

Honoring African-Americans through Opera, School and the Community

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The Civil Rights Movement, as we know it today, can be traced back to July 26, 1948, with the signing of [Executive Order 9981](#) by President Harry S. Truman, which desegregated the American armed forces. In the 1950s and 60s, key events and individuals including [Brown v. Board of Education](#), Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. advanced the movement. In 2010, opera companies throughout the U.S. will continue to celebrate African-American history, honor the activists involved in the Civil Rights Movement and commemorate the reform movement itself with new commissions and special events.

[Kentucky Opera](#) studio artists will work with the Louisville Orchestra on a celebratory concert for Dr. King on January 15, the day on which he would have turned 81. Additionally, the company commissioned a new work by local composer Harry Pickens, celebrating President Barack Obama, called *Chorus of Hope*. The work will premiere at a free event on January 17 at St. Stephen Church, the largest primarily African-American church in Louisville. These events not only serve cultural needs, but they also provided Kentucky Opera with an opportunity to collaborate with orchestra, theater, drum corps and other community partners. "In essence," says Director of Education Deanna R. Hoying, "the community will have a new structure to celebrate Dr. King produced by Kentucky Opera, with performances ranging from opera to drums, to children and adult choirs, dancers and musicians. It meets a lot of needs in the community, as well as for us to become more a part of the fabric of Louisville."

One program of [Houston Grand Opera's HGOco](#) will focus on the speeches "I Have a Dream," by Dr. King and "Yes, We Can," by President Obama. Attucks Middle School, an economically disadvantaged school with which HGOco works, is the recipient of a grant from the Houston Independent School District (HISD) called [Arts Education Matters](#). The grant, which is in its fourth year, promotes partnerships "as a way to measurably improve student performance in all subjects and enhance students' ability to engage with the arts as creators, performers and spectators." This year, HGOco sent two teaching artists (TAs) into Attucks's speech and debate class. Through the work with the TAs, students created their own stories about goals and aspirations based on the two speeches. These speeches were also put to music by the TAs with the goal of presenting them at the school's annual Martin Luther King, Jr. assembly.

While community and school events are encouraging celebrations of African-American history, recent opera company productions should also be noted. [Cincinnati Opera's *Rise for Freedom*](#) and [This Little Light of Mine](#) commemorate John P. Parker, and Marian Anderson and Leontyne Price, respectively. [Des Moines Metro Opera's *A Dream Fulfilled*](#) explored the life of George Washington Carver, an agricultural pioneer and Iowa hero.

Although February was designated Black History Month in 1976, there is certainly more than a month's worth of history to learn about and celebrate. Opera companies have offered — and continue to offer —

productions, school programs and community events spotlighting African-American contributions to the arts, culture and society year-round.