

# AMERICAN MUSIC REVIEW

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## **Helena Brown on Classical Singing, New York, and the Met's Production of *Porgy and Bess***

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton interviews Helena Brown

After several weeks of negotiating her punishingly busy schedule, I finally had a chance to sit down to a dim sum lunch with emerging opera star Helena Brown, who is a dramatic soprano based in New York City. I caught up with Brown just before a performance call time she had that evening, and the day before her general audition as a soloist for the Metropolitan Opera.

Brown did not always know she would become an opera singer. For a time, she considered careers in medicine, political science, or law; given her direct manner, clear and resonant speaking voice, and poised presence, any of these choices would have been a successful one. But once Brown had joined the college choir at Randolph Macon Women's College, her singular voice and distinct musical talent could not go unnoticed for long. Brown then transferred and graduated as a Voice and Arts Administration Major from Hollins University (my own alma mater).

Upon arrival in New York to pursue her MM degree at the Manhattan School of Music, Brown found that although she was vocally very competitive, the challenges to a singing career were more spiritual. So she made a concrete decision to keep going, and to understand her career as a business. She recalls:

HB: The public perception was, "OK, you have these things going on in your voice," "you sound more vibrant here [in the passaggio] as a soprano," and everyone thinks they know better and that I should do something about it. Some people would say I'm a contralto and that I should really do something about it. Well, I'm already singing some contralto-y things, if you will, and contraltos don't just sing things that are marked as "contralto," do they? Of course not.

SJM: It seems really odd to me that people try to cast aspersions on what you're doing beautifully already to assert that you need to do something better. That must have been so frustrating.

HB: Yeah!



*Helena Brown, Dramatic Soprano*

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SJM: So did you take these comments back to your teacher?

HB: I did. I already knew that I could do both [soprano and mezzo singing] and that it was really a kind of marketing strategy. What will satisfy the public enough to let them enjoy my voice and allow me to work? But it is also worth noting that I particularly enjoy dramatic soprano roles and can identify to characters in many ways. I'm not saying that one fach is better than the other; I just could go either way. So, eventually I started to experiment with some roles and really sing them. Like Ariadne: that was one of my transitional roles and it's something that's still right for me.

SJM: I can totally hear that in your voice!

HB: Thank you! Maybe the Met will call it from my repertoire list during my audition tomorrow...maybe! But back to the *fach* discrepancy—there are some *zwischen* things in Wagner that I can sing.<sup>1</sup> Some German coaches say that I could [be a *zwischen-fach*] however, I would say that my voice is more needed as a dramatic soprano. It fulfills me a bit more to stay in that fach primarily and then branch out. It took years to figure this out, by the way, and I'm still figuring it out. But it seems to be working!

SJM: So you said you teach—do you do it locally?

HB: So in addition to doing solo masterclasses at colleges, while on tour with the American Spiritual Ensemble, I did group masterclasses in tandem with our concert performances. I teach privately and right now; I'm originating this position as a resident artist for a private school here on the Upper East Side. That has been very fulfilling. I'm so happy for the students to see a working performer who is unusual in so many respects—should I go in depth on that one? [laughs] I'm unusual in that I'm a person of color, I'm tall, I'm not thin, I have a very large voice, I have a very colorful voice. People compare me to Jessye Norman but I am not her, and that's fine—I have my own name [laughs].

SJM: Call me something other than Jessye please?

HB: That's gonna take a while. [laughs]

SJM: That's both a compliment and oddly insulting.

HB: Yeah. And so... it's good for the students to see me. I can really answer their questions with a bit more knowledge and relevance than some other teachers can. That's just the way it is. I'm in the trenches every day, so of course I can answer those questions. Plus, I'm accessible. I don't want to be pegged with this diva persona that people assume about opera singers. That's just not me. OK, in some respects it is me! [laughs] I like fashion, I am very particular about certain things—but I am still accessible. I can compromise. I can just be there as a real person, not someone who is so far away that you should idolize them. That's not what I'm going for.

SJM: So was there a moment when you realized you didn't have to think about your next move, or got management? Or are you even considering management?

HB: OK that's a lot. [laughs] I am trying to secure management—someone who can help me come up with a

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plan—and by a plan, I mean an approach. Really, I am starting to think that I should go outside the traditional New York geography and over to LA to work within a different framework of marketing. I want to develop a team that is going to approach my brand in the way that young people know and respond. Maybe I need a kind of social media overhaul with some viral videos. I need people who have concepts that are not antiquated. This is the problem with management now, especially with companies that follow the old guard, for instance, you only get hired if you worked in Europe for years until someone went over the pond and grabbed you. It's that old precept of waiting for the right moment. But, I don't have the luxury of just waiting. Being a cancer survivor, I know I'm not just going to sit around, wait, and then say "Thank you." I'm going to make it happen for myself. So, I need someone on my team who's willing to take risks, especially since I'm a bigger voice. My dance card isn't empty, but it's also not completely full.

I am of the opinion that we should have more American dramatic sopranos coming up through American opera companies. I shouldn't have to go to Europe in order to make it happen, and then have America say, "Oh, please come back, we've heard this about you and we'd love to offer you this role." I'm not opposed to Europe—in fact, I love it there. But I should be able to stay in my country and have my art as my livelihood. Over the pond, it's kind of right time, right place, right manager. You must have a manager going in. In the U.S., that is changing. There is this new thing that is happening: casting from websites and promotional videos. Opera has not defaulted to this method, but we are starting to see it take root for some smaller houses with less money/time to hold auditions in New York. Virtual casting is already happening for actors and within the musical theater community. Then, there is the controversial way of casting, in which some of the hiring decision is based on whether or not the artist has clout—whether they are "Hollywood ready," whatever that means. I mean, you could consider me Hollywood ready—there's Lizzo out there, right? [SJM: I love her!] But I shouldn't have to embody a person who already took those risks! Here I am willing to do it for myself. I'm working it out. I'm at the Met right now, doing *Porgy and Bess*, I'm a soloist in the ensemble and I'm making waves. People are noticing me. And I'm having a fabulous time doing it!

SJM: Tell me about the trajectory of *Porgy and Bess*. Did they have an open call? Did you get an invitation to audition?

HB: Did they have an open call? I'm not sure—I didn't get in quite that way. It's more like I knew someone who knew someone. I knew Maestro Donald Palumbo from Glimmerglass when I was there as a young artist. While in residence, I got to work with Maestro on my individual repertoire and received a lot of encouragement from him, as well as some discouragement because I had expressed interest in being part of the regular full time chorus. He said, "I'm not comfortable with you not pursuing this career as fully as you can... you should really try the solo career first."

SJM: So he was envisioning you not as a member of the ensemble but rather as a member of the cast.

HB: Yes. In a way. I did continue pursuing solo work and I was getting hired. But *Porgy and Bess* is different from a full time chorus show. It's an ensemble show and those in the ensemble tend to be soloists. Plus, it's a show that I know intimately. I had done over sixty performances of *Porgy and Bess* before I came to the Met. They were different productions, one of which was on tour throughout Europe with New York Harlem Productions. That's when I did my first leading role, Serena. I think that really put a feather in my cap. We were on the standard theater working schedule of eight shows a week, and I was fine. I don't know—I was warned that it would be rough to do so many back-to-back performances for a show of this magnitude. But I had built up a technique, so it wasn't rough for me. I mean, when we think to the times of yore with singers such as

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Flagstad, they had back-to-back shows all the time, and they would travel on top of that. It was much more than what we do now. If they were able to build the endurance to do that, why can't I do this? So I did! It made me a wiser singer, because I learned what was expected, how to grow into a role, and how to consistently be a good colleague.

So, knowing Maestro Palumbo already, and hearing from a number of people that the Met hadn't quite filled out the chorus, I contacted him. But I didn't take it as a given that they wanted me. I really sold myself. I said, "OK, Maestro Palumbo, you heard me during these years... I'd really like you to hear my progress and see what I now have to offer." And thank goodness it went well. I got hired!

SJM: And after you got hired, how long was the rehearsal process?

HB: We had a lot of time. We had the pre-season in August that stretched on into September until our season opening on the 23rd. So it was an ample rehearsal time, but it was absolutely needed. I think some of us even wished it was longer. They did this production at ENO [English National Opera] and in Amsterdam at the Dutch National Opera. So, this is a co-production between the Met and English National Opera. The director came in already knowing the show but opened himself to the different dynamics of an almost entirely new cast. Many of us come from different walks of life and are veterans from different productions of *Porgy*. We arrived with differing concepts but worked together beautifully to create a unique community for this production, being careful not to fall into the habits some of us naturally developed doing eight-show weeks.

SJM: Were there people in the ensemble who had never done the piece before?

HB: Yes. I think that Maestro Palumbo really designed a stellar cast. He got to choose the ensemble members and it really shows what he had in mind to bring us all together. All of these distinctive timbres and diverse approaches to the shaping of a line. All beautiful.

SJM: Was there anything you disagreed with in the show as you rehearsed? Artistic decisions?

HB: It's hard to say because I've enjoyed the process so much. I've really relished the different perspectives that have come into the show. For example: the Met firmly, firmly decided to focus on natural hair, which is not something most opera companies do—I just... Even in the wigs, imitating my natural hair texture—I mean, there are so many different hair textures and different types [of natural hair], but type 4A, B and C are very rarely represented.<sup>2</sup> We did a mix of using our own hair, adding pieces, or just making wigs that were handtied and designed to look exactly like the kinky curly 4A–4C hair type. And it didn't come without some struggle and mishaps, tripping over each other a little bit. That revealed our desperate need to have a dialogue with each other. Thankfully, as an AGMA [American Guild of Musical Artists] delegate for this production, I was able to help facilitate that conversation, as in, "Here is how I would do my hair, here is how I grew up in this culture with this sort of hairstyle," or "This sort of thing is not something we would do because of X." It's not textbook knowledge.

SJM: That's a remarkable amount of care towards the performer's viewpoint about something that the performers really care about!

HB: Yes! It's something I've been very proud of, and I'm glad I could contribute to that. I do remember talking to the wig department and one of the artists saying that she wished someone from the press would acknowledge



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*Residents of Catfish Row shelter from the hurricane  
from Met's production of Porgy and Bess (2019)*

this.

SJM: Right! I saw that Christian Mark Gibbs and some others from the ensemble were excited about the choreography in the opera. What are people's thoughts on that?

HB: It's mixed. We have some scenes such as the funeral scene, where Serena is mourning her husband Robbins and the community has come to mourn with her, supporting the family during this very tragic time, and just figuring out, what do we do now? How do we keep our

brother who has just passed by the hands of one of our own? How do we keep him from ending up in the hands of the medical community and being defiled? This is still relevant today...

So, in that scene, the Met has incorporated the dancers in ways that seem to push people's buttons. I don't personally have a problem with it. If one is to say, "this is not appropriate, this is not done, you wouldn't dance like that at a funeral," I would say perhaps not at yours [laughs]. Let's remember what time period this is and where people were coming from and the fact that this is a community that's so very insular, with so many different personalities. There may have been people who would dance and praise God in an outward way. It is not the same Christianity that we know today. Further, it may not be the same faith that we know and recognize, saying, "Oh, that's from the Baptist church," etc. So, who am I to judge? The expression of movement comes from a very real and genuine place, embodying the voice of the community, via the unique people who are on stage and who have been in that rehearsal process for weeks and weeks. That's something very special. And also, I need to note that the choreography is done by a prominent black artist [Camille A. Brown]; that's very special on the Met stage. I'm going to take extra care to understand that perspective. There's nothing with which I fundamentally disagree.

SJM: So as a cast member, when you were getting direction, did they discuss Porgy's disability at all? I'm interested in different ways you may have seen his mobility portrayed.

HB: Oh yeah. Absolutely. Porgy's disability has been expressed in very different ways. I've been in productions where in the score, Porgy says, "bring my cart," and the stage direction specifies that Porgy is either in a cart or has a goat. I've seen a low, dolly cart used on stage, which could be very hard for the singer when combined with the already sizable vocal demand. But this is not the only way for a Porgy to get around. When I was with Glimmerglass for their production of *Porgy and Bess*, I remember him having one crutch. That is a way. With our production at the Met, Eric Owens, as Porgy, has been using a leg brace in addition to a walking stick

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and crutch. He has been very careful in how he expresses Porgy's disability, but I also think that the leg brace makes it easier to do so. I speak from experience as I was in leg braces growing up. I've had leg surgeries and everything, so I can identify with this type of disability. I think Eric Owens' approach is very delicate. He really leaned into the device and chose to use it for the majority of rehearsals. I think this attention to detail is coming across well on the stage.

SJM: How did he do navigating the stage? Did they seem to make any alterations to the set given his need to use this device?

HB: Well, it's a large open house set, and it's a rotating set. But if we're being real, I think it would be dangerous to alter the set to favor Porgy's disability. That's not being honest to how Porgy had to function in society, in a time when there were few such considerations. But there is one consideration that is realistic: There are two levels in the house and Porgy's room is on the first level. Perhaps because the community wanted to save him the trouble of the stairs?

SJM: Is there anyone in the ensemble with a disability?

HB: No. And that would be an interesting choice.

SJM: I'm always curious because it seems that more people during that time would have had mobility disabilities due to polio, etc. And I wonder if directors are ever thinking that way.

HB: Wow, I'm glad you said that. But then how do you portray the character without making it a caricature? One thing I would really love is to invite people who have acknowledged disabilities onstage to be part of the production, to more naturally have that authenticity, rather than trying to model it. For example (though in no way does it compare), are you going to do blackface in order to represent what it's like to be a black person? I know how I felt as a young kid watching operas on television and then seeing someone painted to look like me, or going to see *Aida* at the Met and seeing the same thing. It alienated me. I think that is what made it harder for me to approach singing until someone really put it in front of me, later in life.

SJM: I was thinking about a production of Lera Auerbach's *The Blind*, where the audience was led into the hall wearing blindfolds to simulate the experience of being blind, and how, like blackface, it's a wrongheaded representation. And further, would it be better then, to only hire a Japanese singer for *Butterfly*, etc. etc., writing in a program note that we acknowledge the racist history of this opera? Or is it better to remove these troubled pieces from performance entirely? The great piece with the ugly colonialist past? It's a problem for all of us. And I think *Porgy and Bess* has this history, too.

HB: That's a really difficult one. We cannot escape that it was written by someone with white skin, portraying the struggles and stories of people with darker skin who still don't get a fair shake in society. To this day we are working on it. We talk about diversity in opera, and how *Porgy* either helps or hurts that. I'm talking about the "Porgy trap." I was warned about it years ago when I was considering the European tour in 2015. I was warned by my coaches and countless others. I decided not to listen to them. I don't understand why I can't honor this piece and still sing an array of repertoire. I do understand that, as a big voice and as a person of color, I need to play with a certain deck, and in order to be in the game I need to play the game. Well, I decided to play it differently. I can't say that the *Porgy* trap doesn't exist. I have observed that there are people who frequent roles in *Porgy and Bess*, and do not get many role opportunities in different operas, whether it's Strauss, Wagner, or

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Puccini. But I don't think that's going to be me. I won't affirm it. I can do all of it.

SJM: It implies that you don't have self-determinism to say that you'll be trapped in this way, but then there's the larger institutional racism to consider.

HB: It's an important part of self-actualization. We have to work within and outside the system to change it. And as we approach a new decade, those who say, "That's just the way it is," are retiring from this industry.

SJM: Do you think that being in this production has given you something that will move you forward?

HB: It's only been a few months, and we're remounting the production in January and February, but luckily, I do have another contract. I'm going to take part in a more intimate opera by Ricky Ian Gordon that's literally called *Intimate Apparel*. When I received the offer to audition, I said to myself, "Oh wow, it's happening and I've only been here for three days!" [laughs]. The naysayers may say, "It's only because you're a woman of color," but I am still very excited.

SJM: It's happening because you have a glorious voice and that certain quality.

HB: Well, I believe so, and I am covering one of the lead roles over seventy-six shows. So I think I have a strong chance of singing one of those seventy-six.

Read more about Dramatic Soprano Helena Brown and hear her sing at her website, <https://www.helena-brown.com/>. And you can still catch her in *Porgy and Bess* at the Metropolitan Opera through February.

### Notes

1. *Zwischen-fach* [between categories] typically signifies a female opera singer who can sing either mezzo or soprano roles.
2. Types 4A–4C refers to a typology of natural hair types created by hairstylist Andre Walker in 1997.