

Opera and Black History Month

Evan Wildstein, Manager of Education and Adult Learning, OA
EducationLink • 2/18/2008

In 1976, February was declared to be Black History Month in order to celebrate and honor the history and contributions of African-Americans. Opera companies all around the country have focused works and programs around this commemoration.

Recent commissions by [Cincinnati Opera](#) pay tribute to the history and perseverance of African-Americans. *Rise for Freedom: The John P. Parker Story*, composed by Adolphus Hailstork, was premiered in mid-October. Parker was a pivotal figure in black history: an inventor, industrialist and also a participant in the Underground Railroad. This operatic work tells the tale of Parker standing up to the challenge of a cruel slave owner by successfully guiding some of his slaves to freedom through the Railroad. Another work, Adrienne Danrich's *This Little Light of Mine*, honors two opera singers, Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price. Presented in school performances and one public performance in the month of February, this opera describes the racial barriers the two iconic singers overcame. Anderson made a historic appearance at the [Metropolitan Opera](#) on January 7, 1955 in the role of Ulrica in Verdi's *Un ballo in maschera* as the company's first African-American singer. Price followed her there in 1961 as Leonora in Verdi's *Il Trovatore*.

[OPERA Iowa](#), the educational touring branch of [Des Moines Metro Opera](#), also has a new work in their future. At the proposal of composer Dr. Michael Patterson, the piece, *A Dream Fulfilled: The Saga of George Washington Carver*, is set to have its premiere at the Iowa State Historical Building in February 2009. The opera will not only teach students about the life and contributions of George Washington Carver, but will also create partnerships in an attempt to connect students to Iowa's history. The Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, local museums, professional artists and historians will collaborate on this project. The work will focus on some of Carver's lesser-known history in Iowa, such as his attending Simpson College in Indianola and his work with Iowa State University.

A company with a history that stretches back over 100 years before the creation of Black History Month is the Colored American Opera Company (Washington D.C.). Founded in 1873, this company's formation was monumental, as the Emancipation Proclamation was enacted only 10 years earlier. The troupe set out to raise funds for a new by producing and touring an operetta: Julius Eichberg's *The Doctor of Alcantara*. Though memories of the company have faded, its history and music were revived by a performance of *Free to Sing: The Story of the First African-American Opera Company*, by Michael Rosenberg and Shelley Brown, on February 16 at the [Music Center at Strathmore](#).

This year's operatic celebration of African-American history and culture is dynamic and inspiring, thanks to the works presented by these companies and more. A sense of community has been fostered and will, with hard work and hope, continue to grow.