

QUEEN CREOLE

Givonna Joseph
on a mission
to revive old
classical music
by New Orleans
people of color

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Before there was jazz and other genres of music New Orleans is widely known for, there was classical music and opera. But it wasn't just the works of famous European composers that were being performed here in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Bubbling alongside the city's thriving, Old World-influenced cultural scene were the compositions of some of New Orleans' most gifted Creole composers and other composers of color.

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Until recently, many of these works by New Orleans' people of color have been absent from public stages. Some believe it was done intentionally during the suppression that occurred in the Jim Crow era. Handwritten musical scores with French lyrics lay dormant on the shelves of archival storage facilities, gathering dust, and forgotten like the composers themselves.

However, a revival is reaching new heights in dusting off these long-buried compositions and bringing them to the stage. Prominent among those leading the way is Givonna Joseph, co-founder of the nonprofit opera company, OperaCréole.

Givonna is a native New Orleanian and a mezzo-soprano (alto) who has been singing since childhood and later sang roles with New Orleans Opera and in their Opera Chorus. She is now nearly making a career out of researching and producing the French-penned scores of such early Creole composers as Edmond Dédé and father and son Charles Lucièn Lambert Sr. and Lucièn-Léon Guillaume Lambert.

Givonna is also focused on producing and performing in later 20th century operatic works by African American composers, most notably Scott Joplin, William Grant Still and others. In recent years OperaCréole has performed Joplin's "Treemonisha" and Still's "Minette Fontaine," a 1958 work set in 19th century New Orleans.

In a May 2017 interview for "The New Yorker" magazine, Givonna spoke of her passionate devotion to bringing these long-forgotten compositions by people of color to light. "I feel pulled," she said in the article. "I have a responsibility to these people; to put their music and their stories out there. It's a joyful feeling to feel compelled to do this, and I feel like if I don't there's something wrong; that I've failed them in some way."

Interviewed for Breakthru Media magazine, Givonna related what initially sparked her interest in the Creole and African American composers and their works and how OperaCréole came into being. In 2010, in the role of Lily and



as a chorus member for a New Orleans Opera production of "Porgy and Bess," a Gershwin Brothers composition with an all-Black cast, "I connected with other African American singers in the chorus," she explained.

"They had similar interests as me in this older music and were just as enthusiastic as I was about bringing it to light and presenting it. And so, a year later, my daughter (Aria Mason, who is also a singer) and I co-founded OperaCréole with that objective in mind."

The ensemble, with close to a dozen male and female singers in all four voice categories, has made a standard practice of staging at least one major work by a composer of color per season, along with other programs featuring shorter compositions by them. OperaCréole struck a high note in 2017, reviving the younger Lambert's opera, "La Flamenca," with its first performance on American soil, 114 years after its premiere and only-known stagings in Paris.

After a two-year, COVID-related hiatus, Opera Créole re-emerged at the Marigny Opera House on the last weekend of May 2022 with "La Fête Créole," a first-time, well-attended, three-day festival of old Creole compositions, as well as popular arias from the standard operatic repertoire. Among the highlights of the festival were the presentations of several never-before-performed 19th century works of Edmond Dédé and an evening of arias from standard operas that had their American premieres in New Orleans,

sung by world-renowned soprano, Mary Elizabeth Williams. Givonna sang solo on several of the Dédé works, as did other Opera Créole roster artists.

"I am so happy over the great turnout we got for our first festival," Givonna said. "It gives me the encouragement I need to continue what we're doing, bringing these great musical works back to life."

A self-described "New Orleans girl through and through," being descended from hundreds of years of European, Caribbean and African lineage, Givonna grew up a middle child between two boys in the city's Gert Town neighborhood. She attended the Catholic schools of St. Monica and Xavier Prep where she studied chorus under renowned jazz vocalist, Germaine Bazzle. "She was very inspiring, giving me solos and encouragement," Givonna said of Bazzle.

During roughly the same time frame she was also enrolled in the acting and musical theatre program at the NORD Theater, studying under Ty Tracy and Bob Bruce. "I learned so much from them as well," she said.

Givonna graduated from Loyola University with a degree in voice and



Givonna and her daughter Aria Mason



Aria Mason

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music therapy. She married (and later divorced) the recently deceased Dr. Gilbert Mason Jr., the son of a Civil Rights pioneer who led the integration of the beaches in Biloxi, Mississippi. The couple had one daughter, Aria, named after the opera term for a vocal solo. Givonna later went to live and work in Houston for ten years. During her time there she opened a show for Ray Charles.

Admittedly somewhat of a latecomer to the discovery of interest in old-time Creole music, Givonna nonetheless proved to be a quick learner. She credits the late soprano, Thais St. Julien, for introducing her to it and added, “I was singing some Dédé pieces before we started Opera Créole. Aria and I went to Paris and sang at the American Church there in 2008. We first presented some of these songs to them and we were well-received.”

In 2000, Givonna, while education director for the Louisiana Philharmonic Orchestra, became aware of a CD recorded by the Hot Springs (Arkansas) Orchestra conducted by Richard Rosenberg and featuring compositions by Dédé and the Lamberts. The pieces performed on the CD were retrieved from the archives of Xavier University and the Amistad Research Center at Tulane University.

“Finding out about these recordings definitely started pushing me in the direction I needed to go to find out what more there is to do,” she said.

That process of digging through the archives led to the discovery of Dédé’s unproduced 550-page opera, “Morgiane ou, the Sultan of Isbahan” (Iraq), which she hopes to produce with a full orchestra. Factoring in the costs of translating, tran-

scription, paying singers and musicians, plus related production expenses, Givonna and others with a similar objective plan to apply for grants and hold fundraisers in an effort to round up the necessary funding.

Fondness for other musical genres including – surprisingly – country music. While acknowledging the Afro-Caribbean roots of zydeco, jazz, percussive music, brass bands and the like, she also enjoys listening to Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline, Dolly Parton and other country stars. “I like good voices,” is her simple explanation.

So what lies ahead for this busy, multi-talented, dedicated vocalist and musical scholar? The answer is more of the same: more presentations of seldom-performed or never-before-performed works by composers of color for the next cultural season and beyond.

And still another objective on the wish list for Givonna is a statue of Dédé – and possibly the Lamberts – in New Orleans’ Louis Armstrong Park, adjacent to Congo Square where music with Afro-Caribbean roots has historically been performed and is still commemorated.

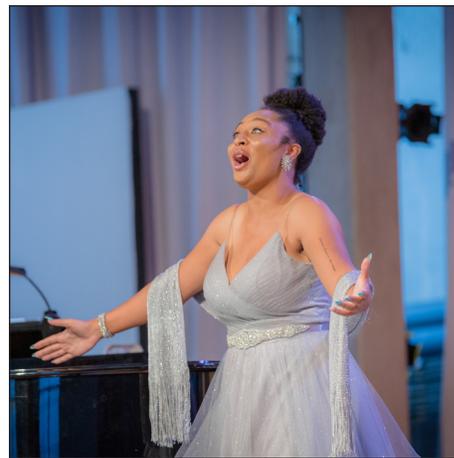
“There are people who are waiting in their graves for their recognition,” Givonna said. “It would be great to uplift them as a part of our history that people just don’t know about.”

For more information about Opera Créole visit their website at www.operacreole.com or their Facebook page.

SCENES FROM LA FETE CREOLE – MAY 26-28,2022



Givonna Joseph and Luther Gray



Taylor White



Kenya Jackson



Tyrone Chambers

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