

OPERA NEWS AWARDS

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LAWRENCE BROWNLEE CECILIA BARTOLI JANET BAKER

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2021 OPERA NEWS AWARDS

**BROWNLEE'S SINGING MAKES
THE VERY ACT OF LISTENING
A TRANSCENDENT**

experience

As Almaviva in
*Il Barbiere di
Siviglia* at the
Met, 2014

Brownlee

Lawrence

▶ **ANYONE INCLINED** to discount the ability of a single voice to change the world has likely never heard Lawrence Brownlee sing. His art vibrates on a higher frequency. Whether he is delivering a jaw-dropping performance of “Ah! mes amis, quel jour de fête!” on the stage of the Met, intoning a plangent rendition of Canteloube’s “La pastoura als camps” to a webcam for an audience sheltered in place, or performing a haunting variation of “There’s a man going ’round taking names” in the Crypt of the Church of the Intercession in Harlem, Brownlee’s instrument edifies as it soothes, inspires as it informs and delivers hope to a despairing, disconnected audience. Opera now finds itself at a moment that, fair or not, demands more from its artists than just great artistry. The ways in which Brownlee has met those demands are as numerous and exquisitely rendered as every pitch-perfect note he intones.

A **TENOR** WHO ELEVATES EVERYTHING AROUND HIM


Long before our current operatic deep-freeze, Brownlee stood out as an extraordinary artist. I first saw him live at the Met in May 2010 performances of *Armida*, a show that came three years into his Met stage career and nine years after he won the company’s National Council Auditions. Rossini’s opera is a kind of overstuffed vaudeville punctuated by the vocal fireworks of six tenors and a prima donna. But Mary Zimmerman’s staging, clearly conceived as something of a participation medal for Renée Fleming, did for bel canto dramaturgy what facial tattoos do for job applicants. Revisited eleven years later via the *Live in HD* capture, Brownlee’s Rinaldo has the effect of sweeping

aside anything not related to stellar singing. In his Act I duet with Fleming, “Amor! Possente nome,” Brownlee provides, in mere seconds, some of the most glorious vocalism that one could hope to encounter in this repertoire, tackling roulades separated by vaulting intervals that progress from an octave to a twelfth, then to a thirteenth up to a high D. The tenor’s performance—in many ways emblematic of what he does best—has a kind of halo effect: it elevates everything around him onstage.


Brownlee’s Almaviva, heard at the Met a dozen times in Bartlett Sher’s thrice-familiar *Barbiere* production, reconfigures the opera itself: through a heartfelt characterization, matchless virtuosity and a clarion, forthright timbre, Brownlee’s nobleman emerges as the opera’s beating heart. What’s more, he gets closer than perhaps any other tenor who has sung the role at the Met to



As Rossini's
Rinaldo at the
Met, 2010, with
Renée Fleming
(Armida)



In "Lawrence
Brownlee &
Friends: The
Next Chapter"
at Lyric Opera of
Chicago, 2020



As Tonio in *La
Fille du Régiment*
at the Met,
2011, with Nino
Machaidze
(Marie) and
Maurizio Muraro
(Sergeant
Sulpice)

embodying the revolutionary verve behind “Cessa di più resistere.... Ah, il più lieto.” His interpretation reminds us that the aria is less a party trick than a veritable anthem of liberation and ensuing joy. Brownlee’s singing in the *Barbiere* finale seems to alter the status quo before our very eyes, reminding us that societal progress, like a Rossini crescendo, seems to move slowly until it doesn’t.

Brownlee’s introduction to music came through his family’s church in Hubbard, Ohio; there he learned to play bass, drums and piano, and the “free, melismatic” mode of Gospel singing, he told *The New York Times* in 2011, was perfect practice for his forays into bel canto. After earning a master of music degree from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, he took part in young-artist programs at Seattle Opera and Wolf Trap before making his professional debut as Almaviva in 2002 *Barbiere* performances at Virginia Opera.

Now in his late forties, Brownlee fully inhabits the role of what Dean Martin would have called a “headliner,” while continuing to find his fullest operatic expression in the music of the bel canto composers. Yet he is clearly too vital a singer to exist in a niche. In 2015, he won acclaim for singing the title role in the world premiere of *Charlie Parker’s Yardbird* at Opera Philadelphia, and he has since taken the show about the legendary saxophonist to Lyric Opera of Chicago, English National Opera and the Apollo Theater. In February 2018, two years before the murder of George

Floyd, Brownlee presented the world premiere of *Cycles of My Being*, an elegiac song cycle by composer Tyshawn Sorey that, in attempting to convey the experience of being an African-American man in America today, amounts to one of the most affecting pieces of vocal music written in the past twenty years.

The seeming ease with which Brownlee tackles the most difficult repertoire has always belied the skill, persistence and attention that he has brought to his art. Brownlee has proved himself to be the rare artist who obviates discussion of craft or technique. Listen to his jaw-dropping performance of *Siège de Corinthe*’s “Grand Dieu, faut-il qu’un peuple,” from his album *Amici e Rivali*, for a recent example of his mastery of the art that conceals art.

If it’s difficult to describe the exalted position that Brownlee now holds in opera, it’s probably because ours is an industry that can be overly concerned with questions of subgenre and categorization. What makes Brownlee’s art so treasurable is that his performances go beyond style and substance to approach the very soul of our art. Maybe it seems silly to ask what could be gained by listening to music when we’re besieged each day by a steady progression of dread. Brownlee’s singing has changed the world by making the very act of listening a transcendent experience. In reaching beyond the summit of vocal virtuosity, the tenor has shown us that the voice is nothing less than a means by which the spiritual can be made manifest.

Adam Wasserman

