

### **Sir Willard W. White (Porgy)**

The 2000 DVD release of *Porgy and Bess*, directed by Sir Trevor Nunn, is a film adaptation of an original stage production at the Glyndebourne Festival Opera from the late 1980s. The original production was well acclaimed and was also revived in the early 1990s. For this reason and to preserve acoustic characteristics, the original EMI studio recording from November-December 1992 in London was used for the soundtrack of the film. The cast acted on a set at Shepparton Studios and lip-synched to their own voices on the recording. (3)

The cast for this production of *Porgy and Bess* is an impressive collection of singers and actors, with one of the most important roles carried by Sir Willard W. White (although he had not yet been knighted at the time of the recording). White portrays the title character Porgy, a crippled beggar with a simple heart, with an attitude of dignity and nobility – watchwords that have carried great importance with the singer throughout his career. According to Grandi Tenori.com's review (3), "Willard White as Porgy is a proud, strong, handsome man who portrays love, spirituality and life." The respect earned by his performance of Porgy is indicative of White's success in his greater career, despite being in a field in which black singers are very underrepresented.

### Childhood and Education

Willard Wentworth White was born on October 10, 1946, in Kingston, Jamaica. His father was a dockworker, and his family was poor, although not excessively poor by Jamaican standards. (7) He attended Excelsior High School under the tutelage of W. A. Powell (6), and in an interview with Michael White of *The Independent* (7), he remembers feeling isolated and disliked as a youth. The other kids made fun of his different-sounding name, and because of his deep voice they nicknamed him 'Grumbler'

and ‘Thunderer’. He also remembers overhearing people say he was ugly. White’s experiences as a child seem to have imbued him with an inferiority complex which was long-lasting and difficult to overcome in his pursuit of a career in opera.

White did not always plan to be a singer, however. His father wanted him to be a dentist (7), and he himself had plans to attend university to study economics. In an interview with the *Jamaica Gleaner* (6), he says, “I wanted to be a ‘real man’, with a necktie, and with a name plate on my desk.” For a time, he worked at Grace Kennedy Ltd., but he also sang on the side. He was a founding member of the Jamaica Folk Singers, he sang with the Jamaica Amateur Operatic Society (now the Jamaica Musical Theatre Company), and he also studied at the Jamaican School of Music. In a passing visit to Jamaica, Lady Barbirolli (wife of conductor Sir John Barbirolli) heard him sing and suggested that he go to study in London. (7) Instead, his father bought him a one-way ticket to New York City, because “the flight was cheaper”.

In New York, White auditioned at the Juilliard School in 1968 and won the second-largest scholarship to the School that year. The scholarship was \$300 short of the required fees, but White was able to get a \$330 stipend from the Jamaican Ministry of Finance through the help of music lover and educator Ross Murray. When asked how he managed to live on the remaining \$30 every three months, White responds, “I was very slim in those days.” (6)

White’s feelings of inferiority from his childhood in Jamaica followed him to New York, which he says felt foreign and cold. While his fellow students at Juilliard were polishing the art of their singing, White felt that he had yet to learn even the basics. Eventually he quit his studies at Juilliard and found work in the Washington and New York City Operas. However the most prestigious U.S. opera house, the Met, would not accept him because his voice “wasn’t big enough”. In the mid-1970s, White was talent-spotted by the English National Opera and brought to London, which he found much more comfortable. He has lived there ever since, in Lewisham, and despite his early confidence problems he has flourished as a singer. (7)

## Operatic Career

White's operatic debut was in a 1974 New York City Opera production of Puccini's *La Bohème* as Colline (5), and his London debut was in a 1976 English National Opera production of Monteverdi's *L'incoronazione di Poppea* as Seneca. (2) Since then he has also sung in opera houses in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and the major European cities, as well as in festivals at Glyndebourne, Aix en Provence, and Salzburg. He has also performed regularly in concerts with the London Symphony Orchestra, the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Royal Philharmonic, the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the La Scala Orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and the Cleveland Orchestras. His repertoire includes bass-baritone roles in operas by Monteverdi, Handel, Mozart, Rossini, Verdi, Puccini, Wagner, Debussy, Shostakovich, Mussorgsky, Prokofiev, and Gershwin. Many consider his best role to be that of Mephistopheles in *The Damnation of Faust*. (5)

In addition to opera and concert performances, White has also acted on film as Porgy in *Porgy and Bess* and as Shakespeare's *Othello* in a highly-regarded Royal Shakespeare Company production. He appeared at the opening of the Millenium Dome in London, and twice as a soloist at the Last Night of the Proms, in 1999 and 2000. He has also created a concert program called "An Evening with Willard White – A Tribute to Paul Robeson", which has been a continuing success at festivals throughout the UK. (5) He has often been compared to Robeson (2), who is famous for bringing black spiritual music to the concert stage, as well as for his social work. White has also recorded a CD entitled "The Paul Robeson Legacy", a collection of spirituals and ballads that Robeson made famous. White says that hearing a Robeson recording was influential in his decision to become a singer. (1)

Willard White is a grammy award winner (6) and has won various other honors and awards in the UK and Jamaica. In 1995 he was awarded a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) (2) as well as the Gold Musgrave Medal, a symbol of excellence awarded by the Institute of Jamaica. (4) In 2000 he was awarded the Order of Merit, Jamaica's third highest honor, for international distinction in the performing arts. (5) Most recently,

on November 24, 2004, White received a knighthood in the Queen's birthday honours list. (2)

### Racial Obstacles

As a black male singer in the field of opera, it may have been difficult at first for White to make progress in his career. There are only two specifically black male leads in the standard repertoire, but many black singers find the character of Porgy embarrassing, and Othello (a tenor) is often played by a white singer in black make-up. White appears to have found his niche in the villain characters in opera, a trend that Michael White, in his interview with Willard White for *The Independent*, speculates may have an unfortunate connection with the color of the singer's skin (together with his voice and physique). Michael White says, "He has become to opera almost as Christopher Lee is to the cinema: a much-loved Mr Scary. It's the consequence of being big, with a don't-mess-with-me sort of demeanour and disarmingly dark tone of voice. ... which is why he travels the world singing roles like Mephistopheles in Damnation of Faust, Nick Shadow in Rake's Progress, Claggart in Billy Budd, Bluebeard in Bluebeard's Castle... a catalogue of demons, bullies, murderers and tyrants." (7)

At Juilliard, Willard White says, "It wasn't so much a case of 'What's this black guy doing trying to be an opera singer?' - although there was some of that. It was more 'Here's a black guy trying to be an opera singer', which is subtler." (7) Throughout his career, White has portrayed many white roles, in part because of the scarcity of roles that are meant for blacks. During one production of the *Ring Cycle* by the Scottish Opera, in which White played Wotan, they received letters of complaint saying that his non-Nordic background could not allow him to successfully portray the required spirituality. Despite these obstacles, however, White has persevered and conquered many great roles. He says that he never "plays white" in his white roles, and he never wears white make-up. (7) From his awards and accolades and extensive career, it is clear that Sir Willard W. White has established himself as one of the great bass-baritones of our time.

## References

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