

## Dunbar hits high note

By Pam Huber

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He wrote of little brown babies and a man who had his dream. He revealed the mask worn by many and penned an ode to Ethiopia.

Paul Laurence Dunbar, a native Daytonian and the first black American to gain national prominence as a poet, ignited the literary world with his turn-of-the-century works and now has inspired two contemporary university professors to celebrate his poetry with operatic splendor.

*"Be proud, my Race, in mind and soul;*

*Thy name is writ on Glory's scroll*

*In characters of fire."*

*So begins the new opera, with stanzas from "Ode to Ethiopia" and "Compensation," which give "a sense of striving for that which is worthwhile," says the librettist.*

Dayton Opera commissioned the new one-act production, "Paul Laurence Dunbar: Common Ground," and hosted a lavish premiere Feb. 10 in the fully restored Victoria Theatre in Dayton. Over the next three months, the four cast members took the 35-minute production to about 70 junior and senior high schools in an 11-county area surrounding Dayton, introducing students to Dunbar and the art of opera. An additional 40 performances were given for community groups.

Herbert Woodward Martin, English professor and poet-in-residence at the University of Dayton, selected the 12 poems to be included in the opera and wrote the libretto. Dialogue is delivered in between the poems to provide a narrative thread, and it links the works to Dunbar's life, calling attention to the guidance offered by his parents, his love for his wife, Alice, and the tragedy of his death at the age of 33 in 1906. "The poetry is extraordinarily singable. There's an inordinate amount of music already in the poems," Martin says. He calls the opera "charming and quite delightful. I think it's accessible, that it's a cohesive piece that makes sense right away."

The opera's composer is Adolphus Hailstork, professor of composition at Norfolk State University. "When I discovered Dunbar's work, I realized that he was my artistic ancestor,

because I write music that reflects a double cultural experience, that of my standard European-oriented education and that of my ethnic heritage." Hailstork blended the two influences in the opera, using standard harmonic and melodic styles for some pieces while choosing a musical style reflective of African-American blues and gospel in others.

*"A Love Letter" and "A Frolic" are light-hearted poems written in African-American dialect, the form that brought Dunbar his initial fame. They set up a courtship theme that dominates the middle of the production and are followed by two serious and heartfelt love lyrics written in standard English, "The Awakening" and "Thou Art My Lute."*

Designed to fit easily into school-day schedules, the production is also extremely portable, with only costumes and folding screens to set the mood on stage. Props such as chairs and podiums were borrowed from each school, and conductor Jeffrey Powell provided piano accompaniment. Powell and sopranos Marcia Porter and Angela Powell, tenor Ray M. Wade Jr. and baritone Kirk A. Walker answered questions from the audience following each school performance.

*"Little Brown Baby," one of Dunbar's best-known dialect poems, reintroduces a playful note to the opera, portraying a father alternately teasing and cuddling his young son, "pappy's pa'dner an' playmate an' joy" for whom he wishes "ease an cleah skies."*

Is the opera successful in teaching a new generation about Dunbar? Yes, says the librettist. "The person who is unfamiliar with Dunbar sees how clever he was and how ingenious he was," says Martin, a Dunbar scholar who dresses in period clothes and takes on the voice of the poet for readings in some of his UD classes as well as for local, regional, national and international groups. "The person who is already familiar with Dunbar sees again the lasting effects he's created, how well he created his characters and how alive they all are. Each group comes away with something quite marvelous.

*Tender teasing quickly gives way to good-hearted goading in "A Negro Love Song" for the two men in the cast and nosy inquisitiveness in "Discovered" for the two women. The poems*

*are energetic and humorous and showcase Dunbar's genius for relating human nature.*

*"Dunbar's characters are all different, they all have an individuality that comes across as being real and vibrant," Martin says.*

He does not claim to have contributed the definitive work on Dunbar, though. "Every generation has to find out how he or she can read Shakespeare or Chaucer, and I think Dunbar falls into that category too," Martin says. "I'm sure that there are other ways of looking at those poems and finding another sense of humor in them, another sense of seriousness in them, and that's okay."

"What we tried to do is suggest that there is a kind of common pursuit and struggle that's related to everyone's life," Martin says. "We wanted to capture the atmosphere and the tone of Dunbar's reaction to the world around him."

*"Accountability" sets the stage for the reverent passion of "A Hymn" and "An Ante-Bellum Sermon," leading to the prophetic "He Had His Dream." At the end, the singers offer a reprise of "Ode to Ethiopia" and "Compensation," strong voices and lyrics interwoven in a powerful wall of sound that begins at the stage and rolls outward, embracing the audience.*

*"Because I had loved so deeply,  
Because I had loved so long,  
God in His great compassion  
Gave me the gift of song."*