

Voodoo, a Harlem Renaissance opera, revived in New York

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Columbia University's Miller Theater was the setting for an unusual musical event this past weekend: the revival, for the first time in almost 90 years, of an opera by the prolific but almost-forgotten African-American composer H. Lawrence Freeman.

Voodoo was presented in a semi-staged version for two performances. The opera was composed more than a century ago. Freeman (1869-1954) was born in Cleveland, studied music with several teachers, and came to New York early in the twentieth century. He composed some popular music as well, but was most committed to the classical idiom. His friends included Scott Joplin, Marian Anderson and James Weldon Johnson. Freeman's works include 20 operas, among them *The Martyr*, which was performed at Carnegie Hall in 1947.

Freeman is little known today. *Voodoo*, completed in 1914 and last performed in 1928, was never even published, and was revived on the basis of photocopies of the composer's own written score. The unearthing of this work was made possible by the donation of Freeman's papers to Columbia's Rare Book and Manuscript Library in 2007, where they came to the attention of some scholars and musicians.

Like other African-American musicians of that time, Freeman was held back not only by overt discrimination, but also by the insidious and no less harmful prejudice that black composers did not belong in the field of Western classical music. Freeman is briefly mentioned in a section of critic Alex Ross's well-known book on the history of twentieth century music, *The Rest is Noise*. As Ross notes, "The early history of African-American composition, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, is full of sorrowful tales."

The Miller Theater production was the fruit of a two-

year collaboration between the Harlem Opera Theater, the Morningside Opera and the Harlem Chamber Players. The performances were conducted by Harlem Opera's artistic director Gregory Hopkins and directed by Melissa Crespo.

Voodoo has many charms, and was fascinating to hear from both a musical and an historical standpoint. Freeman considered himself a follower of Richard Wagner, and there are many points in which his opera successfully synthesizes Wagnerian elements and operatic style with spirituals (including "Go Down, Moses"), folk elements and dance music. Also present, as director Hopkins pointed out in media comments, is the influence of Giacomo Puccini.

There are moments when Freeman's work calls to mind the Scott Joplin opera, *Treemonisha*, which the famous ragtime composer completed in 1910 and revised afterward, but which was not presented in full before Joplin died in 1917. Joplin, in fact, asked Freeman for help in revising *Treemonisha* in 1912. Freeman had moved to New York some years earlier.

Treemonisha was forgotten until its rediscovery in 1970, and was only produced in a fully staged version in 1972. It is not heard often enough today, and has never been presented by New York's Metropolitan Opera, but it is available on audio compact disc.

Of special interest is the orchestration of the current production of *Voodoo*, including a banjo and also an alto and a tenor saxophone among the 30 players. The banjo in particular lends a wonderful folk quality to many moments in the score, and the saxophones are heard to good effect in some ragtime- and jazz-influenced moments of the score.

The opera's plot revolves around a love triangle, set on a Louisiana plantation in the years after the Civil War. Lolo competes unsuccessfully with her friend

Cleota for the love of Mando. An additional element, which gives the opera its name, is Lolo's cooperation with a voodoo priest, Fojo. The jealousy culminates in Lolo's murder of Cleota using voodoo magic, following which she is in turn killed by Mando, loyal to his true love.

The staging in this concert performance included some simple but effective slide projections depicting the general scene and background. Perhaps the opera would benefit from a fully staged version, which might more effectively dramatize the story and enable the characters to emerge more strongly. The Miller Theater performances could also have benefited from the use of supertitles.

This plot is somewhat limited, without a doubt. The melodramatic quality, as well as the "magical" element, as is well known, is not uncommon in the history of opera, especially in the nineteenth century.

This weakness is relatively minor, however, when set against the opportunity to hear this music for the first time in so many years. The limitations of the production are understandable, given the resources available to the small musical organizations involved in this project. The impassioned and effective contributions from soloists, chorus and musicians were clearly a labor of love. The sold-out performance was warmly greeted by a diverse crowd that included many fellow musicians and listeners interested in the Harlem Renaissance and the opportunity to hear a "lost" opera.

The voodoo ritual ceremony in Act III was perhaps the opera's high point, both dramatically and musically. Soprano Janinah Burnett was especially convincing in the demanding role of Lolo, above all in the ceremony in which she gives voice to her overpowering jealousy.

Also noteworthy were the Act I duets, first between Lolo and Cleota (JoAnna Marie Ford) and later between Cleota and Mando (Steve Wallace).

To this listener, the Act II scenes involving Lolo's parents were, along with Lolo's role in Act III, the high points of the evening. The parents, Chloe (mezzo-soprano Crystal Charles) and Ephraim (bass-baritone Darian Worrell), warn her that she has been led astray by voodoo. This theme of struggle against superstition was also central to the plot of *Treemonisha*. The parents movingly depict their love and anguish, in music that synthesizes blues into a classical style.

Voodoo The calls revival attention of achievements and broader significance of the Harlem Renaissance. It comes in the midst of the important exhibition of Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series" at the Museum of Modern Art. One of the merits of that show, which brings together Lawrence's 60 small paintings depicting the internal migration of millions of African-Americans from the southern US in the early decades of the past century, is the way it illustrates the period through its literature, photography, music and art.

In the section on music in the Migration Series exhibit, classical composer William Grant Still is featured alongside such jazz and blues legends as Bessie Smith and Leadbelly. Still, a generation younger, is considerably better known than Freeman. Judging by this performance of *Voodoo*, Freeman's work is also a serious part of this period and deserves further study and listening.

A subject that could reward additional inquiry would be the influence of jazz and popular elements in American composition. In the 1920s and 1930s, composers such as George Gershwin, both in such compositions as *Rhapsody in Blue* and especially in *Porgy and Bess*, sought to bring such elements into classical composition. These attempts faltered in the post-World War II atmosphere in the classical music arena, dominated by a rigidly atonal avant-garde.

Contemporary efforts to unearth and revive the work of African-American composers are certain to demonstrate that American classical music in the twentieth century was never simply "European" or isolated from other influences. Classical composition can only be enriched by a broadening of the audience and an openness to new musical ideas, so long as the foundations of the musical form are developed, and not simply ignored or bowdlerized.



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