

Sunday, February 20, 2005

Songs amid segregation

Long-forgotten June Festival for Negro Music drew thousands to Eden Park in mid-20th century

By Janelle Gelfand
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Johanna Byrd, 73, remembers the night in 1942 that Paul Robeson sang with the June Festival, before an audience of 7,000 at Crosley Field.

"It was similar to when the Beatles came, the enthusiasm," says Byrd, who was a 10-year-old member of the audience. "The crowd was cheering. The African-American papers would talk about the concerts. Then to have (Robeson) come and you could see him - oh!"

It was perhaps the most illustrious moment in the history of Cincinnati's June Festival for Negro Music, an outdoor choral festival established in 1938 for the African-American citizens of Cincinnati that lasted nearly two decades.

Because Cincinnati was musically segregated well into the 1950s, a parallel classical music scene flourished in the black community alongside Cincinnati's white institutions.

But few people today, even among African-Americans, recall the June Festival for Negro Music. It was established "along the lines of the May Festival Association," say annual reports of the Public Recreation Commission, which sponsored the annual concerts in Eden Park's Seasongood Pavilion and other outdoor venues, such as Cincinnati Zoo.

The idea was to lay the groundwork for the "development of a

real and permanent music program among the thousands of colored citizens in Cincinnati," the report says.

The festival presented classical music by prominent African-American composers and included some of the best African-American talent in America as soloists. A well-known African-American conductor and composer Clarence Cameron White, came from New York to serve as music director. Its board was a mixture of leaders of Cincinnati's white musical institutions and the city's most prominent African-American citizens, including Olympic gold medal-winning long jumper DeHart Hubbard.

"I really didn't think about being separate," says Byrd, who sang in the June Festival Youth Chorus in the late '40s. "I felt just overwhelmed to be under these musicians - to sing and do their works, to learn technique and to meet other people from church choirs who were doing the same thing.

"It was just a wonderful occasion, and I looked forward to it every year."

"It was organized for those of us who were classically trained," says Arthur Herndon, 72, of Woodlawn, an opera tenor who won a Fulbright scholarship to study in Italy and pursued a European career because blacks were shunned on opera stages in America.

"At the time, we were doing (classical) music in nearly all the African-American churches. Gospel music did not play such an important role in those days. It was anthems, cantatas and jubilee spirituals that we were trained on."

Strong leadership

Area churches had extraordinary music because the ministers of music were highly trained college graduates with degrees in music. Artie Matthews, ragtime pioneer and founder of the Cosmopolitan School of Music in Cincinnati's West End, and Clinton Gibbs, minister of music at First Baptist Church in Walnut Hills, prepared the chorus.



Arthur Herndon of Woodlawn, a tenor soloist in the June Festival; Ruth Phillips (center) of Kennedy Heights, an audience member and Johanna Byrd of Evanston, a member of the festival's youth chorus, didn't think about being separate, but were thrilled to experience great choral music.

[Zoom](#)

MILESTONES IN LOCAL MUSICAL DESEGREGATION

1951: Loretta C. Manggrum is the first African-American admitted to the Conservatory of Music. (It merged with the College of Music in 1955 to become the College-Conservatory, which joined UC in 1962). A composer, she graduated in 1953. For her thesis, she wrote a cantata titled "Christ the Lord."

January 1952: Contralto Marian Anderson is the first African-American to perform with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra under Thor Johnson, in Bach's Cantata No. 53 and Brahms' "Four Songs."

March 1952: Soprano Estella Rowe and bass Wade Mann are the first local African-Americans to appear in a subscription concert with the Cincinnati Symphony, in a concert version of "Porgy and Bess."

1956: Leontyne Price and William Warfield perform the world premiere of Wallace Berry's "Spoon River Anthology" and excerpts from "Porgy and Bess," the first African-American soloists with the Cincinnati May Festival.

1960: William De Valentine is the first African-American member of the cast of Cincinnati Opera, in "Salome."

1964: Soprano Martina Arroyo debuts in the title role of "Aida," the first African-American to hold a major role with Cincinnati Opera.

1974: The Cincinnati Symphony hires its first black full-time orchestra member, violinist Johann Helstone, a native of Suriname, who stays two years.

1975: Norman Johns, currently assistant principal cellist, is the first black American musician to join the Cincinnati Symphony.

Janelle Gelfand



Clarence Cameron White, a prominent African-American conductor and composer, came from New York's National Recreation Commission to conduct the June Festival Chorus at Seasongood Pavilion, Eden Park, in 1941.

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Choir members included the best singers in the community, whose day jobs were lawyers, doctors, teachers and social workers. Rehearsals were intense, Byrd and Herndon recall.

"Dr. Matthews was one of the most disciplined musicians I've ever met, so we were well disciplined," says Herndon.

But it was positive discipline, adds Byrd. "Even if you couldn't read music, and there were some who couldn't, the discipline was encouraging. You learned."

Herndon sang in the chorus, played his violin in the volunteer orchestra and in the early 1950s was a soloist with the festival. He performed the tenor role in "Hiawatha's Wedding Feast," a choral masterpiece by African-American composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, based on the epic poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

"That was my first exposure to singing. I was in my late teens and was a soloist at church," says Herndon, a graduate of Hughes High School and the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. "For me, that was my greatest moment, because I had never sung anything quite like that."

The festival focused on outstanding black composers (Nathaniel Dett's "Jubilee Spirituals" were a staple) and renowned soloists of the day. Opera singers Anne Brown and Danville, Ky.-born baritone Todd Duncan, who originated the title roles in Gershwin's opera "Porgy and Bess," performed excerpts from the opera.

The festival also used local talent, such as soprano Estella Rowe in 1952, the same year she and bass Wade Mann became the first local African-Americans to sing in a Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra subscription concert, while protesters distributed leaflets outside Music Hall.

Herndon's memory of Robeson's concert is vivid.

"I will never forget two compositions that stuck with me for a long time: 'Bless This House,' and 'The Glory Road,' part recitative, narrative and singing," he recalls. "He had an imposing stance, like a statue. Robeson was just there. It was, like, who is this?"

The world-famous African-American bass-baritone and actor (known best for portraying Shakespeare's "Othello") also sang the Death Scene from Mussorgsky's opera "Boris Godunov," as well as a patriotic panorama called "Ballad for Americans," that included Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" speech.

His program included songs that are still indelibly linked to his name, such as "Ol' Man River," "Water Boy" and Gershwin's "It Ain't Necessarily So."

Point of pride

The June Festival "instilled pride in us that we had the abilities," says Herndon. But when the Public Recreation Commission pulled its sponsorship in the mid- 1950s, "we were disheartened," he says.

The choral festival left Eden Park. Despite that, music minister William P. Gee carried on the tradition at Calvary Baptist Church in the West End, and later at Calvary United Methodist Church in Evanston into the 1960s, presenting works like Rossini's "Stabat Mater," requiems by Brahms, Verdi and Faure, Theodore Dubois' "Seven Last Words of Christ" and Haydn's "The Creation."

"People (African-Americans) were still not welcome in Music Hall, singing in the choruses," Herndon notes.

Gee's successors, George Colin and current music minister Herndon, continued presenting great works. Among the soloists in the 1970s: a young Kathleen Battle.

It bothers Herndon that African-American soloists and composers such as Loretta C. Mangrum, the first African-American graduate of CCM, were so unappreciated. "We've lost so much," he says.

Cincinnati's musical institutions still struggle to overcome their segregated past. But Herndon and Byrd are optimistic that the future will hold more opportunities for talented African-Americans.

"It's a treasure when cultures come together," says Byrd. "It so enriches us. We learn from each other and we grow - we really grow. This is why the country was founded."

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