

# Harry Lawrence Freeman: Pioneering the African American Grand Opera

Ben Worley



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## INTRODUCTION

**T**HE VERSION OF GRAND OPERA created by African American composer Harry Lawrence Freeman (1869–1954) proved to be revolutionary in melding the well established Western European musical practice of opera with the local culture for which his works were composed. Freeman’s combining of traditional European Romanticism with African American spirituals and sound ideals sparked the interest of other African American composers to write opera in a similar manner, and in doing so created a viable new subgenre, which I refer to as African American grand opera.<sup>1</sup>

Although Freeman’s works are not widely known today, their grandeur has been compared with that of Romantic Era dynamo Richard Wagner (1813–1883), whose example, in fact, greatly influenced the prolific American. Such dedication, in part, earned Freeman a telling nickname from one critic as “The Colored Wagner,” which the composer wore as a badge of honor.<sup>2</sup> Through self-promotion, long-lasting perseverance, and cultivated artistry, Freeman was able to pierce the walls of racist oppression and elitism to witness the performance of several of his operatic works in venues either severely circumscribed for African American artists or historically off limits entirely, which ranged from radio broadcasts to being programmed by major orchestras, and even staged with interracial casts.

While Freeman contributed to other genres, notably arrangements of spirituals, and composition of minstrel songs, orchestral music, and ballet, his passion was for opera, which led him to brand a new type for the stage. To this end, he blended the style of French grand opera with the power and precision of Wagnerian music drama, the extended tonality and chromatic harmony of the late Romantics, and the spiritually uplifting segments of African American culture, that is, spirituals and gospel.

Although Freeman is not entirely absent from the musicological record, existing biographic study is littered with subtle racism and a dispassionate lack of depth. The majority of the biographic facts are echoed from author to author with naïveté rather than true scholarship. Because of this historical circumstance, scholarship on Freeman’s accomplishments and his devotion to music education lacks scope. Consequently, those few valuable resources warrant mention, most of which are contemporary with Freeman’s life and career: Edward Hipsher’s *American Opera and Its Composers*

(1927);<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Brawley's article, "A Composer of Fourteen Operas" from *The Southern Workman* (1933); and especially Celia Davidson's 1980 doctoral dissertation "Operas by Afro-American Composers," which contains over 100 pages devoted to Freeman and his works.<sup>4</sup> Davidson's study represents the most complete biography and worklist to date, although her recording of sources referenced is significantly lacking. Among her most valuable contributions is the information she obtained from an interview with Valdo Freeman, the composer's son, a baritone who was frequently featured in leading roles in his father's operas.

I have organized this article into four parts: 1) a biographic sketch necessary to understand Freeman's background as a post-Civil War African American and a discussion of aspects of his career; 2) an outline of his output as a composer in early twentieth century America; 3) a discussion of his reception, noting awards and acknowledgments that Freeman received, as well as the differences in the tone of the reviewers who wrote for African American and mainstream newspapers; and 4) a consideration of his legacy, a short description of Freeman's relationship with Joplin, and speculation on the lasting effect Freeman had on African American music, especially opera.

## BIOGRAPHY

Born into a well-to-do family in Cleveland, Ohio, Freeman had many opportunities to learn music. His father was a carpenter, and his mother, who died early in Freeman's childhood, was reported to have had a beautiful voice.<sup>5</sup> Freeman showed early signs of impressive musicianship when at the age of ten he could play many melodies by ear on the reed organ, a skill he learned while attending public school. Because of familial affluence, Freeman opted to attend Cleveland's Central High School, where he organized and directed a boy's quartet and sang soprano. The quartet performed mostly at school events and churches in the area. Its most prominent performance venue was Euclid Avenue Baptist, a church frequently attended by Standard Oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller, who was said to have praised the quartet's performances.<sup>6</sup>

After high school Freeman moved to Denver, Colorado, and began his early compositional phase. He

was working in the Denver Men's Club when a friend with tickets to Wagner's *Tannhäuser* (1845) invited him to see the opera.<sup>7</sup> This memorable work of art changed Freeman's life forever. In an article published by the *Washington Post* in 1898, Freeman himself confessed that after experiencing *Tannhäuser*, he could not sleep, arose at five o'clock the next morning, and wrote down his first composition.<sup>8</sup> Smitten instantly with the idea of composition, he composed a wordless song for piano every day for the next 200 days. Eventually, Freeman discovered that he could also write the lyrics for his pre-made songs. In the *Post* article, Freeman boasted that these songs and his first two operas were composed without the benefit of a single composition or music theory lesson.<sup>9</sup>

With a new sense of purpose, Freeman returned to Cleveland and studied composition with Johann Beck (1856–1924), founder of the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra. Beck became Freeman's first mentor and advocate, giving him the opportunity to test his new compositions with the premier ensemble of Cleveland. Under Beck's baton, three selections from one of Freeman's early operas called *Nada* (1893) were the first of his compositions to be played in public. According to Davidson, this presentation of Freeman's music was the first time an African American composer was taken seriously by an all-white, major orchestra in the United States.<sup>10</sup>

After receiving rave reviews of his music, Freeman moved to Chicago and became the music director and composer-in-residence for the Pekin Theater, where he composed his only ballet, *The Witches Dance* (1907), which was featured in a comedy sketch called *Captain Rufus*.<sup>11</sup> While working at the Pekin, Freeman also had a two year tenure at Wilberforce University in Wilberforce, Ohio, teaching music classes. With the experience of teaching at Wilberforce, Freeman resettled in New York City to open the Freeman School of Music in Harlem, which *The [Indianapolis] Freeman* described as "one of the most reliable in the city."<sup>12</sup>

In Harlem the Freeman family saw many successes. Along with the Freeman School of Music, the Freeman School of Grand Opera and the Negro Grand Opera Company (NGO) were established, institutions that provided Freeman opportunity to have his works performed. Valdo Freeman handled the business side and H. L. Freeman was a professor and artistic director of these organizations. Carlotta, his wife, possessed a beau-

tiful dramatic or spinto soprano voice and was often the prima donna for her husband's works. With the Negro Grand Opera Company, Freeman broadcast his opera *Voodoo* (1913, revised 1924) on the radio in 1928.<sup>13</sup> In this revolutionary grand opera he combined Wagnerian declamatory singing and *Leitmotiv* with the rhythms and harmonies of African American spirituals and jazz. For this work he was awarded the William E. Harmon prize (\$400 and a gold medal) in 1930.<sup>14</sup> Freeman died of a heart condition in March of 1954; his wife of almost 60 years died in June that same year.<sup>15</sup>

### HIS MUSIC

According to Davidson, Freeman completed twenty-two operas over the course of his professional career.<sup>16</sup> This number varies considerably, however, in almost every source in which Freeman and his works are cited. According to Davidson's interview with Valdo Freeman, even he did not know the exact number of operas that his father wrote and lists several reasons for this confusion.

1. A number of compositions were lost when Freeman moved from Denver to Cleveland, from Cleveland to New York, and from one home or studio to another in New York City itself.
2. Freeman changed the names of some of his operas after they were produced, leading to a possible overestimation of his total number.
3. The composer frequently mentioned the titles of planned and incomplete works to friends and interviewers. This information was often disseminated in print but some of these works were never finished.<sup>17</sup>

With access to the Freeman scrapbook and scores at Columbia University, Davidson concluded that of the twenty-two operas Freeman is thought to have completed, only twelve were presented to the public in either staged performances or concert versions and none were published.<sup>18</sup> From this body of work I have chosen to discuss in detail Freeman's second complete opera, *The Martyr*, composed in 1893, as it presents the clearest example of African American Grand Opera. Freeman's music in *The Martyr* established him as a composer of late Romantic grand opera with its large orchestras and casts, dance movements, and complex, dramatic plots delivered with heart wrenching emotional melodies.

Grand opera is a mid-nineteenth century French subgenre that was directed toward the middle class. To appeal to this audience, it featured lower or middle class heroes in sensational circumstances. The "grand" in "grand opera" itself stems from the lavish means for full productions. The operas had large numbers in terms of cast, chorus, and orchestra members, as well as segments devoted to ballet, betraying their origin in the French opera tradition.<sup>19</sup> Wagner's early operas were nearly exact models of this style, especially in terms of his dramatic work, *Tannhäuser*,<sup>20</sup> through which, as we have seen, Freeman had first been introduced to the latest trends in large-scale Germanic opera.

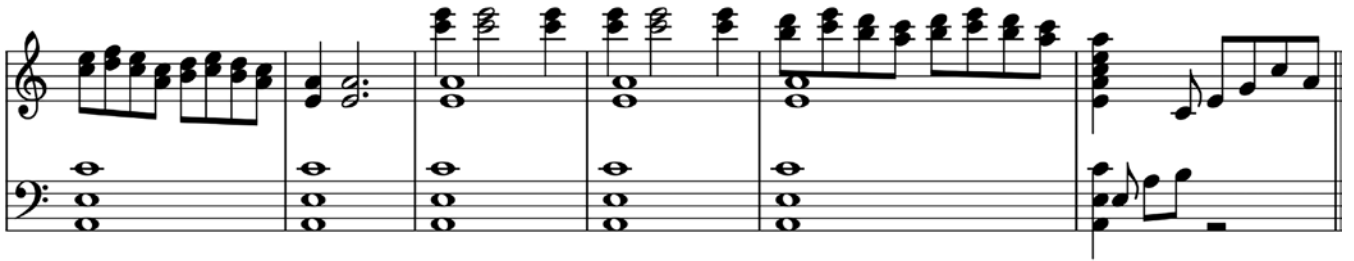
At a time when political uprisings were relatively frequent, many operatic plots revolved around themes of rebellion against a status quo that mainly took the form of religious intolerance or political opposition.<sup>21</sup> The controversial plots often drew the unwanted attention of political censors who would denounce the work in the public media or, even more extreme, shut down the productions entirely.

Following the frequent emphasis on religious intolerance, *The Martyr: A Grand Opera in Two Acts*, originally titled *Platonus* after the name of the main character, features an exotic plot set in Egypt at the time of the Pharaohs. Platonus, born of Egyptian nobility, embraces Jehovah, God of the Jews. Freeman typically constructed his main characters as victims of life-or-death challenges, and Platonus is no exception. His decision to embrace the Jewish faith results in an ultimatum: renounce his God and embrace the Egyptian religion or be killed. After much pleading from his sisters and threats from the Pharaoh, Platonus chooses death over desertion and is sacrificed to Osiris, the god of the dead, whereupon he becomes a martyr for his religion, thus the title of the opera.<sup>22</sup> This tragic story supplies the foundation for a musical rendition in a grand style.

*The Martyr* was recognized as the first grand opera composed by an African American to reach the public stage. Freeman wrote the libretto and score rather quickly in the early months of 1893, and the world premiere occurred at the Deutsches Theater in Denver, Colorado. In subsequent years, Freeman and his own Grand Opera Company performed the piece on tour in Cleveland in 1894, 1897, and 1900, and in Chicago in 1905. It was also staged a year earlier in 1904 at



Example 1. Pharaoh's theme from the overture of *The Martyr* by H. Lawrence Freeman.



Example 2. Slave's theme from the overture of *The Martyr*.



Example 3. First Platonus theme from "God to Thee I cry," Platonus's first aria in *The Martyr*.



Example 4. Second Platonus theme from "God to Thee I cry," in *The Martyr*.

Wilberforce University, which was America's first private historically Black college and university and where Freeman taught at the time.<sup>23</sup>

Adhering to Wagnerian principles, Freeman created four unifying *Leitmotifs* that are heard throughout *The Martyr* and represent both human and inanimate objects of the piece. The first, heard in the overture, represents the Pharaoh (Example 1); the next to appear is that assigned to the slaves and announces the melody that the slaves sing throughout the work (Example 2). Because of Platonus's importance to the plot, he is assigned two themes; both are contained in his aria "God to Thee I

Cry." The first theme is a two-measure gesture that is repeated in a chant-like pattern (Example 3), while the second motif, heard frequently as the opera unfolds, features triplets to energize the line, bringing intense drama to Platonus's dilemma (Example 4).

In addition to his reliance on *Leitmotifs* and the self-written libretto, Freeman reaches more deeply into Wagner's style by avoiding set numbers and opting for a more homogenous delivery. Davidson claimed that *The Martyr* "[has] no arias in the late 19th-century flamboyant style. In fact, there is not much contrast in the setting of the recitative and the aria."<sup>24</sup> This manner

of text setting resembles the method of Wagner because of the use of the “endless melody,” which he began to develop in his early operas *Rienzi* (1840) and *Der fliegende Holländer* (1840).<sup>25</sup>

Following the successes of *The Martyr*, as well as of his teaching and conducting, and moving to New York City, Freeman began writing *Voodoo: A Grand Opera in Three Acts*. Preliminary sketches and a basic score were completed in 1914, but it was never performed. In 1924 Freeman decided to revise the score and was finally able to have his company perform a concert version for WGBS, a New York City radio station. After the concertized version for radio, Freeman’s dreams were fulfilled when in August 1928 a fully staged production of *Voodoo* was mounted by the Negro Grand Opera Company of New York City at the famed Palm Garden. This production was the first African American grand opera to be performed on Broadway.<sup>26</sup>

*Voodoo* does not follow Freeman’s typical cause-and-effect plot line as found in *The Martyr*, but rather presents a treacherous love triangle that ultimately results in death. *Voodoo* takes place on a New Orleans plantation not long after the Civil War. Voodoo Queen Lolo falls in love with Mando, a Black overseer at a local plantation. To Lolo’s dismay, Mando does not return her affection, but rather fancies another woman, Cleota. Lolo calls on her voodoo arts and casts a charm that makes Cleota appear displeasing to the Voodoo Snake God. She is prepared to be a sacrifice, but is rescued by Mando at the last minute. When Lolo notices her dastardly plan has been foiled, she devises a new trick, but is caught in the process. To save his beloved, Mando shoots and kills the Voodoo queen, allowing his love for Cleota to flourish.<sup>27</sup>

Freeman pushed more traditional grand opera limitations when composing *Voodoo* than with his previous operas. Instead of confining himself to only traditional Western European harmonies, he implements African American styles of spirituals, blues, jazz, and even voodoo chants. Davidson argued that many of the vocal lines in the piece are cast in a *recitativo* style with only a few “number[ed] sections [of] distinguishable arias and duets.”<sup>28</sup> Instead of the typical ballet as contained in grand operas, Freeman inserted the more familiar clog, tango, and cake walk dances to enhance his grand work.<sup>29</sup>

## HIS RECEPTION

Freeman’s accomplishments earned him considerable attention in the 1920s. Due largely to the 1928 production of *Voodoo*, he was awarded the William E. Harmon Award in 1930, an honor given only to the best African American artists, writers, and activists of the time.<sup>30</sup> Accounting for inflation, the first place prize of \$400 would amount to almost \$6000 today.<sup>31</sup> Four years after winning the award, his national reputation had become such that Freeman was selected as the maestro and composer for the African American pageant *O Sing a New Song* at the 1934 Chicago World’s Fair. The program for the pageant also featured other notable African American composers, such as Harry T. Burleigh, Will Marion Cook, W. C. Handy, and William Grant Still.<sup>32</sup>

### From the African American Perspective

As expected for the time, reception of Freeman’s works for the operatic stage were decidedly mixed. The African American media praised him for attempting to break down racial barriers that plagued the advancement of African American artists. Benjamin Brawley, an African American scholar from Hampton University in Hampton, Virginia, gave him a glowing tribute in the university’s journal, *The Southern Workman*.

The career of H. Laurence [*sic*] Freeman has been that of a pioneer and of an artist with the highest ideals. Anyone who has the opportunity to study his work at close range is amazed at his achievement and overwhelmed by the sheer power exhibited. His creative faculty is just now at its height. What he may produce in the years to come is beyond all estimate.<sup>33</sup>

A review for *The Brooklyn Daily Times* reported of *Voodoo*, “the story is tense and gripping and the songs . . . are both novel and tuneful.”<sup>34</sup> The *Baltimore Afro-American* carried the headline, “Lawrence Freeman’s Play Takes Pioneer Step in New Race Culture.”<sup>35</sup> Such positive reviews of both the broadcast and the staged version of *Voodoo* were effective in directing attention to his triumph for their African American readership.

### From the Mainstream Perspective

Unlike Freeman’s admiring African American supporters, most of the mainstream and predominantly white media failed to recognize *Voodoo* as satisfactory art.

According to *The Union* of Springfield, Massachusetts, “The endeavor . . . was feeble. They were, to be blunt, amateurish.”<sup>36</sup> *The Evening Word* deemed Freeman’s work “not significant.”<sup>37</sup> The most damning review, however, came from America’s newspaper of record, *The New York Times*, where the anonymous critic titled his evaluation as, “‘Voodoo’ A Naïve Melange,” and called the thirty-member African American cast of singers “largely amateur in spirit.”<sup>38</sup> Given that the *Times* was and continues to be a sort of gatekeeper for public acceptance, these grave reviews likely struck a detrimental blow to Freeman’s goal of establishing a place for African American opera within the Western canon.

Although the majority of the major press representatives failed to advocate for Freeman’s music, there were some mainstream reviewers who awarded *Voodoo* its distinction as a pioneering work of art.<sup>39</sup> *Billboard*, the most prominent music magazine in America, claimed that

[*Voodoo* is] Another step toward establishing a distinct negro culture in the country . . . Despite heartbreaking handicaps due to obvious production limitations *Voodoo* is a most encouraging sign that [African Americans are] capable of entering the operatic field and of contributing valuable material and talent to it.<sup>40</sup>

The most encouraging review of Freeman’s *Voodoo* came from writer Charles D. Isaacson in *The Morning Telegraph* of New York City, although with obvious reservations.

“Voodoo” is a very ordinary experiment . . . worthy of genuine interest . . . It is the work of [an African American] by the new Negro Grand Opera Company . . . “Porgy” was white in creation and direction . . . [*Voodoo*] is a beginning, I rise to commend H. Lawrence Freeman, Valdo Freeman, who is the producer, and the best of the interpreters on the stage at Palm Garden.<sup>41</sup>

These responses by mainstream critics are crucial to understanding that Freeman’s music and the emerging Harlem Renaissance did have enlightened allies.

### HIS LEGACY

Freeman was more than just a composer, producer, and conductor of opera, he was also a genuinely caring person. When Scott Joplin moved to Harlem in 1907, he did not receive the warm welcome that Freeman

had; the hapless pianist and composer was mugged and beaten.<sup>42</sup> Even with the success of his ragtime music, he came to Freeman a broken man, and yet Freeman gave Joplin the coat off his back and took him in as a long lost friend.<sup>43</sup>

It is strange that a composer and musician as dedicated, forward looking, and prolific as Freeman never made it into the canon of Western fine art music, but a small town pianist named Scott Joplin did. Both of them had followed the instructions of Antonín Dvořák when they acculturated African American practice with European opera structures.<sup>44</sup> In his time Joplin was known as the “King of Ragtime” and is now regarded as one of the most influential composers in American history. One explanation might concern their audience. Joplin attracted listeners in the black and white communities for his piano rags. Of greater importance is certainly the “craze” for his popular dance music among members of the mainstream audience. Neither group took much interest in forays into the world of opera by these two pioneers. Institutionalized racism in the elite culture undoubtedly accounted for their plight as outsiders.

That H. Lawrence Freeman’s numerous attempts failed to carve a position for an African American voice in the Western canon may be, in part, simply a consequence of the time. There certainly are aspects of his operas that warrant serious study and evaluation. On the other had, some scholars, including Davidson, have claimed that his poor libretto-writing skills were the cause of his ultimate failure. It is also possible that the novelty of Freeman’s music has been superseded by a negative perception of its quality and led to his historical obscurity. Yet for his efforts to create opportunities for African American performers within the combative social climate of the first half of the twentieth century, not to mention his mixing of cultures observable in *The Martyr* and *Voodoo*, Freeman represents a pioneer worthy of additional scholarly study with music that deserves a second hearing. In support of the latter, it is worth mentioning that most of the 2015 production of *Voodoo* by Morningside Opera, Harlem Opera Theater, and the Harlem Chamber Players is available on YouTube.<sup>45</sup>

It appears to have been at least part of Freeman’s aim in synthesizing African American musical features

with the forms utilized by the Western European fine art tradition to bridge the racial divide in the arts and to allow for a certain equality in musical expressivity to be recognized. With the creation of grand opera from the perspective of an African American artist, Freeman laid the groundwork for such compositions as Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha* (1911, but not produced until 1972), William Grant Still's *Troubled Island* (1937–1939), and more recently Terence Blanchard's *Champion: An Opera in Jazz* (2013). Although he failed to become as well known as his mainstream contemporaries, Freeman must, at least, be recognized as a *bona fide* pioneer for the next generation of African American composers.

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### NOTES

1. This is a feat that Freeman's friend Scott Joplin would die trying. Freeman and Joplin met in Harlem after Joplin had fallen on hard times.
2. "The Colored Wagner," *The Cleveland Press* (March 25, 1898).
3. Edward Ellsworth Hipsher, *American Opera and Its Composers* (Philadelphia: Theodore Presser, 1927).
4. Celia Davidson, "Operas by Afro American Composers" (PhD dissertation, Catholic University, 1980).
5. *Ibid.*, 11.
6. *Ibid.*, 14. According to Davidson, Edith Rockefeller McCormack, John D. Rockefeller's daughter, later offered to finance a large production of *The Martyr* (1893), but died before the arrangements were made.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Harry L. Freeman "African Grand Opera," *The Washington Post* (15 May 1889), 25.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Davidson, 15.
11. *Ibid.*, 18.
12. "News of the Nation's Metropolis," *The Freeman* (May 8, 1915), 2.
13. "Listening in on the Radio," *The New York Times* (May 20, 1928), 140.
14. Antoinette Handy, "Harry Lawrence Freeman," *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, 5 vols., ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), II, 717–718.
15. "H. L. Freeman, 84, Composer Is Dead," *The New York Times* (March 26, 1954), 22; "Mrs. H. L. Freeman," *The New York Times* (June 15, 1954), 29.
16. Handy.
17. Davidson, 31.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Michael J. Budds, "Music in the Romantic Era: Grand Opera" [lecture] (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2015).
20. Ben Worley, "Politics and Reception: The Effects of War on the Acceptance of the Operas of Richard Wagner" [lecture], Undergraduate Research Mentorship Program (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2013).
21. Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 125.
22. Hipsher, 179.

23. Ibid., 34. Freeman's opera companies, with the exception of the Negro Grand Opera Company, were short lived due to lack of funding and his move from Denver to Cleveland, then to New York City.
24. Davidson, 37.
25. Barry Millington et al., "Richard Wagner," *New Grove Dictionary Online*; <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-6002278269> (accessed March 11, 2016).
26. Elise K. Kirk, *American Opera* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 184.
27. Hipsher, 179.
28. Davidson.
29. H. Lawrence Freeman, *Voodoo* (New York: Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, 1924).
30. Other notable Harmon Award winners include Harry T. Burleigh, Nathaniel Dett, Langston Hughes, and William Grant Still (second place).
31. "List of Harmon Award Winners," *Wikipedia*; [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org) (accessed March 22, 2016).
32. H. L. Freeman papers, 11 (accessed September 30, 2016).
33. Benjamin Brawley, "Composer of Fourteen Operas," *The Southern Workman* (1933) 314–315.
34. *Brooklyn Daily Times* quoting a WGBS radio spokesperson (20 May 1928). All newspaper clippings are from the H. L. Freeman papers held in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University (accessed September 30, 2016).
35. Harry Lawrence Freeman, "H. Lawrence Freeman Discusses," *Baltimore Afro America* (March 21, 1936).
36. *The Union* (September 22, 1928).
37. "The Realm of Music," *The Evening Word* (September 1928).
38. "Voodoo' A Naïve Mélange," *The New York Times* (September 11, 1928), 20.
39. Robert Garland, "Well—What of it?," *The Evening Telegram* (1928).
40. *The Billboard*, quoted in Davidson, 76.
41. Charles D. Isaacson, "Music," *The Morning Telegraph* (September 1928).
42. Kirk, 191.
43. Ibid., 189.
44. Michael B. Beckerman, *New Worlds of Dvořák* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 121.
45. Morningside Opera, "HL Freeman Voodoo—Voodoo Queen Aria," *Voodoo*, Youtube.com, 10:58, 3 March 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ObLqD8NIvI> (accessed May 1, 2016).

**Benjamin Worley** is a multifaceted musician with interests in performance and scholarship. An accomplished bass baritone, Benjamin was most recently seen on stage in Union Avenue Opera's summer festival season performing in *HMS Pinafore* and featured in Kurt Weil's *Lost in the Stars*. In 2017, he sang in the Missouri Symphony Society's production of Verdi's *La traviata* while simultaneously music directing for Maplewood Barn Community Theater's production of *Disney's Beauty and the Beast* in Columbia, MO. He has also sung many roles with the University of Missouri's Show-Me Opera, including the title role in Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro*, Simone in Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi*, Reverend Hale in Ward's *The Crucible*, and Don Alfonso in Mozart's *Così fan tutte*, and he covered the role of Don Magnifico in Rossini's *La Cenerentola*. Benjamin is a graduate of the University of Missouri, where he also holds Master of Music in Vocal performance, Master of Arts in Musicology, and two Bachelor of Arts degrees in anthropology and vocal performance, and studied voice with Christine Seitz. He is a former member of the University Singers and held graduate assistantships in voice, opera, and now musicology. He is a two-time national semifinalist at the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) student auditions. Not only a performer and musicologist, he was the president and music director of Add9, Mizzou's all-male *a cappella* group, for the 2013–2014 school year. Under his leadership, Add9 competed in ICCA, went on tour in St. Louis, Missouri, and held a benefit concert for the Windsor High School Choir Department in Imperial, MO.

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