The Musical Journey of Opera Singer Lenora Lafayette: A Louisiana Treasure

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THE MUSICAL JOURNEY OF OPERA SINGER LENORA LAFAYETTE:
A LOUISIANA TREASURE

A Monograph

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University
and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts

In

The School of Music

By
Kyla D. Pitcher
B.Mus. Howard University
MM University of South Carolina
May, 2007
DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to Mrs. Elma Davis and the entire Lafayette family. Their commitment to perpetuating Lenora’s memory is truly inspiring. Because of their relentless efforts to preserve her legacy, their generous contributions of oral history, and their immense love for Lenora Lafayette, she now survives through the pages of this monograph. Her story truly lives on!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to God for successfully guiding me through this journey towards my Doctoral degree. I am especially grateful for His guidance in the development of this paper.

I would also like to thank my parents for their constant encouragement and support. Because of their love I have often felt that there is nothing that I cannot achieve.

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I tremendously enjoyed interviewing Lenora Lafayette’s colleagues. Special thanks to Mattiwilda Dobbs, for inviting me into her home in Arlington, VA and sharing her fond memories of Lenora. She was a charming and thoughtful hostess, and I found her presence to be quite comforting. Thanks to Martha Flowers, for her positive energy and humor! Her vibrant personality emanated through the telephone during our interview. Lucretia West is a phenomenal lady. I thank her for being so generous with her time. To William Ray, many thanks! I remember his kindness towards me as a professor at Howard University. He is still a kind man with immense talent, and I truly appreciate his insight. I sincerely thank George Byrd for the commentary that he provided via e-mail.

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Finally, thank you to The Juilliard School, Fisk University, the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden, and the Basel Stadt Theater for providing information that helped to confirm Lenora’s achievements.
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ABSTRACT

Lenora Lafayette (1926-1975) was an African-American opera singer who developed her professional path while facing tremendous racial, cultural, and economic barriers. She was a Louisiana native with great vocal potential who attempted to enroll at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, but was denied admission due to segregation. Lenora attended The Juilliard School as an alternative and earned scholarships that covered her tuition for an entire year. She studied with the prestigious faculty member Dusolina Giannini and developed her talent to the degree that she was able to win a John Hay Whitney Fellowship for study abroad. She traveled to Switzerland and established herself as a leading artist, debuting as ‘Aida’ at the Basel Opera House. She later repeated the same role at Covent Garden and made history as the first African-American to perform at the Royal Opera House.

Although she did not experience the widespread fame of such contemporaries as Leontyne Price, her international achievements were quite extraordinary for an African-American female of her time. She survived solely on a performance career that was built shortly after World War II and reached its peak prior to the Civil Rights Movement. This study chronicles the musical journey of Lenora Lafayette and examines some of the similarities between her career experiences and those of four other African-American contemporaries.

Chapter one will provide a biographical sketch of Ms. Lafayette. It will address her initial interest in singing and her music education. Chapter Two will follow Ms. Lafayette’s performance career. It will discuss some of her early appearances, recount her most significant professional achievement of integrating Covent Garden, and identify some of the performers, conductors, and directors with whom she worked during the course of her profession. It will also
discuss the abrupt termination of her career and feature four persons from Baton Rouge whose lives were significantly influenced by her achievements.

Chapter Three will provide a brief overview of the careers of four of Lenora’s contemporaries (three females and one male) and will discuss similarities and differences among their career experiences with those of Ms. Lafayette.
INTRODUCTION

On July 26, 1953, the *Times-Picayune States Roto Magazine* featured an article about an African-American soprano from Baton Rouge who rose to stardom on “an empty stomach.” Nestled in the upper right-hand corner of the page is a photograph of Lenora Lafayette draped in exotic clothing and kneeling with her arms stretched to the heavens. The article goes on to detail the events that led to her Covent Garden debut. At twenty-six, she had managed the unprecedented feat of becoming the Royal Opera House’s first African-American singer, replacing Dutch soprano, Gre Brouwenstijn, at a moment’s notice. Her poise, professionalism, and beautiful voice were praised by critics and led to future appearances at Covent Garden as well as performance opportunities around the world. She mastered the roles of Aida and Madama Butterfly, having sung nearly three-hundred performances of *Aida* before her untimely death. She traveled to Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, performing oratorio and lieder, but she continued to do major opera roles on a regular basis, something that was not available to African-Americans in the United States at that time. Although she is mentioned in several publications featuring distinguished African-Americans such as *And So I Sing*, by Rosalyn Story and *Blacks in Opera*, by Eric Ledell Smith, there is still very little material on her life and musical achievements. The purpose of this monograph is to chronicle the musical journey of Lenora Lafayette and to examine some of the similarities between her career experiences and those of several other African-American counterparts. This work may also provide insight into some of the social and professional challenges of African-American singers in the 1950s and 1960s and will discuss Lenora’s place in African-American history.
CHAPTER 1
THE BEGINNING

Early Years

Lenora Gwendolyn Lafayette was born on July 6, 1926, to Howard and Lena Lafayette of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. The younger of two daughters, she had been born prematurely and was “…so tiny that she could be placed in a shoe box.”1 Her fragile frame made her highly susceptible to illness, and when only a few months old she developed diphtheria. Although she fought desperately to live, her prognosis was grim. “The doctors said she probably wouldn’t survive it,” recalls her aunt Elma Davis (who was only six years Lenora’s senior). “Everyone gave up on her except for my mother.”2 Ms. Davis’ mother nurtured the weak infant hourly and prayed often. Eventually, to the amazement of the entire family, Lenora overcame the illness and provided a foretaste of her resilient spirit.3

During the 1930s, Lenora grew up in a very progressive and cohesive African-American community known as “Old South Baton Rouge.” Disenfranchisement had greatly diminished the political influence of black residents, yet they maintained a strong sense of unity and managed to build homes, schools, churches, and businesses that served their needs. African-Americans from surrounding rural areas, and also from New Orleans, moved into the neighborhood to seize the educational and economic prospects offered by the city of Baton Rouge. As a result, the Old South Baton Rouge community experienced an influx of carpenters, masons, and builders who not only served the black population, but contracted with other races and business establishments

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1 Kirby Green, interview by author, 11 December 2002, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.

2 Elma Davis, interview by author, 7 December 2002, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.

3 Ibid.
as well.\textsuperscript{4} Lenora’s father, Howard Lafayette (see Figure 1), had extensive training from the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama as a brick mason. Upon hearing about the abundant opportunities in Baton Rouge, he talked with his new bride, and they decided to relocate, leaving behind their original hometown in West Feliciana Parish.\textsuperscript{5} Howard Lafayette found suitable employment rather quickly and participated in several of the city’s major construction projects. For example, when former Louisiana Governor Huey P. Long launched a campaign to build the nation’s tallest state capitol right in the heart of Baton Rouge, Howard was one of the main brick masons working on that venture.\textsuperscript{6} He was skilled at doing decorative brick designs and added beautiful details to many buildings around the city. Lenora’s mother, Lena, was a teacher in West Feliciana before she met and married Howard. She left the profession to function solely as a housewife and also became a well-known and frequently sought-after seamstress in the community.\textsuperscript{7}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure1.jpg}
\caption{Mr. and Mrs. Howard Lafayette with grandson Kirby Green}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{4} Petra Munro Henry and others, eds., “Assessing Sites of Historic Significance in Old South Baton Rouge” (Baton Rouge, La.: Carver Library, Reference Department, 2005, photocopied), 27.

\textsuperscript{5} Davis, 7 December 2002.

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
Lenora and her sister Dorothy attended Reddy Street Elementary School from the first to the seventh grades. At that time, Reddy Street was one of only two public schools for black children in the Baton Rouge community. Willie Mae McLurkin, Lenora’s best friend and schoolmate, remembers Lenora being a very kind and mild-mannered girl who was exceptionally meticulous at an early age. “She was always so neat and organized,” recalls McLurkin. “And she always had her little handkerchiefs and things. With her mother being a seamstress she...had such pretty little clothes.” Lenora’s appreciation for order was reflected in everything she did, especially her schoolwork. Her mother’s extensive background in elementary education reinforced whatever Lenora learned at Reddy Street, and as a result, Lenora was an excellent student.

What McLurkin remembers most vividly about Lenora Lafayette, however, was her beautiful voice. Whenever she spent time at the Lafayette home, it was apparent that music was an integral part of their family. Lenora’s parents were active members of the church choir. From the time their daughters were toddlers, they made sure that the girls listened to a great deal of music. The sisters differed in vocal timbres, but each exhibited great musical skill. Dorothy’s voice was dark and velvety with a mezzo quality. Lenora’s voice, on the other hand, sparkled in the upper register. It also possessed warmth, and a very clear and bell-like resonance that greatly appealed to listeners. Even as a tiny child Lenora had an adept musical ear. “I can recall when she was very young,” says Elma Davis, “her mother used to play records and she

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8 Henry and others, “Assessing Sites,” 27.
10 Ibid.
11 Davis, 7 December 2002.
(Lenora) would just listen. She had perfect pitch. She would sing those numbers…semi-classical numbers…and she could mimic the persons who were singing.”  As Lenora grew older, this special musical ability helped her to excel. In addition to taking piano lessons, the Lafayette sisters often listened to radio broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera. Over time, they became accustomed to hearing opera and developed a genuine appreciation for classical music.

There were limited performance venues for the Lafayette girls during the 1930s. Church was not only an important place for worship but also for the development of their musical gifts. Neely United Methodist and Wesley United Methodist became the two prominent churches for blacks in the area. Neely United Methodist was where the Lafayette family found spiritual and musical solace.

Faye Barnes, current artistic director of the Baton Rouge Community Chorus, is a lifelong member of Wesley United Methodist Church and a friend to the Lafayette family. She vividly remembers the talent of Lenora and Dorothy and believes that both daughters could have had professional careers. “They were both beautiful singers,” she states, and she elaborates on the many church activities sponsored by Neely and Wesley that brought children together to display their artistic talent. According to Barnes, it was in the summer that Methodists from Louisiana, Texas, and Mississippi came together for a retreat at the Gulfside Assembly and Camp. Harriet Israel served as music director at the camp and spent much time with the youth, teaching hymns and Negro spirituals that they later performed in concert. The exposure to Negro

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12 Davis, 7 December 2002.

13 Faye Barnes, interview by author, 27 April 2006, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.

14 Note: Gulfside Assembly and Camp was a retreat center in Waveland, Mississippi, where Methodists (predominantly African-American) from the southwest region met for study and retreat.
spirituals that Israel offered Lenora had a lasting impact, in that Lenora included spirituals in many of her professional recitals while singing abroad.

When Lenora reached the eighth grade, she attended McKinley Senior High School, which was the only public high school available to African-American students within a fifty mile radius. Those who sought to attend college or obtain a professional degree came from neighboring parishes to enroll. McKinley proudly offered a college-bound curriculum and stood as a cornerstone of the Old South Baton Rouge community. The school’s music teacher, A.E. Carter (See Figure 2), was an exceptional musician with a keen ear for discerning the potential of his students. He was completely dedicated to their artistic development and was especially fond of introducing them to classical works and Broadway show tunes. Each year he produced fully staged operettas that involved most of the choir and required the assistance of the faculty.

Rev. Charles T. Smith, Pastor of Shiloh Missionary Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, is a McKinley graduate and former pupil of A.E. Carter. Smith remembers how the entire community rallied together with Carter to ensure that the productions were a success. Parents provided materials for properties and scenery and even helped with costumes. “The people took such pride in things of that nature at that time,” Smith states. “They didn’t get paid anything extra for doing that. It was just something they did because of their love for the students and their love for art.”

Smith also remembers how Carter transposed an entire tenor voice-part to baritone so that Smith could participate in one of the performances. Carter was so convinced of

\[15\] Henry and others, “Assessing Sites,” 27.


\[17\] Ibid.
Smith’s abilities that he did whatever was necessary to put his talent on display. He was the kind of teacher who cared deeply for his students and wanted desperately to help them succeed.

![A. E. Carter at the Piano (McKinley High School)](image)

Figure 2. A. E. Carter at the Piano (McKinley High School)

Upon hearing Lenora sing, Carter did everything possible to harness and develop her talent. He expanded her repertoire and taught her songs that highlighted the most appealing qualities of her voice. He also made sure that she had ample opportunities to perform, and he featured her at all of the McKinley graduation ceremonies. David Lovely, another McKinley alumnus and former choir member, remembers one of the graduations in which Lenora participated:

The one thing that stands out memorably was that on each graduation day the choir provided music. And I remember specifically, where Lenora was concerned, because she had a fantastically beautiful voice and she was a beautiful girl. The superintendent always attended our graduation. I recall that she sang an aria from *Carmen*. I will never forget. It was fantastic! When the superintendent stood to make comments, he only mentioned the choir’s spirituals and said nothing about Lenora’s aria. And of course, as I look back on it now, I know that it was simply a trend of the times.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{18}\) David Lovely, interview by Kyla D. Pitcher, 9 December 2002, transcript, available from interviewer, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA.
Lenora continued to work hard at her singing and to learn music taught by A.E. Carter. She became especially skillful at performing *Italian Street Song* from the musical *Naughty Marietta*, by Victor Herbert. It was the first song that Charles T. Smith remembers hearing her sing, and he insists that her voice was simply captivating. He attended his older brother’s graduation and recalls watching a beautiful young lady emerge from the wings of the auditorium stage. As she began to sing, Smith was moved by the beauty and vitality of her voice. He confesses that he initially had thought he would rather shoot marbles with friends than attend the graduation, but after hearing Lenora sing, he was glad he had been there. “It so happened that the old superintendent of education was present at that graduation,” remembers Smith. “He was so impressed with her rendition that, when he came up with his special remarks, he made…reference to the song and to her as an artist.”19 The principal broke precedent and asked Lenora to come up and sing the song again.20 On that day, many sensed that Lenora would have a very bright future in music.21

**Fisk University**

In the spring of 1943, Lenora was ready for college, and Carter was convinced that she was talented enough to pursue a professional music degree, so he recommended Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Since the late 1800s, Fisk had been the home of the Jubilee Singers, an internationally renowned group that introduced slave songs to the world. The Jubilee Singers were devoted to the preservation of the Negro spiritual. They came to prominence when they


21 Davis, 7 December 2002.
toured the United States, attempting to raise money for the University’s first building.\textsuperscript{22} Lenora had been introduced to spirituals through church, and she greatly admired the historical significance of the school. She knew that the University had an impressive reputation, and she also respected the opinion of A.E. Carter.\textsuperscript{23} She decided to audition and was immediately accepted. With the help of her parents, church, and one of the community’s civic organizations, she was able to pay the first semester’s tuition. By the second semester, Lenora had convinced the University that her talent was worthy of a full scholarship. As her aunt, Elma Davis, proudly put it, “she never had to pay another dime of her tuition.”

Many were very enthusiastic about Lenora attending Fisk, but there were some who were not so eager to see her leave. A few even tried to discourage her departure because they felt she was simply too young to be so far away from home (she was only sixteen at the time). All that Lenora had ever truly known was the security of her South Baton Rouge community. Some feared that leaving would have an adverse effect on her progress. Her Aunt Elma recalls how several of Lenora’s teachers actually suggested she would not do very well academically if she went that far away. “They told her mother, ‘you’ll probably be losing your money, because Lenora isn’t going to study.’ When she got up there and started studying all that music, her grades stayed up. She shocked everybody because it was what she was interested in. It even made her interested in mathematics again.”\textsuperscript{24} Lenora was determined to prove that she could be a success and the same resilient spirit that helped her overcome illness and prematurity manifested itself once again during her season at Fisk.


\textsuperscript{23} Davis, 7 December 2002

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
While attending Fisk, Lenora studied voice with Dr. Denton Rossell, a graduate of the University of Nevada. He also directed the opera workshop and was so impressed by Lenora’s talent that he cast her in at least three major productions. During her sophomore year, Rossell produced *Hansel and Gretel* by Engelbert Humperdinck. Lenora portrayed Hansel and performed on a set that was both designed and constructed by Rossell. During her junior year, he produced *The Marriage of Figaro* and cast Lenora as the Countess. Although she had a relatively small frame, her voice possessed a warmth and maturity that enabled her to perform some of the heavier roles. Rossell made sure that she did not exceed her vocal limits and created a structured performance environment in which she could test her artistic boundaries. In her senior year, she sang the role of Madama Butterfly on an elaborate set covered with beautiful cherry blossoms. The cast wore costumes that had been shipped in from New York, and they were accompanied by a portion of the Nashville Philharmonic Orchestra. Rossell worked hard to make these productions as professional as possible. He realized then that the United States offered few, if any, operatic opportunities for African-Americans. Therefore, he pushed to create the most realistic experiences for his students at Fisk. The knowledge and experience Lenora gained from Rossell’s teaching proved to be invaluable in her future endeavors. She performed

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25 Martha Flowers, interview by author, 6 March 2006, phone interview, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, LA.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.
Madama Butterfly over one hundred times in Europe and could attribute her initial familiarity with the character to the training she had received at Fisk.  

**The Juilliard School**

After graduating from Fisk, Lenora Lafayette decided to return home and be close to family. She attempted to enroll at Louisiana State University (LSU) and pursue a Master’s degree in music even though the University had historically been a segregated institution. She hoped that the school had developed new policies and that her credentials from Fisk would prove impressive. Despite her best efforts, however, Lenora was denied admission. LSU had been under pressure from several sources to integrate its graduate school programs, and one person particularly eager to challenge the school was W.W. Stewart, dean of the College of Education at Southern University.  

Stewart wanted to file suit against LSU, but he was dissuaded by Southern University president F.G. Clark, who feared that the State Government would retaliate by withdrawing funding for Southern University. Clark instead suggested that they push for legislation that would provide “tuition support for out-of-state graduate training.” The Louisiana State Legislature eventually designated fifty thousand dollars for Negro students in Louisiana who wanted to receive professional training outside the state. According to Charles T. Smith, many medical and nursing students took advantage of the allocated funds and went to school in other states.

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30 Kirby Green, interview by author, 11 December 2002, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.


32 Ibid.

33 Louisiana, State Legislature, Act 142, s. 1 (1946)
Even though this special funding provided a number of Black Louisiana students with an exceptional out-of-state education, most still felt the sting of rejection that was inflicted by segregation. Some members of the African-American community believed that the arrangement was just as harmful as it was helpful. When asked his opinion about the legislation Pastor Smith states, “Well, it was ridiculous, in retrospect. It was not only ridiculous from the viewpoint of social ramifications, but because of economical ramifications. The big hindrance, the damage of the whole business of segregated schools on every level was...trying to populate (sic) two school systems. It was so economically impractical that it lowered the quality of education for everybody.”

Lenora knew that she would have to leave home again if she wanted to realize her dream of becoming a professional opera singer. She moved to New York City and auditioned for the Juilliard School. She also applied for Louisiana’s out-of-state funding and received a monthly stipend that she used towards housing and other expenses for the next three semesters. The combination of a Rosenwald Fellowship and her monthly Louisiana stipend helped cover her Juilliard tuition and enabled her to take care of personal needs.

Separated from her family for a second time, Lenora set her sights on a professional music career and life beyond her restrictive Louisiana roots. She rented a little brownstone apartment on Stuyvesant Street in Brooklyn, New York, and prepared to delve into an intense period of study and discovery. She took voice lessons with the prestigious Italian soprano, Dusolina Giannini (See Figure 3), who had recently joined the Juilliard faculty as an artist-in-

35 Davis, 7 December 2002
36 Ibid.
residence. Lenora worked diligently on implementing the vocal technique taught by Madame Giannini, but she sometimes questioned Giannini’s decisions regarding her voice and even occasionally became a little discouraged because she felt that Giannini was being overly protective. Still, she followed Giannini’s guidance. She knew that her teacher had come from a rich lineage of musicians and possessed much knowledge on building and sustaining a career. Dusolina Giannini’s father, Ferruccio Giannini, was a famous tenor who had run his own opera company for many years.

![Dusolina Giannini](image)

**Figure 3.** Dusolina Giannini

Her mother was a violinist; her sister, a singer; and her brother, a composer. Each was quite talented. Madame Giannini provided Lenora with very solid vocal and theatrical training -- techniques that she had learned from her own teacher, Marcellana Sembrich. In an interview, Giannini once said, “The emphasis of the Sembrich studio was on learning…always learning. Learning to be humble, and have a great reverence towards the music I was singing. Learning it was a privilege to be able to interpret great music, and learning never to be satisfied until I had


39 Green, 11 December 2002.

given the best that was in me.” It was clear to those who came into contact with Lenora Lafayette that she had taken the lessons passed on through two generations of teachers and applied them to her own singing. Lenora became Giannini’s protégé, and the things she absorbed in the Giannini studio carried her very far.

After nearly a year in New York, Lenora decided to look for performance opportunities outside of the Juilliard School. She heard about a new opera being produced at Columbia University and decided to audition. The opera was *The Barrier*, by Jon Meyerowitz. It was based on a poem entitled *The Mulatto*, by African-American poet, Langston Hughes, and it focused on the racial tensions of the South. Lenora was an understudy to lead soprano Muriel Rahn, but eventually portrayed the role when the group performed at the University of Michigan’s drama festival. Shortly thereafter, Meyerowitz pushed to premiere the opera on Broadway, but by that time Lenora had decided to pursue other musical interests.

**Factors That Led to Europe**

By the spring of 1949, Ms. Giannini became convinced that Lenora was ready to pursue a professional career. Lenora’s voice displayed true dramatic qualities and Giannini, who had actually become well-known in Europe for portraying roles such as Aida and Madama Butterfly, felt that these roles would be equally fitting for Lenora. Madame Giannini knew that it would be difficult for Lenora to be cast in opera roles in the United States and felt that she should move to Europe. Lenora pondered the idea, but still had hopes of launching a performance career in America. She toured a few of the Southern and Mid-Western cities, looking for work, but apart from some limited performances in lyceum programs at Black universities, she found virtually

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41 Ibid.

no noteworthy prospects.\textsuperscript{43} In many Southern states Lenora endured the hardship of segregated facilities. Her skin color was a constant barrier, and she never made enough money to truly support her craft.

Many African-American singers seeking professional careers in the United States could attest to these difficulties. Some were engaged at performance halls in the South only to sing before segregated audiences. Oftentimes, Blacks were forced to sit in the balcony of a theater or were denied admission altogether. Even though racism was more overt in the South, there were also incidents of prejudice in the North. After Marian Anderson made her triumphant Town Hall debut in 1935 she became “one of the five highest paid concert artists in the country.”\textsuperscript{44} Still, all of her acquired wealth was not enough to secure a room in New York’s “whites only” hotels.\textsuperscript{45} Miss Anderson sang from her soul to seemingly appreciative audiences and then retired each evening to segregated and far less extravagant quarters. Eventually her career found revitalization in Europe, and she lived there for ten years before returning to the States.\textsuperscript{46} Lenora was gradually becoming convinced that she should do the same.

Racial prejudice was not the only factor that contributed to a large migration of African-Americans to Europe. The Second World War ravaged many parts of Europe (particularly Germany) and forced a generation of European artists (mainly of Jewish descent) to seek asylum in the United States. According to writer Peter Gay, “…students of immigration to the United States have estimated that between 1933 and 1944 some 1500 musicians entered the United States.”\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{43} Davis, 7 December 2002.

\textsuperscript{44} Rosalyn M. Story, \textit{And So I Sing: African American Divas of Opera and Concert} (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 48.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
States from Europe. They scattered across the country and left their mark as professors in colleges, as performers on tour, and as guest conductors.”  

The influx of musicians to the United States left vacancies in many German and Austrian opera houses. Not only did African-American musicians move to Europe, but so did Caucasian Americans who grew tired of competing for the very limited number of singing opportunities in the U.S. This was articulated in a November 1960 issue of *High Fidelity* magazine. In it, German music critic, Heinz Joachim, said that, due to the War and its aftereffects, standards of German singers had sunk while those of foreign singers had risen:

>This rise…is especially true of the USA, which, with its hundred and eighty million inhabitants and its staggeringly numerous and heavily endowed music schools and universities, has only three major opera theatres, so that only the tiniest fraction of the absolute elite out of a great number of highly qualified applicants can make any headway on an American operatic stage. It’s no accident that most of the foreign singers in our opera houses today are Americans.

When Lenora considered all of these factors, she determined that Europe was her best opportunity. Her commitment to success as a professional singer was relentless, and she believed that her talent was such that she could make a sufficient living. Lenora began to dream of possibilities that had been denied to so many others of her race. In 1950, she was fortunate to win a John Hay Whitney Fellowship totaling three thousand dollars. The John Hay Whitney Foundation was a philanthropic organization founded in 1946. Its primary purpose was “to fund innovative educational and minority-directed community projects.”  

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make a trip to Europe for the purpose of taking advanced language studies and to audition for professional singing opportunities. She carefully documented her most significant experiences from 1948 to 1953 in a date book (See Figure 4 below). The entry about her departure to Europe is headed February 23rd and reads: “Sailed for Europe on the S.S. Liberté, for study in Basle (sic), Switzerland.”

![Journal Entry about Lenora’s Departure to Europe](image)

Figure 4. Journal Entry about Lenora’s Departure to Europe

Lenora Lafayette was embarking upon a journey that would take her to professional heights that she never dreamed a woman of her race and background could attain at that moment in time.
Switzerland

Lenora Lafayette arrived in Paris on Friday, March 2, 1951, approximately one week after she had set sail for Europe on the *S.S. Liberté*. The following day, she boarded a train for Basel and spent some time in a local hotel while she searched for suitable housing.

Basel is the second largest city in Switzerland, and it consists of two major sections (Greater Basel and Lesser Basel) that are separated by the Rhine River. While Lesser Basel is largely industrial, Greater Basel functions as the city’s business and administrative center, possessing a vast number of educational establishments and residential areas. Greater Basel is where Lenora ultimately settled, and others who visited her there have commented on its immense beauty and subtle charm. Bordering on Germany to the West and France to the North, Basel is one of the most important railway centers in Western Europe. In some circles, it has been called the “Golden Door” to Switzerland because of its ideal location. Lenora’s selection of this city as her base was strategic, in that she could travel with great ease to neighboring countries for music engagements and professional auditions. With some persistence, she secured a room at a quaint little pension owned by Maria Hauser Shonlau (Figure 5), and she immediately began to familiarize herself with the city.

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51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.
Lenora did not realize it at the time, but Basel would become her permanent home, and Frau Shonlau, her extended family.

Picturesque scenery, convenient location, and subtle charm were all contributing factors towards Lenora’s decision to live in Basel. Even more influential was the advice of voice teacher, Dusolina Giannini, who had earlier made an impact on Basel audiences with her own portrayal of Aida. She encouraged Lenora to audition for the Basel Stadt Opera, and after only three short months, Lenora was cast as the lead in its spring production of *Aida* (see Figure 6). She made her professional operatic debut on Sunday, May 27, 1951, and the audience responded so vociferously that she was signed to a one-year contract.53

![Lenora as Aida at the Basel Opera](image)

**Figure 6.** Lenora as Aida at the Basel Opera

Photo by Hugo Siegfried

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53 Hebert, “A Phone Call,” 9.
Repeat performances of *Aida* followed, and she was also scheduled to sing *Madama Butterfly* (see Figure 7). She meticulously prepared for the new role while also investigating other singing opportunities. Only days before opening night, however, she was faced with a tremendous setback. Severe abdominal pains forced her to be rushed to the hospital, where she was diagnosed with acute appendicitis. Doctors hurriedly scheduled her for emergency surgery. The highly anticipated *Butterfly* had been overshadowed by illness, and the fact that the Concours de Genève - an international music competition for which she had previously registered - was only two weeks away, was also cause for concern. One of the world’s oldest and most prestigious music competitions, the Concours de Genève was founded in 1939, and boasted famous winners such as soprano Victoria de Los Angeles and composer Arthur Honegger.\(^5\)

**Figure 7.** Lenora as Madama Butterfly at the Basel Stadt Opera

Musicians from nearly every hemisphere made up the panel of jurists, many of them having achieved international fame. One example was Ernst Ansermet, founder and former conductor of the world renowned Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. Lenora knew that winning a contest of such stature would elevate her career. It could also help her monetarily, since her John Hay Whitney Fellowship was depleted, and her employment at the Basel Stadt Opera was not enough to meet all of her expenses. She resolved to participate in the competition, despite the fact that she had not fully recovered from surgery. Her fortitude is best captured in an article published by the *Times-Picayune States Roto Magazine* of Louisiana. It reads:

Three days before the competition she was weak, couldn’t walk well and suffered pains when she breathed deeply. It took remarkable courage, yet, as the program read, the sixth contestant was the woman named Mlle. Lenora Lafayette. Dressed in a white taffeta gown she stretched out her arms and sang ‘Ritorna vincitor,’ from her favorite *Aida*. Translated it means, ‘Return victorious!’ That’s exactly what she did…

![Geneva International Contest Winners](image)

**Figure 8.** Concourse de Genève Contest Winners and Conductor Ernst Ansermet
Photo by Wassermann (Geneva, Switzerland)
(From left to right: Mattiwilda Dobbs, Jennifer Vyvyan, Theresa Stich-Randall, Ernst Ansermet, Lenora Lafayette, and another unknown contest participant)

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55 Hebert, “A Phone Call,” 9.
Lenora tied with Theresa Stich-Randall for second place. First place winners were sopranos Mattiwilda Dobbs and Jennifer Vyvyan (see Figure 8). It was not routine to award two prizes for first and second place, but the female talent was so exceptional, and the male talent so unimpressive, that the judges awarded the men’s prizes to the women.\textsuperscript{56} An added benefit of winning the competition was that Lenora was reunited with her friend Mattiwilda Dobbs. The two had met in New York when they were students, and where they performed together in the opera, \textit{The Barrier}. They took time to update each other regarding their professional accomplishments and pursuits.

Subsequent to the Concours de Genève, Lenora received a number of engagements to sing throughout Switzerland and surrounding countries. She no longer had to worry about a lack of finances forcing her to return to the United States, so she successfully fulfilled her \textit{Madama Butterfly} contract with the Basel Stadt Opera (see Figure 7). Later in her career, she expressed in an interview with \textit{Time} magazine that she believed opera was limiting for her, and that she hoped to one day return to the United States as a celebrated \textit{lieder} singer.\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{Covent Garden}

In two years Lenora managed to debut with the Basel Stadt Opera, placed second in a prestigious international music competition, and obtained multiple singing engagements throughout Europe. The childhood dream of being a professional singer came to fruition, and she now made a decent living from her craft. She also exceeded her own expectations of what she could achieve professionally in Europe. Little did she know, however, that one of her greatest accomplishments lay just beyond the horizon.

\textsuperscript{56} Mattiwilda Dobbs, interview by author, 24 February 2006, Arlington, VA, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.

\textsuperscript{57} “Aida for a Night,” 49.
While in Amsterdam performing in *Aida*, Lenora received a telephone call from John Barbirolli, conductor of the distinguished Hallé Orchestra. Hallé was the “longest-established professional symphony orchestra in Britain,” and Barbirolli was recognized as a highly distinguished conductor in Europe. He explained to Lenora that his lead soprano, Gre Brouwenstijn, had developed a severe throat infection and could not sing Covent Garden’s evening performance of *Aida*. He wanted to know if Lenora could be on a plane to London by 2:00 p.m. so that she could sing in Brouwenstijn’s place. Lenora assured him that she could, and after hanging up the telephone, she became quite hysterical. She told a writer for *Time* magazine, “You know, I was so excited when I put the phone down, I just ran around the room for ten minutes.” Lenora had prepared lunch prior to the telephone call, but in the midst of her excitement, she forgot to eat. Once she arrived at the Royal Opera House, she was too nervous to eat, and this is how she became known as the soprano who rose to fame “on an empty stomach.”

She arrived in London at approximately 4:20 p.m., nearly an hour late, according to the *News Chronicle* of London (See Figure 9). The Labour Ministry had considered her extenuating circumstances and granted entry into the country without a working permit. She was hurriedly escorted to wardrobe, where Gre Brouwenstijn’s costume was being altered to fit a smaller frame. Barbirolli visited the dressing room to discuss pertinent details. Lenora

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59 “Aida for a Night,” 49.

60 Hebert, “A Phone Call,” 9.


62 Ibid.

63 “Aida for a Night,” 49.
expressed some concern over the fact that she only knew the Italian version of the opera while the rest of the cast planned to sing it in English (a standard practice of Covent Garden). Barbirolli assured her that everything would be fine and that he would take good care of her. 64 She learned her staging rather quickly, and she earned immense respect from her peers, the audience, and critics alike. There was only one awkward moment in the entire performance when she turned and sang, ‘Che veggo? Egli –mio padre [What do I see? It’s he – my father]. The problem was that the “father,” to whom she was referring, was not onstage. He was actually still in the wings. 65 The mishap did not interrupt Lenora’s mellifluous singing, nor did it affect the impact that she had on her audience. When the final curtain closed, she received thunderous applause.

Figure 9. Press clippings of Lenora’s Covent Garden Debut

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64 Ibid.

65 Ibid.
British music critic, Cecil Smith, who was often very difficult to impress, wrote in the *Daily Express*: “The audience was stirred by the exceptional beauty and vitality of her voice, the simple dignity of her stage presence, and the truthfulness of her acting. It did not matter that she knew the role only in Italian when everyone else sang in English. Such tones as she poured out in the exacting Nile scene are eloquent in any language.”  

Her triumphant performance was covered by numerous London newspapers: the *Daily Dispatch*, the *Times*, *News Chronicle*, the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, and others. What Lenora and those at Covent Garden came to realize was that she had done more than accomplish the feat of flying across the country on short notice to save a performance. She had also become the first Negro singer to perform in an English opera house.

News of Lenora’s success traveled back to the United States. She was featured in *Time* magazine and a number of American papers. Howard Taubman, music editor for the *New York Times*, had never heard of Lenora Lafayette prior to her Covent Garden debut; however, after reading the reviews of reputable British critics, he began to follow her European achievements. He later listed her as one of twelve most promising Negro singers in an article that he wrote for *Ebony*, the most prominent and widely circulated magazine for African-Americans at that time. Lafayette was ranked with Mattiwilda Dobbs, Leontyne Price, William Warfield, Robert McFerrin, Lawrence Winters, and Camilla Williams, to name a few. Each of these singers had been recognized as rising stars and went on to have very distinguished careers. Like Lenora, many of them started performing in Europe and then worked to make professional inroads in the United States. In his article, Taubman provided a brief overview of their credentials, and at the

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67 Ibid.
end of his remarks on Lenora he stated, “I am sure that she will get a chance to sing in this
country. I expect her to confirm the impression she made in London.” 68 Those from Lenora’s
hometown were certain that if given the opportunity, she would make an equally strong
impression on the American public. The Times-Picayune States Roto Magazine of Louisiana
provided extensive coverage, showing photographs of Lenora’s Basel performance, and of her
parents (Howard and Lenora Lafayette) visiting their grandson, Kirby Green (Figure 1). Elliot
Hebert ended his Times-Picayune article with a hint of anticipation by stating, “When she left
she was a promising hopeful. By the time she returns she may be a star in her own right.”69

Lenora traveled back to Amsterdam feeling overjoyed by her experience at Covent
Garden. Less than a week later, she was summoned again to replace Brouwenstijn, who had not
yet recovered from her illness. Lenora’s professionalism and musicality so greatly impressed
Barbirolli, that, after her second performance of Aida, she was offered a contract to sing Madama
Butterfly. She enthusiastically accepted, was added to the 1953 Covent Garden roster, and was
featured with other rising artists such as Hilde Zadek, Monica Sinclair, and Joan Sutherland.
Mattiwilda Dobbs was also listed on the roster, as she was scheduled to appear in an opera that
would premiere several months after Madama Butterfly.

When Lenora returned to sing Butterfly, her reputation preceded her, and there were high
expectations from the British public that she would again take Covent Garden by storm. Larger
audiences and more critics were on hand to determine whether or not Cecil Smith’s first
impression was correct. Lenora played opposite British tenor, John Lanigan, who portrayed
Pinkerton. Monica Sinclair appeared as Suzuki, and Jess Walters as Sharpless. Lenora’s

69 Hebert, “A Phone Call,” 9.
performance seemed to appeal to a majority of the public. Nearly every critic that was present had positive sentiments, with the exception of Cecil Smith. While he had been very complimentary of Lenora in Aida, he felt that she failed to meet the same vocal or dramatic standards displayed in her Covent Garden debut. His column began as follows: “Lenora Lafayette had a tough experience last night. She sang for an audience that expected more than she had to give.” 70 He went on to say that though there were some truly exquisite moments, in general her tone was prevailingly wan and small. He surmised that she had underestimated the size of the big house in which she performed. Other critics disagreed. Scott Goddard of the News Chronicle found that Lenora exhibited both physical and vocal beauty. He added that in most operas the audience is presented with good looks or good singing, rarely both. “Here, they were blended. Imperceptibly, one found oneself drawn into the net of her misfortunes...”71

Figure 10. Lenora in Madama Butterfly

Others described her voice as liquid and luminous, emphasizing that her singing was exceptional. Lenora, and her many supporters, viewed the performance as a success. She made a lasting impression on John Barbirolli, who, in 1959, hired her to record a series of Puccini Love Duets with British tenor, Richard Lewis, and

70 Cecil Smith, “No Fire, Alas, From This Butterfly,” Daily Express, (London), 9 December 1953.

the Hallé Orchestra. A review from *The Gramophone* praised this recording, stating that “Miss Lafayette is always beautiful to listen to. She can well compete with the Italians.”

**After Covent Garden**

In the years following her Covent Garden debut, Lenora received engagements at the Vienna State Opera, the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, the State Opera of Hamburg, the Netherlands Opera, the Opera Houses of Belgrade and Zagreb, the Municipal Theatre in Zurich, the German Opera of the Rhine in Dusseldorf, and the Opera House at Tel Aviv. She also performed in the Czech Republic, South Africa, and South America. These places reveal only a fraction of her exploits.

Even though she became most recognized for Aida and Madama Butterfly -- having performed both roles nearly three hundred times before her death -- she did additional roles that won rave reviews. She was Mimi in *La Boheme*, Elizabeth de Valois in *Don Carlos* (see Figure 11), and Gilda in *Rigoletto*. Her background in opera was extensive, but she also enjoyed singing *lieder* and oratorio. Whenever she had the opportunity to give recitals, she often included Negro spirituals that were enthusiastically received by her audiences. Critics across the European continent who heard Lenora sing found themselves deeply moved by her musicality, the richness and brilliance of her tone, and her very plausible interpretation. When Lenora did the *Beethoven Mass in C* in Basel, Switzerland, a review from the *Basler Volksblatt* (a Basel newspaper) said, “The listeners may have regretted that Beethoven did not arrange the soprano part – enchantingly sung by Lenora Lafayette – richer in respect to the mere soloist aspect.” Of her performance in the *Mozart Requiem* in Luzern, Switzerland, the *Luzerner Tagsblatt* stated, “Lenora Lafayette’s soprano has a beautiful luminance and it is always applied with expression.”

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The heralding reviews span across a fifteen-year period. Her fine reputation as a singer circulated amongst directors, conductors, and peers. Although she was never permanently engaged at an opera house, she was often featured as the premiere singer wherever she went. Much like her teacher, Dusolina Giannini, Lenora worked as a free agent, moving across the continent and captivating all who had the opportunity to hear her. She was fortunate to work at the Vienna State Opera during the period that Herbert von Karajan served as its artistic director. Karajan was a highly noted Austrian conductor who had risen to fame from his extensive and exceptional work with the Vienna Philharmonic. He also won international acclaim for his affiliation with the Berlin Philharmonic, having done hundreds of tours and numerous recordings.

In 1961, Lenora sang in *The Creation*, by Haydn, with L’orchestre de la Suisse Romande, under the direction of Igor Markévitch. This orchestra was founded by Ernst Ansermet, who carried it to a high level of notoriety after WWII. Lenora considered it quite an honor to sing with the orchestra, since in 1951, Ansermet had served as one of the judges for the Concours de Genève, a contest in which she placed second. The reviews for this performance were approving, as evidenced in the *Luzerner Neueste Nachrichten*, which stated, “Already the flawless familiarity with the German

![Figure 11. Lenora in Don Carlos](image)
language was astonishing. Even so, in regard to security, clarity and artistic dedication/devotion, her magnificent voice left nothing to be desired.” She was successful in her performances of oratorio, but she also remained highly regarded for her interpretation of *Aida*. In the *Hamburger Echo* (Hamburg, Germany), she is described as Aida, personified. “Certainly,” it states, “…the title part of this popular Verdi-opera is Lenora Lafayette’s shining role.”

Another important professional with whom Lenora worked is African-American conductor George Byrd (See Figure 12). Lenora first met Byrd in New York while they were both students. She was studying voice with Dusolina Giannini, and he was beginning his studies in choral conducting.73 A native of North Carolina, Byrd attended the Juilliard School and the Paris Conservatory, and he was a student of the renowned Herbert von Karajan.74 He spent more than half of his career in Europe, and earned international acclaim for his unique use of the conductor’s baton to create aesthetic harmony between the orchestra and the audience.

![Figure 12. Lenora Lafayette and George Byrd](image-url)

Byrd traveled extensively, performing in countries such as Belgium, Poland, Sweden, Yugoslavia, France, Germany, and the United States, to name a few. Among the nearly eighty

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73 George Byrd, interview by author, 14 March 2006, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.

orchestras for which he served as guest conductor were: the Munich Philharmonic, the Berlin Philharmonic, the Orchestre National France (ORTF), and the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande.

Byrd ventured into orchestral conducting during his tenure at the Paris Conservatory, and Lenora went on to Switzerland to search out professional singing opportunities. They kept in close contact, and although often separated by their professional engagements, they occasionally came together to perform on the same stage. Each was impressed by the other’s talent, and their initial friendship blossomed into a romance. In a written commentary, Byrd remembered Lenora with great fondness and admiration. He stated:

Our friendship was for many years cemented by the immediate unshakable belief and confidence in the musical talent and ability of one another; by the will and wish for eventual success in the struggle of two black artists, both having overcome the racial barriers of the U.S. southern states to receive high professional training in New York. Our common goal was to make known this talent and ability in Europe and elsewhere. I dare say that this cultural and professional binding and aspiration changed both of our lives, and was at least as strong as our romantic feelings, which had to endure many hardships and long periods of separation in search and achievement of professional occupation.75

Lenora’s approbation for Byrd’s talent was unequaled. She admired his determination to share his gift with the world in spite of his color. She also loved him deeply, and according to relatives and friends, he was the only man with whom she imagined spending the rest of her life. In the journal that details her most significant moments, she recorded his birthday (Figure 13). It was, to her, a date worth remembering.

Figure 13. Journal Entry referencing George Byrd’s Birthday

75 Ibid.
Byrd and Lafayette were privileged to perform together in Brooklyn, New York; Basel, Switzerland; Zurich, Switzerland with the Zurich radio; and in Zagreb with the Krefold-Rhinegold Zagreb Philharmonic. Although they never married, they remained close for many years.

**Final Years**

Over the next ten to fifteen years Lenora kept an active itinerary. Around 1968, after completing a run of *Aida* in Tel Aviv, she discovered a lump in her breast. She was scheduled to begin a tour in South America in the next few weeks, and her doctor told her not to cancel her plans. He would examine the lump further upon her return to Basel. When she underwent a thorough examination, a biopsy of the lump revealed that it was cancerous. She endured a radical mastectomy, followed by chemotherapy and radiation therapy. According to her nephew Kirby, she suffered burns from the treatment and wore prostheses to conceal her surgical procedure. It was a difficult time for Lenora. She took a lengthy sabbatical in order to heal, but she was very private about her illness. “She really didn’t want many people to know for fear that rumors would start and that her career would come to a halt,” says Kirby.\(^76\) When she was strong enough to return to singing, she prepared for more travel. It became apparent that she was a real fighter, and she was determined not to let her bout with cancer end a career that she had worked so hard to build. She would be in remission for at least five years, with an uninterrupted performance schedule. Kirby recalls that, after her surgery, one of the German newspapers reviewed a performance and commented that her voice was even more vibrant following her illness and recovery.

In 1974, Lenora received an engagement in Trier, Germany. She had completed *Don Carlos* the year before to enthusiastic reviews and was invited back to do *La Clemenza di Tito*.

\(^{76}\) Green, 11 December 2002.
It was during a performance of this opera that she took an awkward step onstage and felt a severe pain in her hip. She was able to complete the performance, but later had to be assisted offstage and wheeled out of the house. She returned to Basel to be examined by a doctor. Sadly, the doctor discovered that she had sustained a pathological fracture from metastasized cancer in the bone. She never walked again without assistance, and her career came to an abrupt end. The doctors placed her on an immediate session of chemotherapy. Lenora lost her hair and gained tremendous weight. Her body partially responded to the treatment, but she was very weak, had difficulty walking, and spent the last eleven months of her life in the hospital.

![Visit With Friends](image)

**Figure 14.** Visit with friends after diagnosis of cancer
(From left to right: Frau Hauser, Lenora Lafayette, Frances Floyd and a friend)

It was difficult for her to share the news with her family. Her mother, Lena, had already planned to visit before the Trier accident, and Lenora knew that she would have to reveal the seriousness of her condition during this visit. When Lena returned from Europe she was greeted at the airport by several family members. Kirby remembers the day quite vividly:
I will remember for as long as I live the look of despair on her face when she got off the plane on her return flight home. I was so glad to see her. I was the first person she hugged. And she said, ‘Lenora has terminal cancer.’ It just hit everybody like a bomb. That word ‘terminal’ seemed to, in a matter of seconds, age my grandfather tremendously. And then he suddenly composed himself and said, ‘She’s going to be okay.’ Well, I knew that it was not going to be…and that it was only a matter of time.

Lena had recently had surgery for colon cancer and was also undergoing treatment. Lenora decided that returning home to be with Lena would present too heavy a burden for the family, in that they were both very seriously ill. Lenora’s niece, Frances Floyd, had been a part of some of the family discussions. She was troubled over the fact that none of the relatives would have a chance to see Lenora and to comfort her. Frances decided to travel to Basel on her own and visit her aunt (See Figure 14). 77

Floyd remembers that most of her time with her aunt was spent in the hospital. Lenora had been using crutches since the day she stepped off the operatic stage in Trier, and she spent most of her days in bed to mask the fact that she had difficulty walking. Frances candidly states, “She didn’t want people to know the shape she was in, okay?” 78 She admits that her aunt was a very private individual who basically refused to reveal the seriousness of her illness. In many ways, Lafayette was still the prima donna who had earlier worked her way into the hearts of the European public. This was the image that she wanted the public, and her family, to remember. 79 Frances goes on to say, “…When she was here in Chicago (Frances’ home), we started sort of visiting family that was around. And she was sort of talking about it, but she…was speaking in German. And right now I realize what she was saying. She was talking about leukociten.

77 Frances Floyd, interview by author, 30 April 2006, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, LA.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid.
If you kind of extrapolate that, it’s leukocytes.”80 Frances confesses that, at the time, she simply did not grasp the full meaning of the word.

![Figure 15. Funeral at Hönli Memorial](image)

Despite her body’s deterioration, Lenora still possessed a resilient spirit. During her niece’s visit, she never complained of pain or appeared to be anxious about the future. Frances returned to Chicago feeling satisfied that she had taken the initiative to see Lenora.81 Although she knew that her aunt was fighting a ferocious battle against the illness, she did not realize that this initial visit would also serve as a farewell. Lenora Lafayette died on Thursday, October 23, 1975. Frances went back to Basel, nearly two months after her first visit, to attend the funeral. This time she was accompanied by Lenora’s sister, Dorothy (See Figure 15 above).

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80 Ibid.

81 Ibid.
Lives That Were Touched

Although Lenora Lafayette spent over half of her life in Switzerland, her accomplishments affected people worldwide. This is confirmed by the myriad of letters, articles, photographs, and other mementos that remain as a testament to her infectious persona. Kindness, generosity, and exceptional talent were some of her most outstanding attributes, and these traits helped her to overcome cultural, racial, and geographical barriers. For many, especially in Switzerland, she had become somewhat of an icon. Notwithstanding, she never forgot her humble beginnings in the Old South Baton Rouge community, nor did she fail to remember those who helped cultivate the talent that thousands enjoyed. When her schedule permitted, she returned to Louisiana to perform recitals and concerts. Although she continued to sing in segregated settings, she never wavered in her level of artistry or professionalism. Multitudes of people from the Baton Rouge community were privileged to hear her sing, but there were some whose experience with Lafayette went beyond her singing and whose lives were indelibly touched by her achievements.

Donnie Ray Albert

One such example is baritone Donnie Ray Albert. Over the past twenty-five years, Albert has sung in major opera houses around the world. He captured countless audiences with his mesmerizing portrayal of Porgy in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, and he convinced opera connoisseurs in both Europe and the United States of his broad dramatic range as well as phenomenal voice. He first heard Lenora sing during a gathering of students arranged by A.E. Carter at McKinley Senior High School (See Figure 16). She was accompanied on the piano by then music director, Mallalieu Turner. “We had an assembly and…we were in quite a raucous
Albert recalls. “She quieted us down by telling us how to act at a concert.”\footnote{Ibid.}\footnote{Donnie Ray Albert, interview by Kyla D. Pitcher, 5 July 2006, transcript, available from interviewer, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La.} Albert avows that Lenora’s voice was unusual, and that the students were visibly captivated by the sound. “I just remember that it was one of the most unique voices,” he reflects. “I mean, we had girls in chorus that sang very well whom Mrs. Turner had trained to sing that type of classical music, and we thought they were fantastic! But then, to hear Ms. Lafayette sing, being a more mature woman, we saw what those ladies could become.”\footnote{Ibid.} Albert does not believe that this initial encounter with Lafayette compelled him to pursue a singing career, but he does acknowledge that her inroads in the music world had an impact on his professional journey. Something else that he appreciates is their similar backgrounds. For instance, they are both Baton Rouge natives who grew up in the very same neighborhood. They are also both graduates of McKinley High School who went on to major in voice at their respective universities. Albert recognizes that South Baton Rouge offered a high quality of education and a strong sense of community that consequently produced many successful African-Americans. He considers himself fortunate to be among them.

Figure 16. Lenora with friends at McKinley Senior High School
Two areas in which Albert and Lafayette contrast are in their relationship with Louisiana State University and their decision to make opera a permanent career. From the beginning, Lenora knew that she wanted to be a singer, and she reflected this in her overall demeanor. Those who remember her as a young woman attest to the fact that she carried herself in a manner that let everyone know she intended to go far in the music arena. Albert, by contrast, believed that he could make a difference as a doctor, and in spite of his strong background in piano and voice, he chose to major in pre-medicine when he attended Louisiana State University. Only after experiencing difficulty in his pre-medicine courses did he begin to consider the possibility of singing. “The seed in me,” he states, “was planted by force, because I think God knew where I was supposed to go, and I was destined to do it…” While Lenora had not had the privilege of attending LSU due to segregation laws then in force, Albert was able to audition at the Music School, and he became the recipient of a fee-exempt scholarship. He blossomed in the music program and went on to get a Master’s degree at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas.

The first person who was instrumental in cultivating Albert’s musical talent was Mallalieu Turner, music director at McKinley Senior High School. Turner replaced A.E. Carter in the mid to late sixties and was very aggressive about recruiting talent for the school choir. She had heard Albert sing and kept pressing until he and some of his friends participated in the music activities at the school. Turner shared A.E. Carter’s passion for classical music, and she followed Lenora Lafayette’s expanding career. On at least two occasions that Lafayette returned to Louisiana to sing, Turner made sure that Donnie Ray was in the audience. In an interview prior to her death (she died in 2004 from complications caused by diabetes), Turner reflected on some of the many conversations that she had had with her protégé. She stated, “We often spoke

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of Ms. Lafayette and her talent. It was his ambition to become a singer of her stature. He did. His rich, compelling, and well-trained baritone voice opened doors for him all over the world (See Figure 17).

Figure 17. Donnie Ray Albert in *Nabucco* at La Scala

Albert has traveled a path that was forged by his predecessors. What makes his success especially satisfying, however, is the knowledge that one of these pioneers, Lenora Lafayette, shared his geographical roots.

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85 Malileu Turner, interview by author, 7 December 2002, Baton Rouge, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.
Kirby Bowers Green

Kirby Green, nephew of Lenora Lafayette and elder son of Lenora’s sister Dorothy, is another professional whose life was affected by his aunt’s pioneering spirit. “She was part of the reason I decided to sing opera,” remembers Kirby. “The first time I heard my aunt sing was on a recording that she did for my grandmother while at Fisk. It was a coarse vinyl recording.” Kirby knew that Lenora possessed a very special vocal gift, and he supported her public performances whenever possible. He regrets that he never had a chance to see her in a fully-staged opera, but he appreciates the musical legacy that she left to her family and to the African-American community. “She didn’t open the doors,” he emphasizes, “she KICKED them down. And she changed a lot of stereotypes about African-Americans. That was extremely important.” Green graduated from the Louisiana State University School of Medicine and practiced in the New Orleans area for many years until he was uprooted by Hurricane Katrina. He was able to balance the demands of this profession with the many rehearsals of the New Orleans Opera. Whenever he was not practicing medicine, he was singing. He was fortunate to be cast in roles that highlighted his unique tenor voice, such as Peter, the Honey Man, in Porgy and Bess.

Jacques Lafayette Green

Like his brother Kirby, Jacques found that his aunt’s musical influence reached into various areas of his life. He, too, balanced the demands of a church musician’s schedule with the

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86 Jacques Green, interview by author, 11 December 2002, phone interview, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.

87 Ibid.

88 Note: Hurricane Katrina occurred in August 2005 and is considered one of the worst natural disasters in the history of the United States. The force of its winds caused the destruction of New Orleans’ levees, and the flooding which resulted left entire districts under water. Over one thousand lives were lost in the currents, and countless others were displaced because of permanent damage to their homes.
rehearsals of the Houston Grand Opera Chorus. When he found that he could no longer manage
the two, he gave his full attention to playing and composing sacred music for the Catholic
Church. Although he is ten years younger than Kirby, his memories of Lenora are quite vivid.
“She was a class act,” he recalls. “She was very concerned even when I would play at different
places, for churches, or wherever, that they would at least mention my name…the
bulletin…something like that. She wanted to make sure you got your notoriety or
recognition…”\(^{89}\) Lenora had endured the many injustices of being underpaid and overlooked
because of her race and gender, and she wanted to instill in Jacques the same resilience that had
helped her to persevere.

Also etched in Jacques’ memory were the many elegant items of clothing and the
expensive perfumes that Lenora often brought with her on her visits to Baton Rouge. “She’d
have all those fragrances from Paris and all the nice fancy bottles and everything, and fragrances
from other parts of Europe. She had a lot of things…A LOT OF THINGS that I had never seen
before in this country…not even New York.”\(^{90}\) Nonetheless, her acquisition of material
possessions never hampered her generosity. She spent quality time with Jacques and exposed
him to much of what she knew musically. “She would bring me music so that I could practice:
music that her friends had composed.” Additionally, in preparation for upcoming singing
engagements, Lenora would often vocalize at his piano while he marveled at her extensive range.
“She would ride all the way off the top of the piano,” he fondly recollects.\(^{91}\) It often seemed to
him that she could sing up into the stratosphere.

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89 Jacques Green, interview by author, 27 September 2006, transcript, Baton Rouge, available from
interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.
Jacques believes that the years of being surrounded by so many musical family members planted a seed in his own life, in addition to his aunt’s input. He started taking piano lessons from Faye Barnes (the family friend who was connected with Lenora through the Methodist church) when just a little boy, and by the time he was thirteen he was already playing for churches. He remembers, as a teenager, traveling with his grandmother, Lena, to Nashville, Tennessee, to watch Lenora perform in a special recital. His proudest moment, however, was when Lenora gave a special performance at his high school for his German class. He reveled in the fact that his instructor was greatly impressed by Lenora’s mastery of the German language.

Jacques later took music composition classes at Southern University, in Baton Rouge, and he eventually obtained his master’s degree in Sacred Music from the Interdenominational Theological Center at Texas Southern University. He has served as Minister of Music to the Most Blessed Sacrament Catholic Church in Atlanta, Georgia, for many years.

Reverend Mary Moody

Quite often, when one mentions the name Mary Moody in the Baton Rouge community, one receives highly approving remarks. Mary Moody became the first African-American female to be ordained a minister, and to pastor a church in the state of Louisiana. Many consider these to be phenomenal achievements, especially because she accomplished them at a time when they were viewed as unconventional. She has continued to earn the respect of her peers and of younger generations through her intense commitment to spread the love and the Word of God.

Rev. Moody and Lenora Lafayette were classmates at McKinley Senior High School. They were also good friends who kept in touch after Lenora moved abroad. Their love for music was a common bond, and they both sensed that they had some higher calling to make a difference in the world. Lenora appears to have met her destiny much earlier than Rev. Moody.
It was not until 1972, three years before Lenora’s death, that Moody acknowledged her call to the ministry and began to make strides that would drastically affect a woman’s role in the Methodist Church. Moody wholeheartedly understands the struggles associated with being the “first” in a particular arena. “It took me so long just to receive my license to preach,” she remembers. Even after she earned her license, she had to wait for four additional years to be ordained. There were various roadblocks and forms of opposition that were undeniably discouraging to Moody, but she was determined to reach her goal. Just as Lenora became a pioneer for Black women in opera, Moody became a pioneer for Black women in ministry. She truly believes that knowing Lenora had a tremendous impact on her life. “…And then I’d like to interject the idea that I thought she was a Christian young woman,” Moody adds.

Moody related a specific occasion when she and some of the remaining graduates of the McKinley High School class of 1943 met to celebrate Lenora’s achievements (see Figure 18). “A group of us decided when she came back from Switzerland that we wanted to do something special for her as a class because we wanted her to know how proud we were of her.”92 They met at a local restaurant and spent the evening sharing with one another the things that they had been doing since graduation. They listened intently as Lenora discussed her travels and experiences as an African-American singer living abroad. “She was so receptive and appreciative,” Moody remembers. “She recognized that it was a gift from God.”93

Thousands grieved Lenora Lafayette’s untimely death; but, it was the brilliance of her life that spoke volumes. Some who were privileged to know the singer recount their experiences with her as though they occurred only recently.

93 Ibid.
Their nostalgia suggests that she may have achieved a level of immortality. It also suggests that she somehow managed to perpetuate the image of herself as a prima donna with a loving heart. This was accomplished exactly as she had intended.
CHAPTER 3
HER CONTEMPORARIES

Lenora Lafayette’s death not only brought an abrupt end to a very fascinating musical journey, but it also prevented her from sharing the details of her developmental process with future generations. People would no longer be able to discover the full scope of her experiences as a female African-American opera singer living and working abroad. Hence, the commentary of her contemporaries is vital, because it can confirm a number of her musical experiences and perhaps provide a closer look at some of the common challenges and triumphs of African-American singers from that period (1950-1974).

During her nearly twenty-five-year tenure as an international singer, Lenora collaborated with dozens of artists. Some were already established when she met them, and others achieved professional fame at a later time. Significant among this group of performers were female African-American vocalists Mattiwilda Dobbs, Martha Flowers, and Lucretia West. These women were contemporaries of Lenora Lafayette (and two of them were also her friends). Their lives and careers seem to have paralleled her own in some ways.

This chapter will briefly summarize the careers of the aforementioned women, and then it will compare their experiences in the areas of management, international performance, and private life, to those of Lenora Lafayette. For the purpose of an overall perspective, the chapter will also provide the remarks of African-American baritone William Ray, who lived and performed in Germany from 1956-1981. Ray traveled the European circuit at the same time as Lenora Lafayette and was familiar with some of her achievements.
Mattiwilda Dobbs

An internationally acclaimed coloratura, Mattiwilda Dobbs is a vocalist who is not unfamiliar with “firsts.” She was the first African-American to sing at La Scala Opera House in Milan, Italy, and in 1956, she became the first African-American woman to be offered a long-term contract by the Metropolitan Opera. “She sang twenty-nine performances, in six roles, over eight seasons.”94 Impressively, she also became the Metropolitan Opera’s first black woman to portray a romantic lead.95 Thirty years after leaving the stage, she still possesses a regal appeal. Her eyes sparkle as she speaks of past achievements, but her voice reflects her humility and her acute awareness that she has had a most fortunate life.

Born in 1925, Dobbs was the second youngest of six girls in a musically gifted family. She began playing the piano at age seven and took lessons well into her teens. Each daughter was required to study piano for at least ten years. “After that, nobody wanted to stop,” she recalls. “Everyone learned to love music, and some of my sisters started singing with groups at school and in church. But the entire time the whole emphasis was on classical music.”96 Much like Lenora Lafayette, Mattiwilda spent time with her family listening to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts on the radio and imitating the singers.97 It was her love for classical music and the constant guidance of her parents that led her to Spelman College, in Atlanta, Georgia, where she studied voice under Naomi Maise and Willis James. “You have to understand that though we were segregated...we had a lot of our own institutions – colleges, banks, insurance companies –


95 George White, *Historical Collections of Georgia* (New York: Pudney & Russell, 1855), 75.


97 Ibid.
and some of them quite profitable. Spelman College was predominately black, and in those
days of segregation we could not go to white schools except in the North. So most of us in the
South went to segregated schools set up to educate blacks.  

Atlanta possessed a steadily developing community of upwardly mobile African-
Americans, but racial barriers were still quite prevalent. Mattiwilda’s father knew that she would
not get the best professional music training if she stayed in the South, so he planned to send her
to school in the North once she graduated from Spelman. She enrolled at Mannes College in
Manhattan and studied voice with renowned soprano, Lotte Lehman. She lived at the
International House for one year before moving into an apartment with her sister. The
International House boarded students from all over the world and was often filled with hopeful
musicians. Dobbs fondly remembers seeing Leontyne Price (who was studying voice at
Juilliard) there on a regular basis.

In 1949, Mattiwilda joined Columbia University’s Opera Workshop so that she could
perform in Jon Meyerowitz’ new opera, The Barrier. It was there that she first met Lenora
Lafayette, and the two gradually developed a friendship, for they found that they had several
things in common. They were only a year apart in age. They were both from the South. They
were guided by very supportive parents, and they both came from a musical household. These
commonalities developed a connection that, unbeknownst to them, would later be fortified in
Switzerland.

Although Lenora was an understudy, Mattiwilda got to hear her sing when the cast
performed the opera at the University of Michigan. “I thought it was a very fine voice,” she
recalls. “Very big…dramatic…and I thought she had great potential.”

98 Ibid.
When *The Barrier* returned to New York, Meyerowitz was presented with an opportunity to take it to Broadway. “...I had to make a decision,” Dobbs remembers. “I had to decide to either go to Europe, or to go to Broadway with them.” While the group attempted to raise money for the Broadway premiere, Mattiwilda applied for a John Hay Whitney Fellowship. She was awarded a total of three thousand dollars, and she decided to use the money to study languages in Paris. She coached with Pierre Bernac, a prominent French baritone and teacher.

![Figure 19. Mattiwilda Dobbs in recital](image)

During the summer following her move to Paris, Dobbs visited her voice teacher in Basel, Switzerland. It was there that she heard about the Concours de Genève, an international music competition that was to be held in Geneva, Switzerland. Dobbs knew that winning this

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100 Ibid.
event could catapult her to success, and although it was too late to register that year, she worked
diligently to be ready for the next. She entered the contest in October 1951, and to her surprise,
so did Lenora Lafayette. The two were thrilled to see each other again, but each was also very
determined to win. As fate would have it, Dobbs tied with British soprano, Jennifer Vyvyan, for
first place, and Lafayette tied with American singer, Theresa Stich-Randall, for second. Both
Dobbs and Lafayette benefited greatly from the competition, and they took the time in Geneva to
rekindle their friendship. The first-place prize presented Dobbs with the opportunity to audition
at the La Scala Opera House in Milan, Italy. In 1953, she made history by becoming the first
African-American to sing in that house. Coincidentally, Mattiwilda Dobbs integrated La Scala
during the very same year that Lenora Lafayette integrated Covent Garden in London, England.
They were both heralding achievements.

Over the next two years, Mattiwilda Dobbs performed in various prestigious venues
throughout Europe. After singing in the Glyndebourne Festival, she attracted the attention of
famous manager Sol Hurok, who encouraged her to remain in Europe until he prepared to feature
her in the United States. She toured France, Sweden, Holland, and Luxembourg, dazzling
audiences with her beautiful coloratura voice. She was captivating as Zerbinetta in Adriane Auf
Naxos and amazed listeners with her Queen of the Night from Mozart’s The Magic Flute.¹⁰²
Eventually her hard work and growing popularity in Europe paid off, and Sol Hurok brought her
back to the United States. In 1955, she debuted with the San Francisco Opera, breaking the color
barrier in that house just as she had at La Scala. New York Times Music Critic, Howard
Taubman, commented on this feat, “Mattiwilda Dobbs became a member of the San Francisco
Opera in good standing last night, and the fact that she happened to be the first Negro to sing

¹⁰² Story, And So I Sing, 128.
with this group was taken in stride by nearly everyone in the audience.”¹⁰³ Her success in the United States caused Rudolph Bing, artistic director of the Metropolitan Opera (Met), to take notice. Once Mattiwilda debuted at Town Hall, Bing discussed with Hurok the possibility of her signing a contract with the Met. Dobbs recalls, “When he (Rudolph Bing) first came to the Met, that’s one of the first things he said he wanted to do, to bring some black singers there. And he started by hiring this black dancer, Janet Collins.”¹⁰⁴ Since Sol Hurok was also managing Marian Anderson at that time, Bing decided that Ms. Anderson should have the honor of being the first African-American singer to appear there. Dobbs agreed with this sentiment, acknowledging the contributions that Anderson had made to the world of African-American classical singers. One year later, however (1956), Mattiwilda Dobbs graced the stage of the Metropolitan Opera as the third African-American to sing there in the history of the opera’s existence. She was preceded by baritone Robert McFerrin, who became its first African-American male.

Dobbs enjoyed a lengthy tenure at the Metropolitan Opera, as well as the achievement of being an established singer in her own country. By the time Leontyne Price arrived on the scene in 1961, Dobbs had decided to return to Europe so that she could resume her career as a recitalist and singer of oratorio. She did not return to the United States until the 1970s, when she began to teach voice at the University of Texas and later at Spelman College. She gave limited recitals during that period, and actually sang in Lenora Lafayette’s hometown for a lyceum production sponsored by Southern University and A&M College (the one predominately black university in the city of Baton Rouge). Mercedese Broussard, a retired faculty member from Southern University, vividly remembers that particular performance and the phenomenal impression that

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Dobbs made on the audience – especially the students. “There were a few students seated directly behind me who initially complained of being forced by their professors to attend the concert,” Broussard remembers. “By the time Mattiwilda completed her performance, however, those students expressed just how glad they were that they had been made to come.”

Dobbs officially left the stage in 1974. She served as an artist-in-residence at Howard University until she retired in 1991 to spend more time with her husband (who died several years later). Dobbs enjoys dual domiciles in Sweden and in Arlington, Virginia.

**Martha Flowers**

Much like the lives of Lenora Lafayette and Mattiwilda Dobbs, Martha Flowers’ life reflects her enormous perseverance. Martha’s immense fortitude and angelic lyric soprano voice made her one of the most fascinating singers of her time. Born in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, she was raised by parents who could not afford to finance her music education, but were aware of her talent and believed that she would go far. Martha remembers singing as early as age three, and by the time she arrived at Fisk University, she was more than certain that she would sing professionally. It was at Fisk that she first met Lenora, and she was pleased to find another person as focused and as resolute as she. “You see, we had these ideas in our minds that if Marian Anderson could be a great singer, we could, too. We were fired up about this music business. We were determined that we were going to be singers, and we encouraged one another.”

Martha took part in the opera theatre program at Fisk where she was in several performances with Lenora. When opera workshop director Denton Rossell produced *Hansel and

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105 Mercedese Broussard, interview by author, 10 October 2006, Baton Rouge, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.

106 Flowers, March 2006.
Gretel, Martha played Gretel opposite Lenora’s Hansel. In the *Marriage of Figaro*, when Lenora played the Countess, Martha was cast as Susanna. During their senior year, they both portrayed Madame Butterfly - Lenora on one night, and Martha on the other. They admired each other’s abilities, and Martha admits that she was impressed by Lenora’s talent from the beginning. “Oh, she had a wonderful voice,” Martha recounts. “She really had a very even vocal scale, and this is what singers usually have to work for. The voice seemed to be quite mature.”

When Flowers graduated from Fisk in 1947, she knew that New York would offer greater opportunities than would the South. Lenora was also headed to New York to participate in Juilliard’s Special Studies Program. Martha did not audition for the school until 1950, but instead lived and worked in the city and tried to make a decision about what she was going to do. “It took me a year or two before I could sort of get my bearings…,” she shares, but she eventually won a Marian Anderson scholarship that helped cover her tuition. She studied voice with Florence Paige Kimball and was active in Juilliard’s opera workshop. After Lenora completed the program and moved to Switzerland in 1951, the two did not see each other again for quite some time. Martha fondly recalls visiting Lenora in Basel many years later and thinking that it was one of the most beautiful cities that she had ever seen.

In 1952, Martha participated in a revival of Virgil Thompson’s *Four Saints in Three Acts*. The group first performed in Paris, and then traveled to New York to feature the opera on Broadway. Some of the other singers in Martha’s cast were Leontyne Price, Gloria Davy, and

107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
Rawn Spearman. The publicity that they received for *Four Saints in Three Acts* generated an opportunity for them to join an international tour of *Porgy and Bess*.

Figure 20. Martha Flowers in Porgy and Bess

Martha connected with the tour shortly after she finished her training at Juilliard. It was a milestone in her early professional career, and it also offered the chance to travel around the world. She remembers that they were viewed as the United States’ goodwill ambassadors to Russia, as the two countries were engaged in the “Cold War” and desperately needed to repair their relations. Over a three-year period, the company traveled to twenty-six countries and four continents. Her last engagement with *Porgy and Bess* was in New Zealand in 1965 (see Figure
20). Martha currently resides in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and manages a private voice studio. She is a retired faculty member from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Lucretia West

A flier posted in *Musical America* magazine, February 1956, includes a review that describes her as “A Marian Anderson in rejuvenated form.” Lucretia West’s luscious mezzo soprano voice captivated Europe around the same time that Mattiwilda Dobbs, Martha Flowers, and Lenora Lafayette were there. Although she and Lenora never met, they were both cited by a music critic in *High Fidelity* magazine as “…two of the most sumptuous, opulent voices in the world…”

Unlike her previously mentioned counterparts, Lucretia did not harbor a childhood dream to be an opera singer. She began her vocal studies rather late, and when she realized that she wanted to seriously pursue a career, she did not immediately enroll in a music conservatory. Instead, she studied privately, acquiring initial training from a teacher in Washington, DC. She later moved to New York to work with Mae Browner. It was in New York that she got the idea to go to Europe. Lucretia eventually traveled to France to join the Paris Conservatory. While there, she also met Mattiwilda Dobbs. “I went to Paris first of all thinking this would be a marvelous thing for anyone who wanted to sing in foreign languages,” she says. “It didn’t take long for the French singing teacher (Pierre Bernac) to tell me that the voice wasn’t right for what I wanted to do.” Bernac convinced her that the size and color of her voice was better suited for German lieder and oratorio. He also suggested that she would probably be a Wagnerian soprano before she would ever be right for French literature. Upon hearing this news, Lucretia

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saw no reason to remain in France, and she moved to Austria to continue her vocal studies and to audition. She became a widely acclaimed singer of oratorio and lieder and participated in a number of recordings. Two works include Mahler’s *Symphony No. 3* with the Berlin Philharmonic under the direction of Sir John Barbirolli and Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* with the Vienna State Opera Orchestra.

Although she was offered numerous opportunities to sing opera, she genuinely preferred singing oratorio. Excellent management kept her performance itinerary full, and whenever she was not singing, she was busy teaching. West served on the faculty at the Music Academy of Karlsruhe, Germany, for a number of years. She became a citizen of Switzerland, and resided in Zurich until the late 1990s.

![Image](https://www.durbeckarchive.com/bl-west.html)

**Figure 21.** From the Durbeck Archive  [www.durbeckarchive.com/bl-west.html](http://www.durbeckarchive.com/bl-west.html)
Westminster (USA), WN 18090

**The Subject of Management**

In her autobiography entitled, *The Inner Voice: The Making of a Singer*, Renee Fleming discusses one of her unintentional shortfalls as a beginning professional. She states, “For all the invaluable lessons I learned about being an opera singer while in school – whether chest
resonance, languages, style, or how to sing above the staff—no one had ever sat me down and
told me to make sure my airfare was covered when I sang in foreign countries. No one said a
word about bookings, interviews, or cancellation policies. In short, no one explained anything
about how the business works.”111 Fleming acknowledges that it is crucial for young singers to
familiarize themselves with various aspects of the business, since no one simply glides onto the
Metropolitan Opera stage and begins to sing.112 As her career grew, she hired employees who
were responsible for dealing with various aspects of the industry, and she relied on management
to promote her talent and to secure engagements.

The situation was somewhat different for Lenora Lafayette, who experienced intermittent
periods of self-management throughout her career. Lenora became highly skillful at scheduling
recitals and searching out auditions, but she knew that it was crucial to find an influential
manager who was unafraid to represent an African-American singer both in Europe and in the
United States, to which she desired to return eventually. Mattiwilda Dobbs believes that Lenora
Lafayette could have had equal success in North America had she only secured the right
representation. While reflecting on Lenora’s career, Dobbs stated:

You ask me why I thought she didn’t have the career she should’ve had. She was
a dramatic soprano. She could have sung a lot of different roles, and she came
along just when the color barrier had been broken. She was really just one year
younger than I. Our careers paralleled. We went to Europe at the same time. I
sang in ’56 and she was at the height of her career then. So she really could have
been invited to sing there (the Metropolitan Opera) same as Felicia Weathers or
Gloria Davy. In fact, Lenora was more of a dramatic soprano than Gloria Davy.
But I always thought that she (Lenora) should’ve had a bigger career. Maybe it
was because she didn’t have an agent.113

112 Ibid.
113 Dobbs, 24 February 2006.
According to Lenora’s relatives, she did have an agent. There was uncertainty, however, as to how long she was with this agent or how many agents she may have had over the course of her career. It is also uncertain whether or not Lenora ever got to sing for such prominent managers as Sol Hurok. Nephew Kirby Green remembers that during some periods of her independence, she became extremely frustrated because of mistreatment. “My aunt was a very trusting person,” he says. “There would be times when she would negotiate one price for her services and then get paid something smaller.”

Lenora had also, according to some relatives, sung for a talent scout who wished to bring African-American singers back to America. Although he appeared to be impressed by her talent, he ultimately chose someone else, and this was a discouraging blow. Despite the rejection, Lenora was persistent, and she strategically placed herself before audiences where she was most celebrated. She carved a niche for herself in the most receptive and fruitful places, and she forged a career according to her own terms.

Dobbs acknowledges that while her own voice gained wide recognition in Europe, it was the representation of Sol Hurok that brought her even greater visibility - especially in the United States. She adds that her first agent was not very useful. In fact, his best contribution was to put her in touch with another French agent after she enrolled at the Paris Conservatory. “And when I won the competition (Geneva 1951), that French agent started getting me work,” she adds. Eventually Mattiwilda was introduced to Hurok, who was one of the top managers in the industry at the time. Shirley Verrett, another noted African-American soprano from New Orleans, fondly refers to Hurok’s professionalism and managerial gifts in her autobiography, *I Never Walked Alone*:

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114 Green, 11 December 2002.
Sol Hurok was an elegant man. He was not tall and was a bit stout, but he carried his weight well. He dressed impeccably – always with a hat and cane. Mr. Hurok did not require a formal contract, simply a letter of agreement. He felt that if an artist and he were good for each other, that was fine. If not, the artist could get out of the agreement, as could he. It was a smooth operation. Hurok really managed a career…He had a keen sense of showmanship and stayed on top of the business because he always had his associates out looking for new talent. He was also not afraid to manage African-American artists or those of other races.115

Upon hearing Dobbs sing, Hurok was immediately impressed, and he arranged for her to be featured in America. Although Dobbs returned to the recital circuit after having spent many years with the Metropolitan Opera, she knows that superb management greatly influenced her American career.

When questioned about management, Martha Flowers avows that proper representation makes a difference with regard to how much exposure a singer gets. Although she did not choose to permanently reside in Europe, she realized that the continent offered limitless opportunities, and she was determined to take advantage of them. “I managed to get an impresario who booked my concerts in Europe, and his contacts were mostly European because he had been the manager and impresario for a famous Russian baritone by the name of Chaliapin. He had a lot of really wonderful…contacts, and since I had sung in most of these places with *Porgy and Bess*, it was easy for him to book concerts for me.”116

September was the beginning of touring season in Europe. She usually launched her trip in the Scandinavian countries because the weather was so beautiful. The tour often lasted a total of three months, and during that period she visited places like Holland, Greece, and Norway. Once she returned to the United States, she relied on bookings from an agency that planned


116 Flowers, 9 March 2006.
national concert tours. Additionally, she sang in lyceum productions at black colleges and universities in the Southern states.

Lucretia West believes that when she signed with the most influential manager in German-speaking Europe in the 1950s, it resulted in a steady flow of employment throughout her career. While studying in New York, she sang with an accompanist, Leo Taubman, whose brother was an important agent in Germany. “When I went to Austria, he (Leo) sent me to his brother not thinking that I would be thinking about management, but just that his brother knows people.” When Martin Taubman heard Lucretia sing, he immediately decided to represent her. He worked very hard to ensure that she had adequate publicity, and he kept her performance schedule booked.

Lenora Lafayette’s family always hoped that she would one day be more widely recognized in the United States. Although they did not realize this dream, they are certain that it was not an absence of talent that prevented her from securing strong management. Instead, they agree with the sentiment of nephew Kirby Green, who concludes, “You know, it’s all about…being in the right place at the right time...”

The Lure of Europe

Lenora never imagined that she would spend half of her life in Europe. In fact, she would have been quite satisfied to remain in the United States, had she been certain that her career would flourish. Even after first venturing away from home to Fisk University, she sought an opportunity to return to Baton Rouge and earn a master’s degree. The family

117 Kirby Green, interview by author, 15 March 2006, transcript, available from interviewer, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, La.

118 Elma Davis, interview by author, 7 June 2006, Baton Rouge, transcript, available from interviewer, Kyladee123@msn.com, Baton Rouge, La.
residence was “…about five blocks from Highland Road…, and you could go over…Highland Road and go right…to LSU.  It was walking distance,” Elma Davis remembers. Lenora anticipated the day when she would be able to take the short walk from Tennessee Street to the Louisiana State University campus and receive the excellent training that would begin her career. Those close to her also realized, however, that she was more devoted to the vision of becoming a singer than she was to honoring regional ties. She moved in the direction that her destiny pointed…which was ultimately to Basel, Switzerland.

When asked about the decision to spend most of her life abroad, Mattiwilda Dobbs insists that it was an easy choice. She acknowledges that singers such as Lenora and herself were focused on finding the best opportunities to perform; even if that meant that they would live in another part of the world. Dobbs states, “In my time, a lot of us would go to Europe and find jobs in Germany because Germany was just getting back on its feet after the war and had just lost a generation of singers and teachers. There were a lot of vacancies, which nowadays are not there anymore.” She thought that to sing before queens in Europe and then have to return to segregated facilities in the United States was extremely repressive. Thus she fought racial discrimination in the most effective way that she knew how: by refusing to sing before non-integrated groups, regardless of the financial or professional ramifications. “When I signed my first contract with Hurok, I said, “I’m not singing for segregated audiences. I just can’t do it.” So, I lost a lot of money in the South, you know.” Dobbs was fortunate, however, to become a change agent in her country. For example, she once declined to sing at the then segregated

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119 Note: Highland Road is a popular thoroughfare that extends through the South Baton Rouge community and the Louisiana State University campus.


121 Dobbs, 24 February 2006.
Municipal Auditorium in Atlanta, Georgia, but she later became the first African-American to sing on its stage after its integration in 1961.

Not only did there exist more employment opportunities for musicians in Europe during post World War II, but singers in Europe were often judged solely upon the basis of talent. Most Europeans possessed a deep and reverential love for the arts, and if Americans exhibited true artistic skill, then they were welcomed, no matter what color their skin. Anne Brown, the first soprano to portray the character of Bess in Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*, moved to Norway during the 1940s to further her career. She reflected on the profound appreciation demonstrated by the Norwegians after the war in an article that she wrote for *Ebony* magazine:

During the day, when I walked down the streets, they halted on the sidewalks occasionally and applauded. They were courageous. They had just come through the war, their land had been devastated, their houses were bad, their clothes poor, they had little food or coal. Still, they could smile and love music and the sun on the snow of their hills: still they could enjoy their night-lighted sky, savor the joys of skiing and talking to strangers of all kinds.122

Annabelle Bernard, another African-American soprano and Louisiana native who forged a successful career in Europe, spent thirty years engaged at the Berlin Opera. When asked why she had not, after achieving such fame in Germany, returned to the United States, she replied, “I didn’t want to lose what I had; I didn’t want to end up working at Woolworth’s.” 123 Both Bernard and Lafayette enjoyed the sincere admiration which regularly emanated from European audiences, but wrestled with a simple dream of integrating the New Orleans Opera in their native state of Louisiana. Bernard finally achieved this goal in 1976, one year after Lenora’s death.


It was mainly the desire to study languages that led Lucretia West to Europe, coupled with a burning aspiration to sing classical music. “…I found that very often here in the United States altogether, there are not enough people who can work with you in the German repertoire, and that was what I was interested in.” 124 Before moving to Paris, she sang at a few of the black colleges as a part of their lyceum program, but found the experiences to be unfulfilling. She felt that they did not really assist her professionally. “…It didn’t connect one to the other,” she states.

West was also quite cognizant of the racial discrimination prevalent in her own country, but she did not feel compelled to try to brave the barriers that had been set up for African-Americans at that time. “I didn’t live through it, really, because I didn’t try.” Gradually, she became content with her European dwelling and did not see the need to try to establish herself in America. “…I was quite satisfied to stay in Europe without any connection to the United States,” she shares. West found that Europe presented a warm and welcoming environment that was void of any discussion of color. When asked whether she ever encountered discrimination there, she quickly replied, “You see, the fact that you’re asking me about it brings to mind that I would never have had anyone in Europe ask me about race.”125 Just as she feels that Europe never denied her opportunities because of her race, she also believes that she was not awarded opportunities simply because of her race. Even though there were some in Germany who were fascinated with the warm timbre of the “black voice,” it was comforting to her to know that she was hired exclusively because of ability.

124 West, 2 March 2006.
125 Ibid.
Martha Flowers remembers how difficult it was for her to find engagements in New York after graduating from Juilliard. She laments the fact that despite all of their excellent training, African-American singers could not even secure a position in the Metropolitan Opera Chorus. Flowers believes that the lack of opportunity practically “forced” most of them to move abroad. “Black opera singers and concert singers just didn’t have a chance,” she declares. “You would have auditions, even for a manager or something, and they would turn you down.” 126 She recounts how she was once the recipient of an award that gave her the privilege of a Town Hall concert. “My reviews were extraordinary, because I think I sang very beautifully. But NO managers approached me,” she remembers. “Of course, I rejoined Porgy and Bess and stayed with that company, because there was no work in the States for me.” 127

When the Porgy and Bess tour ended and she could no longer work abroad, Flowers decided to return home and become inventive. She formed a touring quartet called Kaleidoscope which consisted of trained African-American vocalists who visited different parts of the country in the 1960’s, singing classical arias, duets, trios, and Negro spirituals. She reflects that the group frequently had to sleep in segregated quarters when they traveled the Southern states because it was next to impossible to find integrated hotels. Consequently, black artists had to rely on the hospitality of those who had invited them to perform. Flowers appreciates, however, that she remained in the United States long enough to witness significant social improvements for black Americans. She proudly tells of how one of Kaleidoscope’s members, Garret Morris, left the group in the late seventies and became a very successful television actor/comedian who

126 Flowers, 9 March 2006.
127 Ibid.
later frequently appeared on *Saturday Night Live*, a popular televised comedy series that originated in the early eighties.

Martha admits that she was never exceptionally wealthy from her craft, but she adds that she was also never destitute. She made a living at her singing, which is what she originally set out to do, and she relishes the fact that she was able to forge a professional path during an era that was especially challenging for her race. When things got to be too difficult in her country, she simply enjoyed the welcoming embrace of Europe. She has no regrets.

**Marriage and the Singer**

Intense focus frequently appears to be one of the traits of successful performers. Most of them agree that achievement is accompanied by sacrifice, and this sacrifice is often manifested in the area of relationships. Some believe that among the small percentage of African-Americans who sing opera, there are more females who wrestle with balancing a career and family than there are males. The demands of the profession can be overwhelming for both the singer and the singer’s spouse. Consequently, a number of women are resigned to being single. A few even admit that the overpowering desire to sing eventually outweighs the aspiration to be married.

There are other women who manage to find companionship outside of their race. From Marian Anderson to Denyce Graves, African-American women have discovered that romance can be achieved beyond the color line. Interracial marriages seem to be more widely accepted in Europe. Soprano Anne Brown alluded to this in her article for *Ebony* magazine entitled, “I Gave up My Country for Love.” In it, she shared the satisfaction that she obtained from discovering a new life with her Norwegian husband Thorlief Schjelderup. “I feel that I have gained much and lost very little in marrying Thorlief and making his country my home,” she stated. “My great problem has always been to combine a career and a family life. I must admit that in the past I
failed often. But today that is just a part of history.” 128 She went on to say that in Norway, “…my children and I are simply people who happen to have brown skins. The Norwegians may be curious about these brown skins, but there is not ugliness in the curiosity.” 129

By contrast, Lenora Lafayett did not attempt to cross racial boundaries to find companionship. Nor did she date very many men within her own race. The focus that she placed on her career was impenetrable, and she believed that a serious connection initiated too soon could be detrimental. “She had an idea of how far she would go with a relationship,” remembers Elma Davis, “…and very often she shut it off when persons wanted it to go further than she intended.” 130 Lenora maintained this policy until she met fellow musician George Byrd. He was handsome, intelligent, and ambitious. Before long his became the only name mentioned when Lenora was asked if there was someone special in her life. According to her Aunt Elma, one of Lenora’s greatest regrets was that she did not marry George. Family members and colleagues alike remember him as her most significant love. Byrd also bore romantic feelings for Lenora, but he desperately wanted to be a successful conductor, and he pursued his career with fervor. It was a romance that they both desired but found that they ultimately could not sustain.

Mattiwilda Dobbs used the same approach as Lenora throughout her initial training to become a singer. Dobbs shares that there were a number of eligible suitors, but she kept them at a safe distance because she sought to become a recitalist and did not want to be deterred. Things changed considerably, however, once she moved to Paris. It was there that she met a handsome

129 Ibid.
130 Davis, 7 December 2002.
script writer for Spanish Radio named Luiz Rodriquez. They fell in love and married, but tragically, illness claimed his life only a year after their wedding.

A considerable amount of time passed before Dobbs married again. She completed her contract with the Metropolitan Opera, returned to Europe, and began performing with the Stockholm Opera. While there, she caught the attention of a distinguished looking Swede by the name of Bengt Janzon who had been privately admiring her voice and her beauty. He was the public relations representative for the opera house, and he also worked as a journalist for a Swedish newspaper. Mattiwilda thought that he was very appealing, not merely because he was good-looking, but because he was aware of her talent, unintimidated by her achievements, and supportive of her career. So devoted was he to her success that after they married he took a three-year sabbatical from his own job in order to travel with her internationally. Dobbs admits that, had she not married such an encouraging spouse, she might very well have discontinued singing. Before she met Janzon, she traveled nearly everywhere on her own; and although international stardom possessed its rewards, she also found that the loneliness could be difficult.

Lenora shared this same sense of isolation, and she occasionally revealed it in her telephone calls to her mother. Nephew Kirby Green remembers his grandmother discussing the despondence that Lenora’s voice occasionally reflected during a telephone call. There were times when she felt that the challenges of her profession were utterly insurmountable. Nevertheless, she persevered and knew that her family was as close as a telephone call. She garnered strength from a close circle of friends and from her abiding faith in God.

Martha Flowers agrees that unless singers have supportive families and/or spouses, they can expect the road to be complicated. Lenora and Mattiwilda were able to rally a significant amount of support from their families, and Mattiwilda found a husband who was willing to make
some personal sacrifices to advance her career. Martha discovered early, however, that if she truly wanted to sing, she might have to forfeit marriage. Her beauty attracted dozens of reputable men, but she never seemed to find one who wanted to share her lifelong dream. “I was married twice and divorced very, very early in my career,” she states. “I never had the nerve to do that again.” It was not that Flowers wanted to remain single. She just could not suppress her fervent desire to sing. “I knew once I got married…that when I got into it I would have to give up the singing. I didn’t want to do that.”

To Martha Flowers, letting go of a career that she had worked diligently to build was simply not an option. Both of Martha’s husbands were African-American - one, a lawyer, and the other, a fellow musician from Juilliard. Despite the fact that neither marriage lasted, she is immensely grateful for what she learned from these relationships.

Lucretia West fell in love with an attractive man upon initially moving to Europe, and the fact that she was black was really not an issue for him. He asked her to marry him on several occasions, but she refused because she did not want the level of commitment that a marriage entailed. They enjoyed a nearly thirty-year liaison and continued to be mutually supportive of each other until his death.

A Male Perspective

What African-American baritone William “Bill” Ray has in common with the women who have been discussed in this chapter is that he attained his dream of becoming a professional opera singer beyond the borders of the United States. The distinction lies in how this initial opportunity (that ultimately led to his European career) came about. He did not “pursue” it. Instead, the life-changing prospect actually came to him.

131 Flowers, 9 March 2006.
In 1956, Ray had just graduated from Oberlin College, and he was doing some social work in Cleveland, Ohio. During the evenings, he sang performances of Puccini’s *The Cloak* at the Caramel Theatre, and one night he was approached by European talent scouts who had been sitting in the audience. They asked him to consider traveling abroad to participate in a Viennese production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, by Gian-Carlo Menotti. They believed that he would make an excellent king. He remembers the agent saying, “We can’t offer you your flight or even your trip over there, but we can make it worthwhile for you - if you should choose to come - with an honorarium that would be very generous.”\footnote{132} It was an appealing offer. And although it did not promise a permanent engagement, he decided to give it some thought. He went home and discussed it with his wife. “I think both of us decided that we were young enough that if it had been a mistake we could always come back to where we were and start all over again,” he states.\footnote{133}

They traveled to Vienna by ship and really did not know whether they would remain there for very long. From the time that Ray sang his first note on the Viennese stage, however, audiences were astounded. Many approached him about representation, and he eventually connected with two wonderful managers - one who handled his singing engagements, and another who secured radio and television opportunities. What at first had looked as though it would only last a few weeks ended up extending into many months. When Ray discovered that he would be able to make a full-time career out of his craft, he sent his wife back to the United States to pack up their belongings and to make arrangements for their children to enroll in a German school.


\footnote{133} Ibid.
Although he knows that his voice was a great attraction in Vienna and the surrounding areas, he also credits much of his success to the tenacity of his agent. Ray remembers singing for various directors and receiving an enthusiastic response, followed by the question, “But what are we going to do with him, because he’s black?” His agent insisted that a black man could also do white roles, saying to the directors, “Well, now, you have white people doing Otello….why can’t you have a black man put on make-up and do a white role?” The agent went a step further by taking pictures of Ray in white make-up. These photographs were presented at many of his operatic auditions. The unconventional approach convinced directors that the idea was feasible, and they began to cast him in crossover roles.

In many ways, William Ray was just as hopeful as Lenora that he would be able to first establish himself in the United States - although he recognized that his country still maintained some reticence towards black classical performers. “I wanted to have a career,” he says, “but because of having had Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson as mentors, I was pretty sure that my career as a serious classical singer would not grow as easily in America as it would in Europe. Europeans were receiving African-American artists much faster and more generously than Americans. Their whole idea about ‘artists’ is very different, because they somehow go beyond the color of a person and listen to the music.”

Even after Ray’s mentor, Paul Robeson, had become an international phenomenon and his notoriety had greatly increased, in America he still struggled with a consistent undercurrent of racism. In a biography authored by his son, Robeson is said to have written the following about a return visit to the United States and his fear of the country’s reaction to his portraying Othello on Broadway:

134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
Went to the theatre to see *Strictly Dishonorable*. Very amusing. Am so upset about American audience. Seems so terribly crude – there for entertainment, not because of love of theatre. Very strange feeling for me to be sitting in the balcony – I am most afraid to purchase orchestra seats for fear of insult, when in England my being in a theatre is almost an event…I feel so oppressed and weighted down. I am very alarmed about the chances of *Othello*. Don’t see how an American audience will accept the play…

During his time in Germany, William Ray became a part of a network of African-American singers who were working abroad. He recalls that oftentimes they would meet at airports or train stations while in transit to a particular singing engagement and exchange information about their ventures. This is how they were able to keep up with one another’s careers. It was in this manner that he first learned about Lenora Lafayette. “I heard that she had a beautiful voice and she was a very, very attractive woman, and did many roles that perhaps at that time she wouldn’t have been able to do in America.”

Ray admitted that even after twenty-five years of success in another country, he still understood that he was an American living in Europe. He also realized that he could not sing forever. Ray returned to his native United States in 1981. He joined the faculty at Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, Maryland, and later succeeded Mattiwilda Dobbs at Howard University when she entered full retirement.

During her lifetime, Lenora Lafayette not only gained the respect of numerous music critics, artistic directors, and conductors, but she also possessed the genuine admiration of her peers. Their commentary confirms that she was an outstanding singer whose voice was obviously well-suited for both the operatic and concert stage. Moreover, their remarks disclose some of the legitimate challenges that she faced as a female African-American vocalist, and that a number of the decisions she made regarding her career were in direct relationship to these challenges.

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challenges. The aforementioned contemporaries may have followed different paths towards professional success, but they still share some similarities with Lenora. Perhaps the most common thread that connects them (male and female alike) is their deeply imbedded tenacity, for they each had a profound desire to sing and took the necessary steps to make their dream come to fruition. In the process, they developed highly reputable careers during an era when success was much more difficult to attain, and they also set the tone for the generations that would follow. They opened doors that other young African-American singers continue to walk through with pride and confidence.
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

The musical expedition of Lenora Lafayette reveals that she was an accomplished vocalist whose fortitude helped her to achieve many cultural milestones. While her greatest successes were not attained in her native country of the United States, her triumphs are quite significant and are no less worthy of recognition.

This study has retraced the steps that Lenora Lafayette took towards her professional goals, using the oral history of surviving relatives, friends, and contemporaries, as well as the documented history of articles, reviews, and photographs. Although her premature death in 1975 prevented her from sharing her story in her own words, the commentary of those who knew her has served as a guidepost, providing cohesiveness and clarity to her journey. Their remarks not only confirm her accomplishments, but they also provide an in-depth look at the many experiences that helped to shape Lafayette’s personhood. It is hoped that the results of this study will help perpetuate her legacy and will increase the amount of printed material regarding her numerous musical exploits.

Lafayette’s talent was both acknowledged and praised by some of the most widely respected critics of her time. She was listed by famous *New York Times* music critic Howard Taubman among some of the most noted African-American singers of the era, and she consequently deserves to be permanently recognized in the annals of American history. She is important among African-Americans because she operated as a pioneer, traveling uncharted territory for her race and then making a significant impact. She is important to Louisiana because, despite the perils of racism, she became one of its many talented treasures – be they black or white – who emerged from the beautiful state to make a difference in the world.
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“Journal Entry on Lenora’s Departure for Europe.” Figure 4, p.17. Reprint courtesy of Jacques Green.

“Journal Entry Referencing George Byrd’s Birthday,” Figure 13, p.31. Reprint courtesy of Jacques Green.


“Lenora as Aida at the Basel Stadt Opera.” Figure 5, p.20. Reprinted by permission, from Elma Davis. Photograph by Hugo Siegfried © 1953 by Times-Picayune States Roto Magazine.

“Lenora as Madama Butterfly at the Basel Stadt Opera.” Figure 6, p.17. Reprinted by permission, from Basel Stadt Opera. Photographer Unknown. Contact author Kyladee123@msn.com.

“Lenora in Don Carlos.” Figure 11, p.29. Photograph courtesy of Elma Davis.

“Lenora in Madama Butterfly.” Figure 10, p.27. Photograph courtesy of Elma Davis.

“Lenora Lafayette and George Byrd.” Figure 12, p.30. Photograph courtesy of Jacques Green.

“Lenora With Friends at McKinley Senior High School.” Figure 16, p.37. Photograph courtesy of Jacques Green.

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Wilson, Evelyn L. Laws, Customs and Rights – Charles Hatfield and His Family: A Louisiana 
A 1947 graduate in music from Fisk has scored a success recently singing the leading role in Verdi's opera, "Aida" at London's Covent Gardens. The story of this success appeared in the February 9th issue of Time Magazine.

She is Lenora Lafayette, a native of Baton Rouge, La., who received her degree from Fisk as a voice major five years ago then studied at the Juilliard School of Music. Miss Lafayette went to Europe in 1950 on a traveling and studying scholarship.

Under the direction of John Barbirolli, Miss Lafayette made her appearance as Aida on a few hours notice, filling a spot originally to be sung by a noted European soprano who had taken ill with laryngitis.

According to reports, Miss Lafayette received "an enthusiastic welcome" from the Covent Garden audience as she demonstrated "stage presence" .... "her voice reached to the farthest tiers of the opera house."

A London Daily Express music critic wrote that Miss Lafayette had "a voice of exceptional beauty and vitality."

Miss Lafayette received her first operatic experience in a production of "The Barber of Figaro" presented by the Fisk Music Department in 1946.
Thursday, April 22, 8:15 p.m.
Fisk Memorial Chapel

Lenora Lafayette, Soprano
Ann Gamble At The Piano

PROGRAM

I
Requieum and Arias: Aia Spieldato: ................................... George Frederic Handel
from the opera Amadigi (1715) ........................................... (1665-1759)

II
Casto: Lasciati morire ................................................... Claudio Monteverdi
from the opera Orfeo (1607) ............................................. (1567-1643)
Let me die! For who can comfort me is such misfortune, in such great misery?
I let me die!

Aria: Cung animan gementen ........................................ Giovanni Pergolesi
from the Stabat Mater .................................................. (1710-1736)
A setting of a portion of the sequence concerning the sorrowing mother of Christ
at the cross, to be sung on Friday before Palm Sunday and at the head of the Seven
Robes, the third Sunday in September.

III
Lachen und Weinen ..................................................... Franz Schubert
(1797-1828)
There are so many things to laugh and to cry about when we are in love. I laughed for joy
this morning, and why must I cry now that it is morning? I don’t know. There are so many Things
to laugh and to cry about when we are in love. Last evening I wept in my pain, and now, my heart,
how can you wake up laughing this morning? —Frederick Barlow.

Die junge Nonne ......................................................... Schubert
The nun speaks: “Storms and thunder rock the house, lightnings flash like outbursts of passion.
I have come out of this storm into peace, I am the bride of the heavenly Bridegroom. The ball
of approaching mourning rings after above the tumult. I follow the call.” —Johann Nikolaus, Isaac von
Cranghter.

Nacht und Traeume ...................................................... Schubert
The holy sight descends upon us, bringing us dreams which shall steal through the soul of man as
the moonlight fills the land. We listen happily to them, and cry when day returns, “Come back,
holy night! Charming dreams, come back again!” —Matthais von Collin.

Die Almacht ............................................................. Schubert
Great is Jehovah, the Lord; Heaven and Earth testify to His great power. Tis heard in
the fierce raging storm, in the torrent’s loud thundering roar. Tis heard in the rustling of leaves
in the forest, seen in the waving of golden fields, in the array of flourish flowers. Tis seen in myriads
stars that stud the heavens. Fierce it sounds in the thunder’s loud roll, and flames is the Lightning’s
brilliant quivering flash. Yet clearer the trembling heart to this proclaiming Jehovah’s power. To
the eternal Lord God Almighty took thus praying to Heaven and hope for grace and for mercy.
Great is Jehovah, the Lord.—Johann Ludolphus Pycker.

Soprano
Heard In
Fisk Festival

BY SYDNEY DALTON

The first musical event of the Fisk music and art festival occurred Thursday night, when a
former Fisk student, Lenora Lafayette, gave a recital recital at the Memorial Chapel of the univer-
sity.

This young singer, who has enjoyed considerable success in Europe, presented a dramatic soprano
voice of most remarkable quality. There is color, richness and volume in her tones. While it is
not completely under control, at times showing some effort and evidencing a slight wavering, it is
nevertheless, a voice of consider-
sable beauty.

Material Not Often Heard

The program offered some material not frequently heard in reci-
tals, as, for example, the “Cantiones” from Pergolesi’s “Stabat
Mater,” which Miss Lafayette sang
in flowing style. There was also a
recitative and aria from one of
Handel’s forgotten operas, “Arab-
dios,” and some British folk song
arrangements by Britten.

Four of the six songs in De-
busse’s “Arlequin Ondine” were
incidentally, the composer’s dedi-
cated to Mrs. Gardner. In Mrs.
Gardner was a voice of great
clearness and correctness. It 
with some lack of force.

In the aria, “Meditate rumination” from Verdi’s “Addio,” the young
singer strove to take full ad
vantage of the dramatic possibilities
of the piece, and her voice was robust
and at its best.

British Folk Songs

In a beautiful “Folk songs of the
British Isles” capably arranged by
William Britten, with accompaniments in modern forms that would surprise
the folk back home, Miss Lafayette
sang with enthusiasm and consider-
sable understanding.

Ann Gamble, a skillful pianist and member of the Fisk faculty, played
helpful accompaniments.

Tonight the Fisk University
Choir under Harry C. von Burgan
presented a program and the
musical attraction will end with a
concert to be given by the Northen
Gentlemen, returned to the John Work, on
Sunday at 5:15.
IV

Scene: Ritorna vincitor! ................................. Giuseppe Verdi  
From the opera Aida  
(1813-1901)

Return victorious! What can my lips pronounce language so implausible? Wish him victor over my father, over him who weeps as an only one! I may be restored to my country, to my kingdom, to the high station I now perform; if I may wish him conqueror over my brothers! Even now I see him stained with the blood so cherished, amid the clanging triumphs of the Egyptian battalions! Behind his chariot a King—my father—as a fettered captive!

Yes, God! Watch over me, those words seem unsaid! A father restores to me, his heart-broken daughter. Oh, scatter their arms! Forever crush our foe!

Ahh! what wild words do I utter? Of my affection have I no recollection? That sweet love that consoled me, a pining captive, like some bright sunny ray shining on my sad life? Shall I invoke destruction on the man for whom in love I languish! Ahh! never yet on earth lived one whose heart was torn by wilder anguish!

These names so holy, of father, of lover, no more dare I now utter or even recall. Abashed and trembling, to heaven I cry that my prayers for both, for both my tears would fall. Ahh! all my prayers seem transformed to blaspheing, to suffer is a curse, dark slum to sift; through darkest light I wander as dreamt, and so cruel is my woe that I faint would die.

Merciful gods! look from on high! Pity these tears hopelessly shed. Love, fatal power, mystic and dread, break thou my heart, now let me die! Merciful gods! Oh, hear my cry!

INTERMISSION

V

Ariettes Oubliées (Paul Verlaine) .................. Claude Achille Debussy  
(1861-1918)

1. C'est l'extase langoureuse  
Langid rapture, bliss of dreaming,  
When pallid moonbeams are streaming,  
Love is weary; now the forest  
gently waves in the breeze.  
Hark! a choir of tiny voices  
timidly sings in the trees.

O cool murmur faintly swelling,  
And silver mist gently swelling;  
A voice through the darkness is calling,  
plaint of petals slowly falling  
or purchase of pebbles rolling  
to the ceaseless wave of the brook.

You faint lament ever ringing,  
you soulful soul softly singing  
through the darkness, it is ours:  
'Tis thine, mine, ever floating,  
humbly praying, fondly gazing  
on the lovely evening hours.

2. Il pleure dans mon cœur  
Tears falling on my heart,  
and the rain on the city;  
Langid fancies impart  
gloom and grief to my heart.

O pitter pattr of rain  
on the soil, on the tiles!  
For a heart full of pain  
faintly patters the rain.

O sorrow deep that galls me!  
but what will befalls me!  
What? Has there been an treason?  
Thou mornest without reason?

Ahh! 'tis the saddest sadness  
that I cannot conceive  
why I fret, why I grieve;  
And yet deep is my sadness.

3. L'ombre des arbres  
See the faint shadows of trees  
that fall on the river,  
falement as they quiver.  
Whilst on the soaring,  
tremulous branches above  
is softly wailing the dove.

Thou sweet, O pallid wanderer:  
you shadows that tremble,  
closely thine limb self resemble.  
Thus lament all thy hopes  
that like dust are now scattered,  
yth fonded visions now shattered.
THE ALUMNI ASSOCIATION OF FISK UNIVERSITY
NASHVILLE CLUB

PRESENTS

LENORA LAFAYETTE
SOPRANO

ANNE GAMBLE KENNEDY
ACCOMPANIST

IN A CONCERT AT THE
FISK MEMORIAL CHAPEL

SUNDAY EVENING, JUNE 5, 1966
EIGHT O'CLOCK

ADMISSION, TWO DOLLARS
July 9, 1951

Secretariat of the International
Competition for Musical Performers
Conservatoire de Musique
Geneva, Switzerland

Gentlemen:

This is to certify that Lenora Guendalyn Lafayette was a student of Juilliard School of Music during the academic year 1948-49.

She was enrolled in the Special Studies plan with a major in Voice. Her application form states that she was the recipient of a $2,000.00 grant from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation.

Sincerely yours,

Frederick Fraussits
Assistant Dean

PP: sf
COURT GARDEN OPERA

THE

Printed Matter, 16, 1953
hurry to your nearest Jäger

for hand-picked presents—

Jäger

At the Gärtner House Regent Street London

The garden music opened in two pieces. Leopold Drury

Leaser - Charles Fielder

THE COVENT GARDEN ORCHESTRA

Conductor - Douglas Robertson

THE COVENT GARDEN OPERA CHOIRS

Producer - Robert Hemsman

Conductor - Sir John Barbirolli

Secretary and Companion by Sophie Pethold

GRAND OPERA IN THREE ACTS

MADAME BUTTERFLY

Wednesday, 16th December, 1933
ACT I
SYNOPSIS
MADAN BUTTERFLY
CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE
LIONENE MILLS
W. E. VANDERPOOL's mother
WILLIAM EDWARDS
The Doctor, bookkeeper at a store
NORMA LEWIS
Henry Littlewood
ROSE M. TRAVERS
Inora Lavallée
W. E. VANDERPOOL
Miss Waters
Samantha's servant in Manhattan
MONIQUE STANDER
Rose's servant in Manhattan
DOROTHY RICE
Goa's stepmother
JOHN LACAN
Lionene's fiancée, U.S. Navy
APPENDIX B

LETTERS OF PERMISSION
AFFIDAVIT

PARISH OF ORLEANS

STATE OF LOUISIANA

BEFORE ME, the undersigned authority, personally came and appeared Dr. Kirby Green, M.D., a resident and domiciliary of Orleans Parish, State of Louisiana, who after first being duly sworn, did depose and say that:

1. He and his brother, Jacques Lafayette Green, are the true and lawful heirs of Lenora Lafayette, hereinafter called decedent, by virtue of their right to represent their mother, Dorothy Lafayette Green, now deceased, and the only sibling of the decedent, in the succession of the decedent;

2. He, his brother, and other family members, are aware of and support the research efforts of Kyla Dean Pitcher, a Doctoral Candidate at Louisiana State University, on the life and musical career of the decedent; and that

3. He and his brother waive all confidentiality requirements under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, as Amended, and therefore, direct any and all educational institutions, including Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, and The Juilliard School, Music Division, in New York, New York, to allow Kyla Dean Pitcher to examine all records of the decedent’s enrollment and/or attendance at those institutions and photo copy same.

KIRBY GREEN, M.D.

SWORN TO AND SUBSCRIBED before me this 22nd day of February 2006, at New Orleans, Louisiana.

Walter Wilkerson, Attorney and Notary Public
NAME: Lyda Fisher
ADDRESS: 7017 Cypress Blvd
        Baton Rouge, LA 70808

DATE: February 4, 2004
RE: Germaine Lafayette

We do not have this information in the collection.

Materials from Special Collections do not circulate.

Information will be forwarded as soon as possible.

The cost of duplication of an 8x10 glossy print is $25.00, plus $5.00 for mailing. Please make a check out in the amount of $30.00 payable to Fabry's Studio. We must receive payment before the photograph(s) can be taken to the photographer. Photographs will be forwarded by Fabry's Studio. There is a $25.00 usage fee for each photograph. Please make check payable to the Fisk University Franklin Library.

Special Collections is closed during June and July.

☑ Enclosed is the information requested.

Beth M. Howse
Special Collections
Librarian
Request for reproduction of manuscript material

The Lila Acheson Wallace Library of The Juilliard School will provide reproductions of manuscript material from its collection under the following conditions:

The material will not be duplicated, quoted, or published in whole or in part, without advance written permission of The Juilliard School.

The material will be used solely for the purpose of personal study, as described below.

Item requested for reproduction: Lenora Lafaytette materials

Name: Kyla Pitcher.
Address: 5617 Congress Blvd, Baton Rouge, LA 70808
Tel. no.: 225-728-1663
Institutional affiliation: Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge
Purpose of study: To be used as documentation of the Lafaytette attendance @ Juilliard in the monograph of Kyla Pitcher
I agree to the conditions specified above

Signature

Date

Library approval

Authorized signature

Juilliard
BESTÄTIGUNG

Basel, den 27. Juni 2006

Sehr geehrte Frau Pitcher

Wir bestätigen Ihnen gerne, dass Sie die von uns erhaltenen Ectas von Leonora LaFayette in Ihrer Dissertation und einer daraus resultierenden Publikation publizieren dürfen. Da uns der Urheber der Fotografien unbekannt ist, die Sängerin aber an unserer Institution tätig war, können wir Ihnen nur die Genehmigung über die uns betreffenden Rechte erteilen. Wir empfehlen Ihnen aber den Hinweis in Ihrer Dissertation, dass der Fotograf der Abbildungen nicht eruiert werden konnte und dass sich dieser oder seine Rechtsnachfolger an den Verlag oder den Autor wenden sollten.

Wir bitten Sie ein Belegexemplar Ihrer Publikation zu senden und verbleiben mit guten Wünschen für Ihre Arbeit.

Freundliche Grüße

Simon Baur
Theater Basel, Archiv
CONFIRMATION

Basel, June 27th 2006

Dear Ms. Pitcher,

We are happy to confirm that you are allowed to publish the cetas (slides) of Lenora Lafayette, which you have received from us, in your dissertation and in a resulting publication. Since we do not know the initiator/photographer of these photographs, but the singer was working at our institute, we can only give you permission of the rights concerning us. However, we recommend a note in your dissertation, that the photographer of the pictures could not be found out, and that this person or his/her successor in interest/legal successor should contact the publisher or the author.

We kindly ask you to send us a specimen copy of your publication, and remain with good wishes for your work.

Kind regards,

Simon Baur
Theater Basel, Archive
Kyla Pitcher
5617 Congress Blvd
Baton Rouge, LA 70808
USA

18th February 2006

Dear Kyla,

Please find enclosed the material described by my colleague Caroline relating to Leonora Lafayette.

I've included all the material in her file – unfortunately there isn't as much as we would like, but I hope that you will find it useful. I've also included photocopies of the programme of her Madame Butterfly performance in December 1953, but as she was a last-minute substitute for the role of Aida in February of that year (replacing Giselle Brouwenstijn), she isn't mentioned in the programme for that performance. However, the information would be very similar to that contained in the programme for Butterfly and we can send this on if you would find it useful – just send us an email.

Please don't hesitate to contact us if you need more information about the Royal Opera House.

Best wishes and good luck with your research.

Rachel Hayes

archive.enquiries@roh.org.uk
020 7212 9353
VITA

Kyla D. Pitcher is a native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She received her Bachelor of Music degree from Howard University, in Washington, D.C. in 1994. She was the recipient of a Graduate Assistantship from the University of South Carolina where she earned a Master of Music degree in opera theatre. While there she studied voice with Gene Ferguson and Tanya Currier, and she also received extensive training in opera theatre from Talmage Fauntleroy.

Ms. Pitcher is currently an Adjunct Professor at Baton Rouge Community College where she teaches music appreciation. She is a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Musical Arts at Louisiana State University and is a student of Robert Grayson.