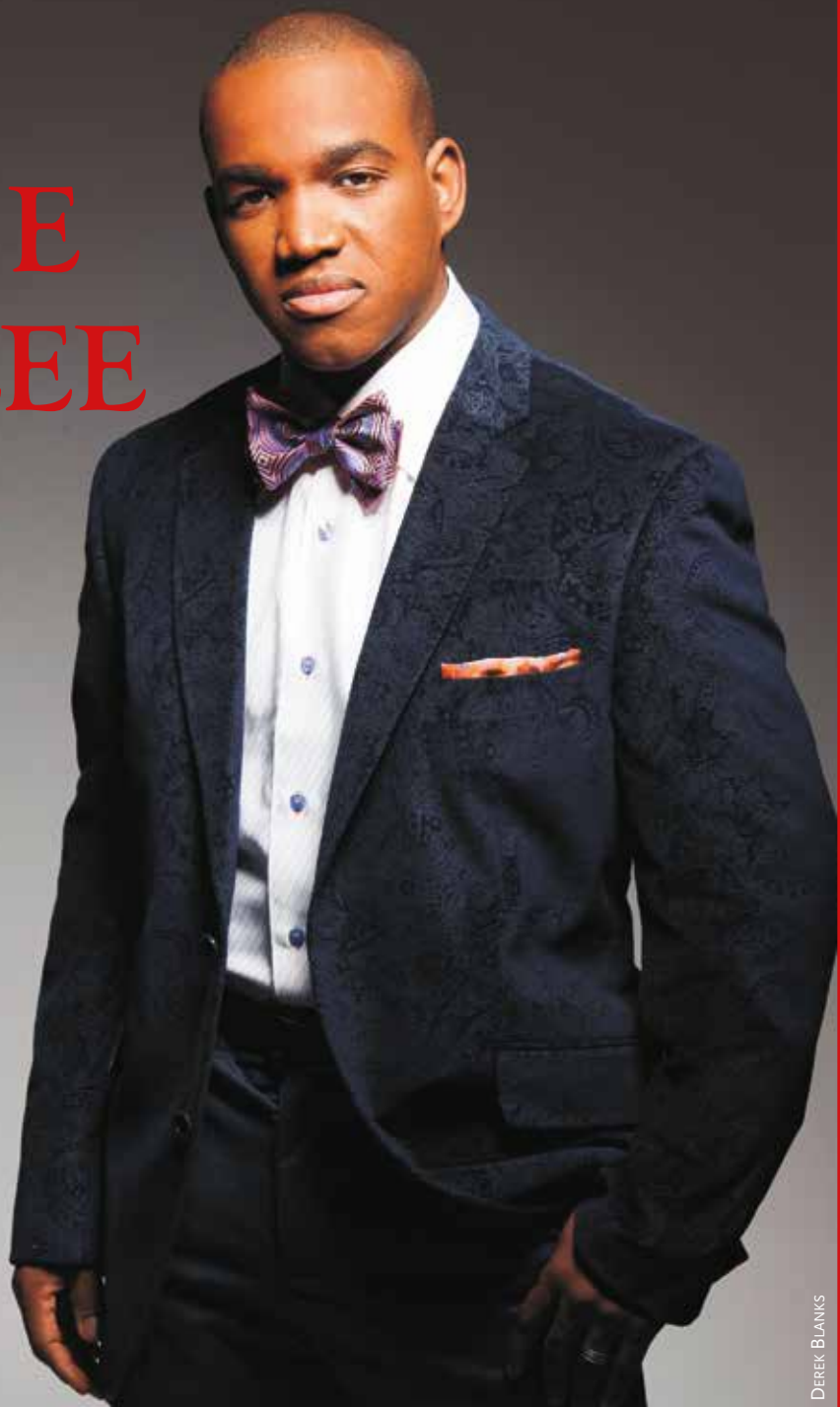


The Incomparable **LAWRENCE BROWNLEE**

*Star tenor makes his
San Francisco Opera
debut in
Don Pasquale*



DEREK BLANKS

Set in the country's heartland at the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains, the Rust Belt enclave of Youngstown, Ohio is better known for its steel and manufactured goods than for producing masters of the music of Rossini and Donizetti. Yet Lawrence Brownlee, lyric tenor and premier expo-

Rosalyn Story is a violinist for the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra and the author of the novel Wading Home, as well as And So I Sing, a nonfiction work about African-American opera singers.

ment of the bel canto repertoire, has emerged as one of that city's most prominent native sons. Endowed with a richly textured tone, lightning quick agility, and extraordinary range, he sits atop opera's A-list, sought after by virtually every notable company on both sides of the Atlantic. And as an African-American male artist at the pinnacle of success, he has learned to thrive in the rarefied air of opera stardom against the headwinds of America's cultural history.

The history of opera's black tenors is fraught with struggle. The gifted artist Roland Hayes, born on a plantation in the post-slavery

South, wielded his great talent like a sword in the face of racial abuses and indignities to become one of classical music's legendary figures. In the politically charged atmosphere of Germany in the 1930s, Hayes, who never sang for an opera company, stood patiently on a recital stage while a jeering audience of Berliners finally quieted down and became transported by his sublime Schubert lieder. But mid-century America saw a shift in the political winds, and by the time George Shirley debuted as the Metropolitan Opera's first black tenor in 1961, African-American men, while not a common presence, were not entirely unfamiliar on the opera stage.

Brownlee, who grew up singing and playing in what he has called a "one-hundred percent black" Pentecostal church, experienced his very first opera on the stage as he was performing in it. As with many black artists, it was the church that nurtured Brownlee's musicality; he played guitar, bass, and drums before being singled out as a gospel soloist, and classical music was remote from his world. In college, he set his sights on the law but abandoned the notion when an unexpected competition win permanently altered his course. From then on, Brownlee heeded every signpost that pointed toward the opera stage.

He quickly became known as a singer with special gifts. While many tenors can spin a shimmering phrase, Brownlee's dizzyingly high range (he owns an F above high C) and natural gift for the florid passages of such repertory stalwarts as *The Barber of Seville* and *The Daughter of the Regiment* set him apart from the field. Brownlee covers a full spectrum of genres, as demonstrated by his performances and recording of spirituals, and his recent creation of the role of saxophonist Charlie Parker in Philadelphia Opera's premiere of the jazz-tinged *Yardbird*.

Recently, Brownlee discussed his artistic beginnings and his current success.

What was it like in the church you grew up in?

I grew up in the Church of God in Christ, which is typically known

from, but my dad says my great-grandfather "Pig" had a beautiful tenor voice, and he would walk the fields and woods and sing. People could hear him coming before he got there! I guess his voice came to me.

Typically, tenors play the lead romantic roles in opera, and there has been, historically, some resistance to casting black artists in this role. Has race been a factor for you?

The biggest obstacle for me is that I am a short, black tenor who has the voice to sing leading roles. People wanted me to understand that I might not get the opportunities because of those "strikes against me." Thankfully, there are a lot more of us singing today. I appreciate the trailblazers like Roland Hayes, George Shirley, and Vinson Cole. It is not an even playing field now, but it's more common and acceptable to hire singers of color.

I've learned that you have to be better to be equal, and then you have to be special and make your specialness stand out. I have to give them no reason to tell me "no."

Recently, I lost thirty-five pounds, because I realized that if I'm short and round, that can be used against me. Early on, some of my black colleagues said I might not get the chances, but I'm more of a "half-full" kind of person. I think only of the things I can control and focus on that.

Was there ever a time when you doubted that you might not have made the right choice?

No, it always felt right. When I was in high school, I was in a show choir called the Youngstown Connection. There was a teacher named Carol Baird who organized it and we performed all over—in coffee shops, old folks homes. We even sang at Walt Disney World and the Berlin Wall. We were racially diverse and became like family. That was part of what opened my mind up to the world that was out there.

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for being very charismatic with the choir and praise teams adding a lot to the flow of the service. It was a large church with a wonderful music department, and we sang "hardcore" gospel music and a few hymns. I played instruments, and I sang with my family. But around the age of twelve, that was when people started to take notice of my talent.

You've said that your parents both sing. Is that where your voice comes from?

My parents have said they don't know where my voice comes

You and jazz pianist Jason Moran did a rendition of "There's a Man Goin' Round Takin' Names" for NPR Music at Harlem's Church of the Intercession in memory of young, unarmed black men killed by police. How did that come about?

Jason and I met when his wife was in *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess* in New York, and I had a few friends in the cast. And then last summer we were both in a Glimmerglass Opera production in Cooperstown, New York. We were talking about Black Lives Matter, and we wanted to do something. The whole thing sat heavy on my heart. Being African-American men who could be targeted our-



In 2015, Brownlee created the role of saxophonist Charlie Parker for the jazz-tinged *Yardbird*, an opera by composer Daniel Schnyder and librettist Bridgette A. Wimberly.

selves, we felt we had a platform to say something with our hearts, and we wanted it to be far-reaching. We wanted to say something without saying it directly. Sadly, it has happened again and again, so each time it is recycled. When we performed it, the air in the space was full of so much emotion.

Is there a role that you haven't performed that you would like to do? What else would you like to accomplish that you haven't already?

One day, I'd like to perform the roles of Arnold in *William Tell* and Edgardo in *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Neither is planned yet, but I'm hopeful for the future. Otherwise, I'd love to meet the President of the United States before he leaves office.

What would you like people to know about you that they may not already know?

I'm the father of an autistic son, Caleb, who is three years old. I'm doing a weight loss challenge that I hope will raise money for autism awareness. I plan to be more and more involved in autism awareness and the organization Autism Speaks.

What have you learned that you would like to pass on to young singers, especially African-American singers?

The greatest thing that I have learned is that in everything you can

control, do it, whether it's languages, acting, level of preparation. There will always be things outside of your control, but don't play the blame game. You have to realize that you are directly responsible for your success.

I have a lot of colleagues who are frustrated. I tell them we have to be masters of playing the game, but we must be in the game to play. Don't let anybody disrespect you, but make sure your talent does the talking. 🌸

Tenor Lawrence Brownlee's new CD *Allegro io son: Donizetti and Bellini* (Delos Music) is currently available at the Opera Shop, located in the South Mezzanine of the War Memorial Opera House. **Immediately after the October 2 matinee performance of *Don Pasquale*, Brownlee will sign copies of his latest release.**

