

# Afro-Cuban Women in Opera: Stories, Coincidences and Realities

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Opera transcends singing: it requires preparation, dedication, immeasurable devotion and above all vocal talent that distinguishes itself from that found in popular song. I am not saying the latter form doesn't also demand certain vocal talent; just that opera also demands the memorization of extensive texts—not always in one's native language—which forces the singer to have at least phonetic knowledge of a number of languages to be able to do justice to the one in which the work was originally written. This opens doors to intercultural exchange with singers of numerous nationalities who compete for the same roles anywhere in the world.

Cuba, too, had the good fortune to receive this very refined genre. Many Cubans have given their all to diverse national and foreign stages, to delight their audiences with their precious and even envied talents.

Nowadays, there are those who believe that opera is just about shouting, but once they hear Schubert's *Ave Maria* interpreted with mastery and devotion, not even the most introverted, hard-hearted, unmovable and insensitive among them can keep his or her tears from flowing.

Yet, what about those who sing it, those who by only emitting a sound bring love and sensitivity to the most abandoned soul? I am referring to the Afro-Cuban women who have made this their career and life, and yet are barely known or mentioned, not only despite their talent, but also their drive to continue on, making their own way towards their dreams. These dreams have been to become professionals despite being rejected in their homeland, a place that prides itself for being democratic and socialist, but that deep inside

still hangs on to racist and exclusionary feelings and attitudes.

Has the history of Cuban opera taken into account all those who built the structure and knowledge upon which today's legacy is supported and surviving to our days? I am certain that in today's opera curriculum there is no class specifically about each one of the pioneers who made his or her contribution. Moreover, I would dare say that only a few deserving figures would be mentioned regarding this subject, and the Afro-Cuban men or women who made their mark on each of the roles they played would not be among them.

On an island where the most developed and easiest to find voices are those of sopranos, and the most difficult, those of mezzo-sopranos, due to our hot and humid climate, there are indeed black mezzo-sopranos, but they are never mentioned:

- **María Julia García Ramos**, a singer and teacher who studied at the Amadeo Roldán conservatory and finished her training in Bulgaria, was a favorite student of Zoila Galvez. Her broad operatic repertoire included pre-classical, romantic and contemporary works, as well as *zarzuelas*, and lyric and concert songs. She presented in the most important Cuban, European and Latin American halls and theaters.

- **María Lourdes García Sánchez** was a very excellent singer who studied in Cuba and abroad. Her musical repertoire included work by very well-known musicians such as Juan Espinosa and Harold Gramatges. She specialized in interpreting the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Frank Schubert and Robert Schumann, and sang in operas such as *Madame Butterfly*, *Barber of Seville*, *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata*, *Il Trovatore*, *Cavalleria Rusticana* and others. In all, she demonstrated her re-

fined and exquisite singing and magnificent dramatic acting.

There may have been little fanfare about these two mezzo-sopranos, but their careers were spectacular. They got the highest praise for each and every one of their performances: thunderous and unending applause from a public well versed in the genre. I have the good fortune and memory of having shared the stage with María Lourdes García, as part of the Teatro Lírico Nacional's chorus, when she was one of the principal soloists in *Cavalleria Rusticana*. Her performance in it was unforgettable. Of our sopranos, I'd like to mention:

- **Alina Sánchez Rodríguez**, who was one of the great interpreters of the *zarzuela Cecilia Valdés*, by Gonzalo Roig. She founded (1986) and directed the Estudio Lírico de las Artes Escénicas, and garnered praise from critics at the Guanajuato Cervantine Festival (Mexico, 1975), for being a "soprano of immense possibilities. [For the] precious timber of her voice, her perfect technique, an expressive temperament that favorably impresses her public." Among the many prizes and awards she has received, she was acknowledged as the best female singer at the First Festival de Teatro de La Habana (1980).

- **Linda Mirabal Jean-Claude**, a privileged voice that has revealed her interpretive virtue at renowned national and international venues. She not only sang but also played oboe with Margarita Horruitiner and Zola Gálvez.

- **Maida Galano** studied piano, choral direction, harmony and instrumentation. She has been offering young, talented singers and pianists classes in technique and repertoire, in Madrid, since 2000.

And what of those who began their careers before 1959, those with valiant blood and moral fiber like that of Mariana Gra-



*Fiftieth anniversary of the Cuban National Lyric Theater*

jales, women who did not allow themselves to be forgotten because they were black?

- **Hortensia Verónica Coalla Raveiro** (Havana, July 9, 1907-Miami, July 21, 2000), a soprano and pianist who Ernesto Lecuona identified as “The most beautiful voice in Cuba.” Her portentous voice impressed and moved audiences in Cuba and the rest of Latin America. She was one of the first Hispanic-American artists interviewed by the *Miami Herald* and received two OTTO trophies (in honor of actor Otto Sirgo) for her triumphant artistic career. She owes all this glory to having persevered in perfecting herself. She shared the stage with tenor Miguel de Grandy several times, and was accompanied by the Orquesta Sinfónica y Filarmónica of Havana. She also sang with the Banda del Estado Mayor del Ejército, directed by Luis Ca-

sas Romero, for stations COCO and CMCK, and debuted *El cafetal* on CMQ when Cuban television premiered. Her career was long, but it is not all told in books.

- **Josefina Zoila Gálvez Pérez** (March 19, 1889-November 26, 1985), a soprano and teacher. Due to her vocal talent, she was sent abroad to study in 1920, at the Academia Santa Cecilia (Milan, Italy). She also traveled to France, Spain and the United States to perfect her vocal technique and preserve her skills. A *coloratura* soprano known for singing traditional operatic roles, critics from publications such as *El Piccolo*, (Rome, 1922) called her an emotional voice with rich hues: “She sings and her voice is a marvelous wave of warmth and passion. She is a true artist who makes her audience passionately enthusiastic.” The most noteworthy comment about

her is published in the *Diccionario de mujeres notables en la música cubana*, by Alicia Valdés, in which she says Gálvez Pérez is one of the most relevant opera singers of our time; her voice transcends boundaries and rises up universally, when to do so was a real achievement, since there were no social conditions for black women.”

To appreciate artistic beauty, we must get beyond the colors of the rainbow. So, why so much racism? Is it a sin to be a black woman? Or, does being a black woman mean not having enough intelligence to devote one's self to something other than hard, slave work or servitude? Only God knows what I went through to achieve my goals, when I decided to become a member and founder of the Instituto Internacional de Estudios Afroamericanos in Mexico, the Sociedad de Estudios Afrocubanos, in Havana, and the Instituto Cubano Puertorriqueño de Cultura. Time passes on, but history repeats itself. Only the names change, for example:

- **Yolanda** Hernández, a soprano who studied voice, piano and percussion. She founded the Teatro Lírico Nacional de Cuba, began singing in the choir, and debuted with the lead role in the opera *Halka*, in its first ever presentation (1970) in Cuba and America. Her extensive career has included *Aida*, *Macbeth*, *Il Trovatore*, *Tosca*, *La Bohème*, *Turandot* and others, in addition to a concert repertoire of Cuban and foreign composers. However, her bibliography does not make mention of all the obstacles she had to overcome to reach her height, or the racism or envy that could have held her back. She was a victim of this society's hidden blows, but did not allow herself to be squelched. She is known the world over as a soprano with a charming and captivating voice. In addition, she not only put Cuba on the map in the world's most prestigious the-

aters, but also demonstrated, through her devotion and dedication, that opera knows no color.

All these Afro-Cuban women, with their many different stories separated by time, coincide in that they had the possibility of perfecting their vocal studies abroad and came back to share their lives and talent with their homeland—despite the great disdain they encountered.

Yet, the reality is different. They are many stories of many talented and hardworking artists who have not gotten the chance or acknowledgment they deserve, stories that have not been revealed because they have not had the ability to be heard, nor gotten the attention they deserved on the part of responsible authorities and institutions.

It is difficult to gain a spot in the Instituto Superior de Arts (I.S.A.) to get a degree in opera. It is almost impossible to get into an elementary-level music school. Even if one gets the spot, all kinds of obstacles come up throughout one's studies, as if by magic. These limit the development of those artists who are being shaped. Once one graduates from the I.S.A., it is nearly impossible to find teachers, which is also the case with professional training abroad: Cuba's African descendants are always at a total disadvantage.

What about the contests, the ones where all the named prizes have already been assigned from the very first day? In the Teatro Lírico Nacional, where I have worked for sixteen years as a member of the chorus, it is very difficult to get a solo, leading role, despite one's talent and knowledge of the art. The leading roles are previously given to a fixed cast, which results in many proven, quality singers not belonging to the company.

Our permanent and unsatisfied demand is for justice and a space in which talented

singers can interpret leading roles without their skin color mattering. Even those of us who have graduated from the highest level of training face great challenges in receiving roles in even traditional Cuban works that reflect the social conflicts of the slave era.

Unfortunately, we have inherited the conflicts of that period. Why aren't we allowed to play even the black roles, since we've already been black since birth? If we are not black enough for those roles, and we cannot play white roles, what color are we and what can we do?

The great Cuban composers of the last century who forayed into lyric theater, like Ernesto Lecuona, Rodrigo Prats, Gonzalo Roig, were white and had solid academic training. Yet, they included in their works the spirit of the Afro-Cuban and folkloric, musical tradition, so that their works could become the classics of our culture, so much so that they left no one out of their works, and worked with a number of the aforementioned, talented, black, female singers. What is saddest of all is not what happens, but where, since foreigners do not understand that there is a racist tendency in Cuba, even though it is socialist.

It is only in Cuba where we cannot have the lead roles in operas, much less so in Spanish *zarzuelas*. Why? Because it wouldn't be long before one heard: "when has there ever been a black Spaniard or a black woman singing opera?" One hears thousands of questions just as absurd as this one, despite the fact that Shirley Berret, Leontyne Price, Leona Mitchell, Jessie Norman and others have had successful careers and shared the loftiest of stages with figures such as Luciano Pavarotti, who was not concerned with skin color, but rather with vocal talent and professionalism.

Art knows no frontiers and like God, excludes no one. One cannot speak of art when there is no justice or equity. Much less can one speak of the development in an opera that excludes not only black women, but also black men who have given their emotional and artistic best in every presentation, but are still struggling.

It is time to eliminate this absurd and underdeveloped way of thinking that blacks are inferior to whites, and that we cannot develop as opera singers or in any other noble profession. Those who enjoy privilege should not continue to use skin color as a justification, for fear they will lose their place or popularity, and the acceptance of a majority that pays an entrance fee to see a good show.

Each one of us occupies a place in space; each one of us wants to occupy the place they deserve in their profession, which is far from wanting to take anyone else's place. This very difficult art demands talent, but also variety. Cinema has seen multiple films made of a same story, but with different actors, simply because variety keeps things interesting, and repetitiveness leads to boredom, weariness and even dislike. We don't have to go all the way to Africa to be able to sing opera: Pavarotti shared his stage with black singers at concerts and operas. The truth is that "variety also brings about success."

We Afro-Cubans, African descendants, or blacks—whatever they want to call us—have the ability, vocation, knowledge, talent and desire to sing this very difficult musical genre. Do not fear us! We are not a plague! We are human beings with the same aspirations, dreams and desires to do something with our intellect. We do not bite. We just want to be heard: give us a chance!