

The Washington Post

'The Doctor of Alcantara': History Makes a House Call

By Anne Midgette
Washington Post Staff Writer
Monday, February 18, 2008; C01

Sometimes, if you want to hear a certain kind of music, you have to put it on yourself. This was true in 1873, when the Colored American Opera Company, Washington's first resident opera company, mounted an operetta called "The Doctor of Alcantara," by Julius Eichberg. And it is still true in 2008: On Saturday night, the Music Center at Strathmore, known as a concert hall and a presenting organization, tried its hand at producing, putting on a show called "Free to Sing" to commemorate that earlier achievement.

There is no questioning the historical and social interest of the result. The event was sold out months in advance; the audience included current members of [St. Augustine's Church](#), the first African American Catholic church in Washington, founded in 1858 and from whose choir the members of the Colored American Opera Company were culled. A main point of the exercise, after all, was documenting an important and forgotten chapter of local history.

And the show did resemble an old photograph album, not only because of the archival images on a screen above the performers' heads. It was a compendium of musical images: spirituals; music the choir actually sang (including part of a Mass written by the choir director, John Esputa); and Eichberg's operetta. And like an album, it was a wonderful historical document -- though not all of its components were equally interesting.

One sympathized with the challenge that faced the show's creators, Shelley Brown (Strathmore's artistic director) and Michael Rosenberg. Simply mounting "The Doctor of Alcantara," a frothy, derivative piece that melted on the ear like a meringue on the tongue, would not have conveyed the full story, nor allowed for the inclusion of relevant pieces by Esputa or one of his students, [John Philip Sousa](#). Instead, they created a first-act introduction comprising musical pieces performed by the fine [Morgan State University Choir](#), pasted together with a bare minimum of spoken narrative from the actor David Emerson Toney.

Another challenge lay in presenting music that nobody, with the best will in the world, would claim is first-rate, such as Esputa's slender, simple Mass in C or the affable bombast of Sousa's virtually unknown "Te Deum." In its day, the St. Augustine chorus was highly praised for its performance of Haydn's "Saint Cecilia Mass," but on Saturday this was the most lackluster element on the program. (Assign no blame to the choir -- schooled to hair-trigger responsiveness by Eric Conway -- which generally did a terrific job with a large amount of music.) Balancing out these pieces were a disproportionate

number of spirituals, which showed off the choir and pleased the audience but were not integral to the story.

The operetta, too, was of more historical than musical interest, representative of countless once-popular scores languishing in archives all over America. Eichberg clearly thought Rossini was the ne plus ultra of comic opera, harking back to a bygone style the way a composer today might seek to emulate Rodgers and Hammerstein. His slender plot revolves around Carlos and Isabella, who love each other although their parents have arranged other marriages for them; in the end, it turns out that the proposed arrangement is a marriage to each other. Along the way, the eponymous doctor thinks he has accidentally killed Carlos a couple of times; once, he thinks he hears Carlos's ghost, and Eichberg shows he knows his [Mozart](#) with a brief excursion into "[Don Giovanni](#)'s" D minor.

But weak though the piece was, it was also utterly charming, so lovingly cast and accompanied with such ardor by Angel Gil-Ordóñez and the Post-Classical Ensemble that it would have taken a curmudgeon to resist its appeal. Awet Andemicael as Isabella and Kenneth Gayle as Carlos had voices whose strengths and limitations were perfectly suited to the period: slender, light, tight little instruments capable of great sweetness, if not great volume, and attached to eminently likable performers.

The standouts were Millicent Scarlett, a mezzo-soprano who has a low register and isn't afraid to use it (an automatic plus in my book), as Isabella's confidante Inez, and Carmen Balthrop, who in the role of Isabella's mother demonstrated the meaning of the term "stage animal" with impressive technique (if sometimes slightly flat upper notes) and consummate, scene-stealing showmanship. Gylchris Sprauve was appropriately funny in the brief title role, and Toney, almost hoarse from his narrative duties, took on a couple of comprimario bass roles.

In 1873, the performances resulted in unanimously strong reviews from papers in Washington and [Philadelphia](#), with particular praise for the fine chorus, and the company was able to raise enough money to build a new church. This performance, even if it remains a happy one-off, was at the least a fitting echo, and tribute, of its predecessor.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/17/AR2008021702434.html>

The Washington Times

Article published Feb 18, 2008

Post-Civil War work rings true

By Stephen Brookes –

The fact that "The Doctor of Alcantara" has fallen into obscurity is not, perhaps, one of the great musical mysteries of our time. This frothy little operetta was a smash hit in the 1870s, but to modern ears its melodies are hopelessly banal (there's even an aria called "Oh, Woe is Me!") and its drama thin; fun to listen to, but about as deep and enduring as a Britney Spears marriage.

But context is everything, as they say, and "Alcantara" was revived (in concert form) for the first time in a century on Saturday night at Strathmore, as part of one of the most thoughtful and unusual musical premieres this season. Titled "Free to Sing: The Story of the First African-American Opera Company," the production wove music, photography and narration together to tell the true but long-forgotten story of a heroic group of blacks in Washington in the years around the Civil War. With few resources but their own voices, they formed first a choir, and then the Colored American Opera Company, the first opera group in Washington, and raised \$75,000 putting on "Alcantara" to build a church and school.

It's an inspiring piece of local history, and Strathmore brought together some exceptional talent to tell it. Written by Shelley Brown and Michael Rosenberg and narrated by the rich-voiced David Emerson Toney, "Free to Sing" evokes the period more as dramatic sketch than history lecture, illustrated with the kind of spirituals and classical religious music that the original choir would have sung.

Opening with a dramatic processional of "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," the Morgan State University Choir turned in solid if rather low-key accounts of five other spirituals, two movements from a simple but lovely Mass written by John Esputa (the original choir's music director), a bit of Haydn and a surprisingly moving "Te Deum" from that master of the march, John Philip Sousa. Through it all you could hear the deep hopes and even deeper fears of the time.

The real excitement came in the second half, which was devoted to the Opera Company's music. The group had an all-too-short life — it only put on seven performances of "The Doctor of Alcantara," written by the emigre Julius Eichberg in 1862 — but was nonetheless able to build St. Augustine's Roman Catholic Church with the proceeds. And it's easy to understand its success; "Alcantara" is a light soufflé of a work, whipped up from the usual batch of thwarted young lovers, meddling parents and lots of free-floating hormones, but it was brought off on Saturday with such ease and relaxed humor that it was impossible to resist.

There was fine comic interplay and often superb singing from Awet Andemicael as Isabella, Kenneth Gayle as Carlos, Carmen Balthrop as Lucrezia and Millicent Scarlett as Inez, as well as an engagingly over-the-top vocal turn by narrator Toney. But much of the evening's pleasure came from the Post-Classical Ensemble and its expressively kinetic conductor, Angel Gil-Ordonez, who turned in lively, detailed and almost mischievous playing, making this work seem as fresh as it must have more than a century ago — back in the first heady years of freedom.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20080218/ENTERTAINMENT/407269706/1007>

Performance revives oft-forgotten history of a black company

By Tim Smith
Sun music critic
February 18, 2008

An obscure and fascinating chapter of African-American history came vibrantly to life Saturday night, along with an obscure and fascinating example of 19th-century entertainment.

This dual exploration of the past was a result of an ambitious venture by the Music Center at Strathmore, which moved from its usual presenter mode into producer status with *Free to Sing: The Story of the First African-American Opera Company*.

Such a hefty title might arouse suspicions of stuffiness, but this sold-out multimedia presentation steered clear of a lecture-y tone.

On the first part of the program, a brisk narration, interspersed with musical selections, laid out the basic information about how a Catholic church choir in downtown Washington grew into the city's first opera company and the nation's first black opera company.

The rest of the evening was devoted to a concert version of the piece that this remarkable troupe performed to positive notices in D.C. and Philadelphia in 1873 -- *The Doctor of Alcantara* by German-born violinist and composer Julius Eichberg.

A few years before the start of the Civil War, Blessed Martin de Porres Chapel was established for free black Catholics. Later named St. Augustine's, the church developed a reputation for musical, as well as spiritual, assets, thanks to a gifted church choir. In 1868, John Esputa, a former Marine Band member and teacher of John Philip Sousa, was appointed the ensemble's director.

Esputa heard the potential in his singers to move outside the realm of sacred music, and, in 1869, helped create a showcase for them, the Colored American Opera Company. Soloists included a former slave who did sewing for Mary Todd Lincoln.

Although the company apparently folded soon after its successful performances of the Eichberg operetta, it raised enough money to start building a new church and school for St. Augustine's.

To illustrate the quality of Esputa's chorus Saturday, Free to Sing had the luxury of the Morgan State University Choir. The group, led by Eric Conway, demonstrated its customary polish and personality in spirituals, an excerpt from a Haydn Mass, and, most intriguingly, sacred works by Esputa and Sousa (his Te Deum, possibly written for the St. Augustine's choir, revealed a slight hint of "The March King").

The main event, though, was The Doctor of Alcantara, given such a breezy, enthusiastic performance that it was easy to understand why the work was once a favorite of American audiences.

Eichberg, who founded the Boston Conservatory of Music in 1867 (at his death in 1893, The New York Times called him "one of the greatest violin teachers in this country"), seems to have possessed an exceptional flair for melody. Much of Alcantara could be mistaken for something by Jacques Offenbach or even a young Johann Strauss, with lots of dancing rhythms and witty turns of phrase.

The plot involves typical operetta ingredients, including a pair of lovers temporarily thwarted, ultimately joined.

Although spoken dialogue was dispensed with here, noted actor David Emerson Toney did useful narrator duty with theatrical aplomb and also gamely sang a couple of small parts.

Awet Andemicael soared sweetly as Isabella. Carmen Balthrop offered exceptionally charming, stylish singing as the mother, Lucrezia. Millicent Scarlett romped through the role of the maid, Inez, with a juicy tone. Kenneth Gayle, as Isabella's intended, Carlos, sculpted his ballads sensitively. Gylchris Sprauve needed more tonal weight for the title role but revealed comic flair.

Despite the limitations of a concert format, director Scot Reese succeeded in generating plenty of engaging action from the cast.

Although the choral part in the operetta is small, the Morgan singers made each contribution count. The orchestra of the Post-Classical Ensemble played with an admirable sheen. Conductor Angel Gil-Ordóñez brought to the score delightful rhythmic flexibility and lyrical nuance.

It was a thoroughly persuasive, classy performance that paid fitting tribute to the forgotten Eichberg and the little-known ensemble of black singers that made its bold mark with his music more than a century ago.

<http://www.baltimoresun.com/entertainment/music/bal-to.free18feb18,0,7999106.story>

From Church to Stage: Black Opera Company Was The City's First

By Jacqueline Trescott

Washington Post Staff Writer

Saturday, February 24, 2007; Page C01

The first opera company in Washington was organized in the 1870s by African Americans.

The long-forgotten story of the Colored American Opera Company is being unearthed by a network of scholars, musicians and archivists led by the Music Center at Strathmore. The effort is to culminate next February in a program at Strathmore of the company's music called "Free to Sing: The Story of the First African-American Opera Company."

At the center of the story is St. Augustine Roman Catholic Church and its predecessor, the parish of Blessed Martin de Porres.

Blessed Martin's chapel was founded in 1858, and drew members from the burgeoning black middle class. In 1862, parishioner George Coakley, an oyster supplier, got permission from President Abraham Lincoln to have the church's Fourth of July picnic next to the White House. (The event raised \$1,000 for the Blessed Martin's school.)

By 1866, it had established a flourishing music program.

"They were self-sufficient, literate people who knew music," says Dena Grant, an archivist for St. Augustine's and a literature specialist at the Library of Congress. "We forget there were black people who knew classical music."

Birth of an Opera

Where the idea for an opera company came from is not entirely clear, but the group was organized by a barber, William T. Benjamin. The opera company came together in 1873 with John Esputa, a well-known white teacher, as its director.

He had worked with St. Augustine's since 1868, according to a church history written by Morris J. MacGregor in 1999. How the partnership happened is not entirely clear.

"What it looks like is that he lived in the Navy Yard neighborhood, and the parish priest at [the nearby] St. Peter's Catholic Church was the Rev. Felix Barotti. He became the priest at Blessed Martin's, and recruited Esputa as the music director," says Patrick Warfield, visiting assistant professor of music at Georgetown University.

Esputa had been an apprentice of the U.S. Marine Band, where his father played, and then joined the band himself. He and his father ran a music school near the Marine Barracks, and John Philip Sousa was one of their students. About the time Esputa began working with the black church, he became a music teacher for the Washington Colored Schools.

The parish choir, according to the MacGregor history, sang Haydn and Mozart at well-attended performances chronicled by the daily newspapers, as well as the Catholic Mirror. "On Easter Sunday in 1873, for example, the choir performed Haydn's 'Solemn Mass in Honor of the Blessed Virgin' and Antonio Diabelli's 'Gaudeamus' accompanied by a small orchestra of trumpets, horns and strings," wrote MacGregor.

By 1873, the opera company was a distinct part of the church's music program. In addition to Benjamin, who was a baritone, singers included Mary A.C. Coakley, a contralto and a former slave who sewed for first lady Mary Todd Lincoln; George Jackson, a baritone who fought in the Civil War; soprano Agnes Gray Smallwood; contralto Lena Miller; bass Thomas H. Williams and tenors Henry F. Grant and Richard Tompkins.

That year, the company produced "The Doctor of Alcantara," a popular work of the time by Julius Eichberg, a German-born composer. There were seven performances in Philadelphia and Washington, including two at Ford's Theatre and one at Lincoln Hall at Ninth and D streets NW that drew 1,500 people.

An advertisement in the Daily National Republican appealed to the city's mayor, A.R. "Boss" Shepherd, to attend. "We hope to be able to demonstrate that our race will in time be capable of taking rank musically with our white brothers and sisters," the invitation read.

The Daily Washington Chronicle reported: "Lincoln Hall was literally packed. Of course the majority of the audience was colored, and included a host of the personal friends of the singers. . . . Quite a third of the audience was composed of white ladies and gentlemen, largely attracted, perhaps, by the novelty of the affair." The writer went on to say: "The choruses were effective. In dramatic ability there was little lacking, and the singers were quite as natural as many who appear in German and French opera."

But the company wasn't performing just for musical glory. It was raising money for the church. According to the church's historians, the opera brought in \$75,000, which went toward a new building and a \$14,000 organ. A two-story sanctuary and school at 15th and L streets were completed in 1874 and dedicated in 1876. The new church was named after Saint Augustine, a bishop and African saint.

At the dedication, the U.S. Marine Band, led by Sousa, played Alois F. Lejeal's "Solemn Vespers," with soloists from the opera troupe. Church historian MacGregor reported that an 18-piece orchestra performed with two choirs on the occasion.

But that was one of the last appearances for the opera company. After helping to pay for the new building, it was disbanded. Those who have looked at the slim records of the company have concluded it had reached its goal, and also, Esputa became ill and moved way.

But the church and its music became an important force in the city. President Rutherford B. Hayes and abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass attended services at St. Augustine's. A 1905 newspaper article described it as the largest black Catholic church in the country.

Those days weren't "quite as segregated as we think," says Warfield, the Georgetown professor. "People were moving back and forth between the communities." The church

was at the same location until 1948, when The Washington Post bought the property. It relocated to 15th and V streets NW, and will celebrate its 150th anniversary next year.

Rediscovery

The story of the Colored American Opera Company is barely a footnote in local histories.

"I didn't realize the opera was something so buried," said Strathmore Artistic Director Shelley Brown. In 2003, Brown was researching music created in Washington for the Strathmore's Timeline Concert Series and found a mention of the company. But, at first, she found little else. "It was a fairly short-lived company and it wasn't studied," Brown says.

Even church members knew only a small part of the story. "We knew it was well-known in its day and had toured to raise money for the building, but very little else," says Grant, who is helping St. Augustine's organize anniversary events.

Brown reached out to the academic community to find any information about the group. Grant found an 1880 book, "Music and Some Highly Musical People," by James M. Trotter, in the Library of Congress archives. It contained a chapter on the opera, which included the list of performers.

Raymond Jackson, professor of music at Howard University, says the company was new to him, but he wasn't entirely surprised to learn of its history. The ties to the arts were strong in slave and freed communities, he explains. "There was such a love for music and a desire to be involved in something cultural and a desire to be part of a bigger world experience," Jackson says.

Espata's music came from various sources. "Espata wrote a Mass, a very simple piece, about 15 minutes," says Warfield. "His other music was parlor music, a polka, a waltz. 'The Doctor of Alcantara' [by Eichberg] was one of the most popular operettas of its time and performed by a lot of companies. It's Gilbert and Sullivan-like," he says.

In February 2008, Strathmore and the Morgan State University Choir will re-create an evening focused on music the company performed.

On the program will be a restaging of "The Doctor of Alcantara," an 1862 work the historians say hasn't been performed in about 100 years. The concert will also include two recently discovered pieces: Espata's "Mass in C" and Sousa's "Te Deum."

Joseph Horowitz, artistic director of the Post-Classical Ensemble, a chamber orchestra, says the event will break down a number of impressions people have about the word opera and the 19th century. A panel of music experts will discuss the era.

"The fascination of 'The Doctor of Alcantara' is that it is completely different from classical music as we know it today. The distinctions we make today were not in place. When we talk about opera, we think the grand opera, perpetuated by the Metropolitan Opera. In the 19th century, there was no dominant notion of opera. It could take place in a small place and didn't necessarily attract opera elitists," says Horowitz.

The organizers hope the tribute will provide a glimpse into a Washington that disappeared, both socially and musically.

Eliot Pfanstiehl, president of Strathmore Hall Foundation, says the revival is part of the organization's move to produce, as well as present music. "We want to pay homage to regional music," he says. "We would like to become known as a musical house that honors its own. And we believe part of Strathmore's role is to take an artistic risk."