

Opera from a Sistah's Point of View

Janet Jarriel, JEJ Artists

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Soprano Angela Brown's voice is not her only asset — she is a tremendous advocate for diversity within opera. Her program, Opera from a Sistah's Point of View, is the result of her sincere desire to bring opera and classical vocal performance to diverse audiences. She has shared her program with schools, churches and civic organizations around the country, and through opera companies' education initiatives. [JEJ Artists](#)'s Janet Jarriel recently conversed with Brown about the topic.

Janet Jarriel: You sing in many opera houses and concert halls in our country and other countries, and say that when you look out at the audiences you always hope to see greater diversity. What do you mean by that?

Angela Brown: I want to see people from all cultures, from all walks of life. In the audiences, I want to see young and old, black and white, the haves and have nots. I want opera not to be seen as an elitist art form, but open, honest and possible for everyone — operas are about *all* people. I want everyone to be exposed to opera. If it's not their cup of tea, maybe it's because they haven't tried it — Lipton shouldn't be the only choice.

JJ: Who do you think holds the key to making our classical music audiences more diverse?

AB: The people who do the hiring in opera houses play a big part. If all houses would hire with diversity in mind, then the performers' families, their friends and friends of their friends would come. Then soon you'd have one big old melting pot going on. But, you also have to reach the parents of young people because they *are* the future of opera. If we can turn the parents on to opera, then they can spark the interest in the art form in their children by bringing them to performances.

JJ: You love all kinds of music, but you started out singing gospel and more contemporary music. What sparked your interest in and love for opera?

AB: I found my classical roots through Ginger Beazley at Oakwood College. She loved me into this music and nurtured me into this music. I don't think I would have stayed with it without her. She introduced me to Virginia Zeani at [Indiana University](#), who became the polisher and finisher of my voice. She helped me stand on my own two vocal chords and sing and put it out there.

JJ: How can we help young audiences connect with opera and see it as relevant to our world today?

AB: A lot of opera companies have in place educational outreach programs that help to make opera and classical music, as a whole, more palatable to young audiences, and that's fabulous. But, sometimes even those programs need a facelift. To have culturally diverse soloists and ensembles go out into the

community to perform allows young, budding minds to know that when we are singing *Madama Butterfly* we are telling the story of people in Japan; *Porgy and Bess* is a story about people in South Carolina; *La Forza del Destino* is about folks in Seville, Spain; *Carmen* is about Spanish people too; *Aida* is about African people in Africa. These stories are about peoples of the world. If no one has ever said it to you that way, you don't realize that opera is about everybody — rich, poor, people in love, people mad about people in love — basically, life. That's why I do my program called *Opera from a Sistah's Point of View*. I try to let people know that the way *I* see it is that we are all seen in the characters on the stage — and, that's opera. It might be a different setting in a different time, but it's still reflective of people from all places and walks of life.

JJ: You have always been a person of action, not just talk. What do you want your contribution to be in the effort to expand and diversify classical music audiences?

AB: I would like to think my mark in opera is to bring people together, all kinds of people from different backgrounds. They don't have to talk a certain way, dress a certain way or even look a certain way. I want them to know that everybody is welcome at my house — opera house, that is! Just choose your seat and sit down.