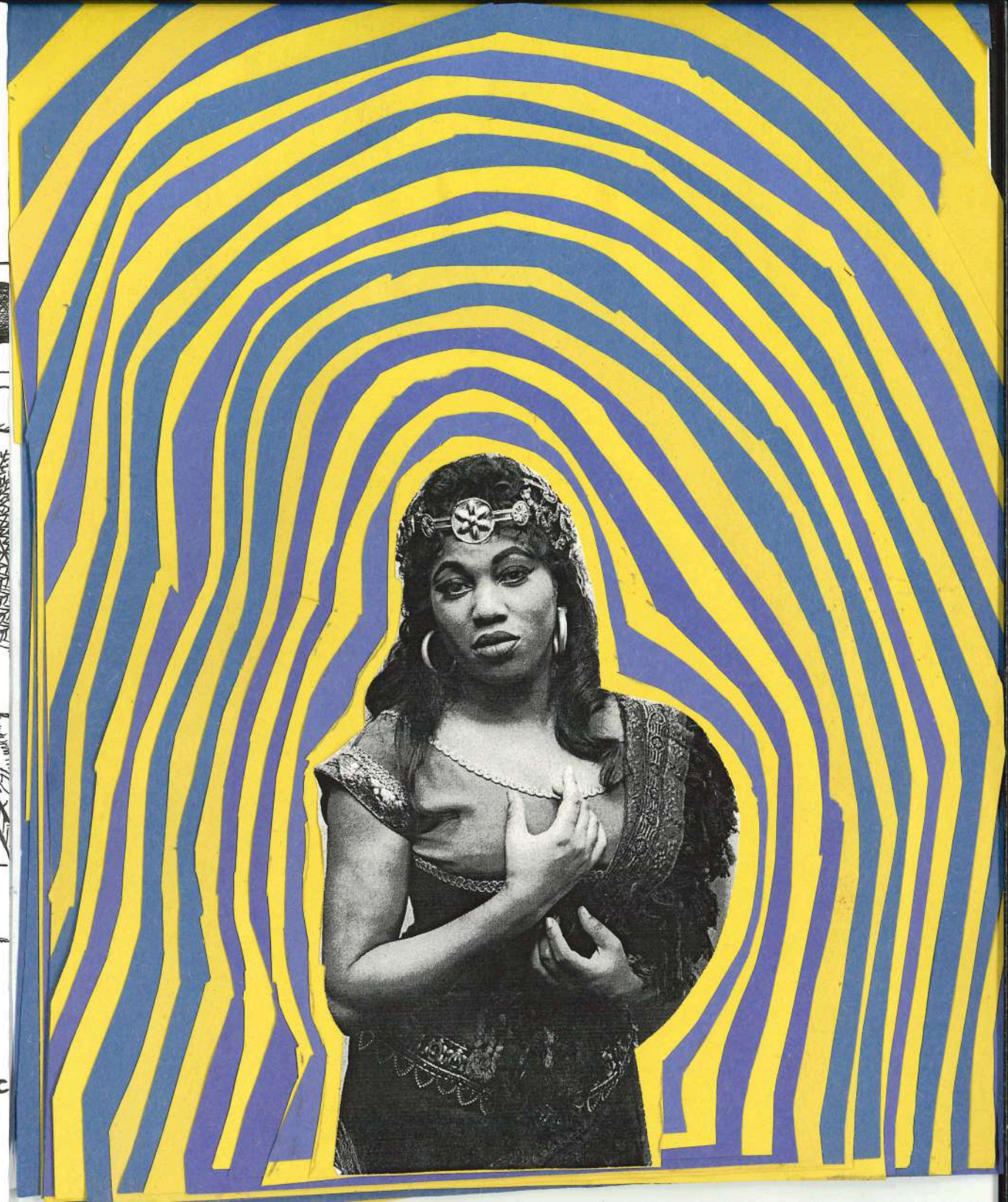
Rose Window & Lancets, Chartres Cathedral, c. 1205



WHAT DID I



I heard Leontyne Price singing "Pace"  
From Verdi's *La Forza del*



Excerpts from *The Monster I Am Today:*  
*Leontyne Price and a Life in Verse*

by Kevin Simmonds

The operatic voice exits the body a procession of elemental sonances: hard, liquid, gauzy, molten. Winged with vowel, words glint, irradiated.

This particular human sound dazzles and falters. Even a single note can waver in stature. Beyond the beauty of tone and shapeliness of phrase, there's an understanding of material, architecture and weather.

An aria is a weather event. The singer and listener experience how the voice creates the conditions and withstands its forces. Together they determine the weather.

Before any human, wooden, or metal vibration, they consent to a *being-there*. To contract and enlarge, to vanish and return.

The pressures and temperatures of expectation also vary. Thus, the primordial weather, the *frisson*.

From freshman year in high school, I was a standout, a soloist. Pimple and insecure whenever I wasn't grasping a score and sounding my tremulous tones, my voice commanding attention because it asserted that striking, girth-giving oscillation: vibrato.

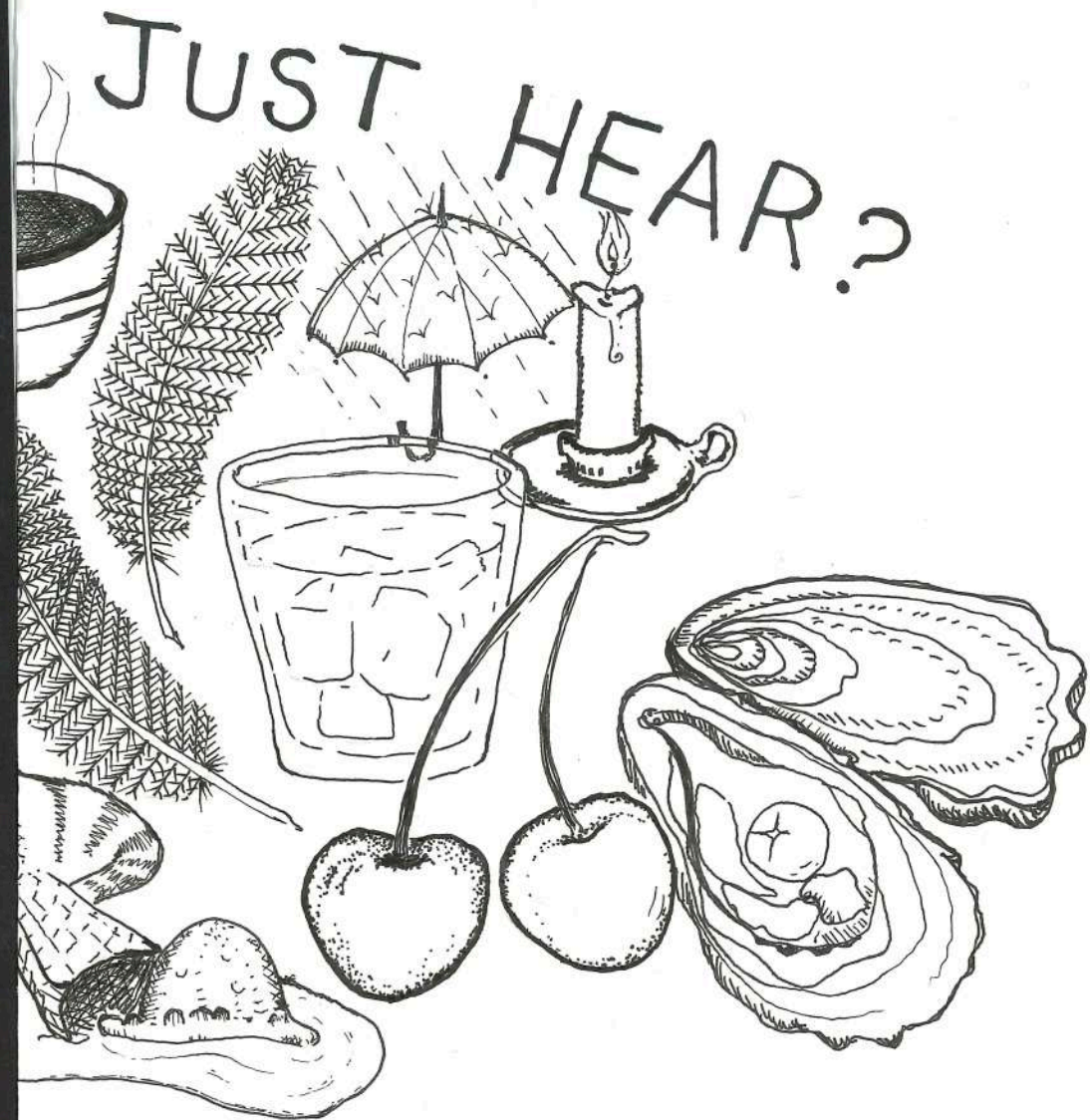
Its bombastic shake and naked shimmer, its self-congratulating excess. My gay adolescent dream: a voice that gave me character, or allowed me to *play* a character. Operatic.

The opera singer conceals, much like a ballerina, the work it takes to appear effortless. Yet she is without a floor to absorb any misstep. She must make the floor—her body is the floor.

Listen with Me



Price sings "D'amor sull'ali rose"  
From *Il Trovatore*, Verdi



e, Pace, Mi Dio"  
Destino



# CRITIC'S

# CORNER

From "Leontyne Price At 90: The Voice We Still Love To Talk About," Tom Huizenga, NPR

JESSYE NORMAN, SOPRANO

Hearing this voice — this vibrant, beautiful, soaring, amazing voice, on whatever that stereo equipment was at the time, was quite overwhelming. I used to sit — very often alone — just listening to the sound and wondering what she really looked like and what her friends were like and what it must be like to carry such an instrument around in one's own body. [Her voice] was a cloud filled with silver, and the silver was the part that gave it its light. And that light, when one was able to experience her on stage, was all around her as well as coming out of her body. She's a role model still for many singers. A great number of African-American singers refer to her as "our empress," "our queen." She is the level of performance to which we aspire. That artistic output over all those years, that's what we'd all like to do. And I hope that at this point in her life, that she's able to understand and appreciate the amazing artistic life that she shared with the world.

SHERILL MILNES, BARIitone

[Her voice] was like an avalanche of sound. She would open mouth and all this gorgeousness came out. It didn't seem big, but almost the further you got away from her the bigger it became, which is ideal in vocal technique. It's almost a religious experience to hear Leontyne sing — makes you feel closer to God. Whether you're an atheist or believe in god, her sound elevated all of us. We did Un ballo in maschera, a Verdi opera, in Atlanta. That was spring-summer, 1966. After the performance, [Metropolitan Opera General Manager] Mr. Bing took the whole cast to a country club. Leontyne was very famous. We walked in, and the manager came up and whispered to Mr. Bing, "You can't come in." She had just sung her guts out, and couldn't believe that I was in the middle of those things about which I had been reading. And Mr. Bing, to his credit, said, "Folks, we're out of here." And we went someplace else. Leontyne, through her personality, through her voice and her influence, then really opened the door — the crack that Marion Anderson had opened — and made a place for the African-American. She opened the door for the ones of my generation: Martina Arroyo, Grace Bumbry, Reri Grist and others. That was Leontyne's doing and she paid a price. Because I'm sure if I experienced that in Atlanta that one time, she must have had that situation many times. In that way her influence in civil rights, without being specifically a civil rights leader, she was a leader.



*My voice is me, what can I say?  
My voice is what I think life is.  
My voice is beauty. My voice is  
America. My voice is my  
blackness. My voice is love. My  
voice is God.*

— *Leontyne Price*