

11-2021

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Justin John Moniz
New York University

Minnita Daniel-Cox
University of Dayton, mdanielcox1@udayton.edu

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Moniz, Justin John and Daniel-Cox, Minnita, "The Vocal Point: Honoring a Legacy: The Final Conversation with Arthur Woodley" (2021). *Music Faculty Publications*. 37.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/mus_fac_pub/37

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Honoring a Legacy: The Final Conversation with Arthur Woodley

Justin John Moniz and Minnita Daniel-Cox



Justin John Moniz



Minnita Daniel-Cox

AMERICAN BASS ARTHUR WOODLEY APPEARED with prestigious opera companies around the U.S. and abroad, including the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Washington National Opera, Seattle Opera, L'Opera de Montreal, Opera Philadelphia, Dallas Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Pittsburgh, Opera, New Orleans Opera, and Opera Theatre of St. Louis. His many roles included Varlaam in *Boris Godunov*, Bartolo in *Le nozze di Figaro*, the Four Villains in *Les contes d'Hoffman*, Kuno in *Der Freischütz*, Banquo in *Macbeth*, Nick Shadow in *The Rake's Progress*, Sulpice in *La fille du régiment*, Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, Rocco in *Fidelio*, Publio in *La clemenza di Tito*, Angelotti in *Tosca*, Achilles in *Giulio Cesare*, and Dansker in *Billy Budd*. Woodley created the role of Dick Hallorann in Paul Moravec's *The Shining*, at the Minnesota Opera, and Emile Griffith in *Champion*, at the Opera Theatre of St. Louis.

Mr. Woodley had a distinguished history with the role of Porgy in *Porgy and Bess*. He sang the role in concert with the San Francisco Symphony, the National Symphony Orchestra, the Baltimore Symphony, and on tour in Italy, including Santa Cecilia in Rome, with Yuri Temirkanov. In staged performances, he appeared with Opera Philadelphia, Indianapolis Opera, Opera Colorado, Bregenz Festival, the Savollinna International Festival in Finland, and the Catfish Row Opera Company of Charleston, South Carolina, in a gala celebration of the 50th anniversary of the opera's debut.

In concert, Mr. Woodley appeared with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta Symphony, Houston Symphony, Modesto Symphony, the U.S. Naval Academy, the American Composers Orchestra in Carnegie Hall, the Collegiate Chorale at Lincoln Center, and at the Bard Music Festival. He also sang the world premiere of *God, Mississippi, and Medgar Evers* with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, and was the bass soloist in Beethoven's



Arthur Woodley

Journal of Singing, November/December 2021
Volume 78, No. 2, pp. 289–294
<https://doi.org/10.53830/WEVC6237>
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National Association of Teachers of Singing

Symphony No. 9 in Mexico City with Sir Neville Marriner and The Academy of St. Martin in the Fields.

Mr. Woodley was born in New York City and raised in Saint Croix. He tragically lost his brief battle with cancer on Friday, November 20, 2020, at the age of 71. Arthur Woodley and Justin John Moniz served as colleagues at NYU Steinhardt. As part of a larger project entitled, “A Fight for the Light: Underrepresented Journeys to the Stage,” both Justin and Minnita Daniel-Cox sat down with Mr. Woodley to discuss his personal and professional journey shortly before his passing.

Justin John Moniz: Arthur, what are your proudest artistic achievements?

Arthur Woodley: I would say the big opening gala at the Met this past year. Also, the previous gala with Netrebko and all these fantastic singers. She was a featured artist and I did my part in *La bohème*. But, the first was *Porgy and Bess*, an opera that I’ve known for a very long time—especially with all those voices that were there. All the fantastic, fantastic voices. I like to call it the Ebony Classes. That experience was absolutely wonderful.

I was born in Harlem, but my early years were spent in the Virgin Islands, which is where my parents are from and where I started school. Ninety-five percent of my family remained there, so I would go back if Mom had the money to send me back. She would usually cobble those pennies together and off I would go to the islands. So, one of my greatest achievements was going back to the islands after I’d completed my studies and began my career. I actually did a concert in the church in which we had all grown up. My mother had grown up there, my uncles, my aunts, my grandparents, and my great-grandparents. So, we’re talking about going back 150 or more years in that church—a church which is now over 250 years old. Returning to that space, standing there, and giving a recital was one of my proudest achievements. I was there and my family was there. My mother was there, my mother’s teachers were there, all to hear that one concert. And you know—it still remains—it still touches me to say that I was able to do that for the ancestors and those people present. And, for my mother.

Minnita Daniel-Cox: What would you say some struggles have been in your journey as a performer?

AW: I think getting established. Getting that first and second step. And, finally getting that third step and beginning to accelerate. But, sometimes you’ve got a gig, you do the gig, and then you’re waiting months to get another. That was really one of the things that was tough to get accustomed to, become established, and begin to get what I call real quality gigs. Then people knew you and believed in you. They believed in the talent you were gonna put on the stage. That was really hard. And you know, it took a while. It really took a while to get going. The other thing that is hard is that your confidence has to survive. And as a Black artist you’re always gonna wonder, you know, “Am I good enough?” “Is it enough?” “How are they viewing me?” “Do they see what I have?” And sometimes they do, sometimes they don’t. The idea of just persevering, of keeping it going, of loving what you do so much that it’s kind of hard to say, “I’m gonna give this up.” And the many times that you do say it, the times when you go, “Why don’t I go back and get my degree in blah-blah-blah,” or something of that sort. And then Providence steps in and says, “Oh, here’s something.” Here’s a little tidbit or something like that, and you’re back in the saddle again. You wanna do it. You wanna do the research, you wanna get it going. You want to succeed. In whatever that endeavor is, whatever that opera, whatever that recital, whatever it is, you want to do well. *That’s* the thing. Will they believe me, will I get another chance? You know, those are the things that are coming up.

And although we would like to, we hope that we get to the point where we always have that confidence, we can see that in this . . . that now, people, it seems their eyes are being opened and they’re saying, “Oh, wow! Oh, yeah! Oh, they must’ve struggled a bit more.” “Oh, this must’ve happened, that must’ve happened.” [**MDC:** They weren’t lying!] Exactly—exactly. You know? “Oh I can see it a little bit.” But you know the other thing, you’ve gotta be careful, that little peek through the open door, can close quickly again. So we have to keep on being steady. Our steps must be steady. Our walk must be steady. Our belief in what we want to do, our love for what we want to do, what we are made to do, those steps we have to take to do this, we must remain steady and those steps must keep going . . . one after the other.

JJM: Arthur, who are the individuals within the industry that have inspired you in some way?

AW: Big people, little people. My church is in Harlem. I sang in a choir as everybody did. You know, you had your junior choir and everything else. And it was the little old ladies in my church, and I mean little and old, who would come up to me and say, “Here’s a dollar. Go buy some music and learn another song and come sing for us on the Sundays to come.” Those people. They put this thing in me. And I never thought really and truly that I would be a singer, you know? I never thought that. My family would much rather have had a doctor, a lawyer, an Indian chief. We were the up and coming, the strivers. My mother never finished high school, my grandfather only went through the third grade. My grandmother never learned to read nor write. So there was a bit of a burden on us, a bit of a feeling on us, like, “Boy, you’d better do something with your life,” and that carried over to those little old ladies who would give you that dollar and tell you [to] go buy a piece of music. So that was part of it. School? School was another thing where a teacher or two would say, “You should join the choir.” Fine, great, join the choir, it’s a great place to be, camaraderie, the whole thing. It’s a goodie. So you do all of that, and that helps you along. That really helps you along.

When I entered college it was as a biology major and not as a singer at all. But there was a choir. And I was used to choirs. So I joined the choir. And in that choir, that teacher gave me a part in a Kurt Weill piece which stirred my interest again in music. And he also said to me, “You really have fine talent. You know, did you ever think of . . . ?” and I went, “Eh, no.” So, he said to me, “Look, why don’t you take a year off [I lived in the South Bronx]; there’re all of these scholarships for underprivileged areas and they can help you, cuz I know you don’t have the money.” You know, single mom? The whole deal. “So why don’t you take a year off, and just try this. Take a year off, study abroad, go to Italy. Then come back and you can take up your studies again where you left off.”

So that’s what I did. I went to Italy, not knowing a word of Italian, and started to study with a wonderful lady there by the name of Clotilde d’Angelo Ronchi. I went there for one year, they gave me a scholarship for a second year, I spent three and a half years total in Italy and I was reborn. I came back and I said okay, I know what I wanna do. I went to Mannes College of Music. I studied there with a man by the name of Sebastian

Engelberg and he lit another kind of fire in me. That was wonderful.

But then when I got out I thought now what to do? Where to go? Choir again. A friend of mine named Robert Bass, head of the Collegiate Chorale, said, “Look, Arthur Mitchell is starting a choir at Dance Theatre of Harlem. He wants a choir to accompany his dancers in certain pieces. Why don’t you come?” So I went up there and joined Dance Theatre of Harlem. Arthur Mitchell, I guess we can say, took a liking to me, made me first a librarian of music at the place while I still sang. I used to sing and accompany Virginia Johnson while she danced to “The Greatest Love of All.” So I would sing that song while they danced. Arthur Mitchell then said, “Okay, we’re gonna make you assistant registrar so you can make some more money,” because by then I was married. And then at a certain point Arthur Mitchell said, “It’s time for you to go. You need to sing.” Arthur Mitchell wrote two letters, one to the Met, one to City Opera. The Met, nothing happened. City Opera was different. I auditioned and they took me. And in that sense, my career began.

AW: A little later on, I sang for a guy named Simon Estes. And Simon said to me, “Daggon, boy, you need to come to Europe. You can have a career in Europe. There’s a program there called the Opera Studio of Zurich, and I think that that would be a great place for you.” So with the help of Simon I got a scholarship again, left my wife and went over to Zurich. It was a fantastic year there. And following that first year, Zurich offered me a two-year contract, but I turned it down. And I turned it down because I wasn’t ready. And I *knew* I wasn’t ready. They wanted me to be ready, but I just wasn’t. So I came home.

Simon [Estes] had a friend by the name of Veronica Tyler. Simon, Veronica, and I had done this concert, featuring excerpts of *Porgy and Bess*. Veronica pulled me aside and said, “Do you know Porgy?” And I went, “No. No, I know the pieces that I’ve sung with you.” And she says, “You need to learn Porgy, because Porgy’s gonna take you places. Porgy’s gonna help you. It’ll open some doors for you.” I get emotional about it. I mean, she just passed away this year. And Veronica Tyler said, “I want you to get a pen, pencil, a notebook, I want you to start learning Porgy because I think you’re gonna make a wonderful Porgy.” I went down to Veronica’s place on

a Saturday. I got there at ten in the morning, we started to work a little bit, she fed me lunch, and ten and a half hours later, I left that place. Who's Porgy? What is his relationship to Sportin' Life? What is his relationship to whatever? What does this phrase mean? When you sing it, what does it mean? Ten and a half hours later I left—I staggered out of that place—and went home with a headache. And then I went back the next day for another five and a half hours. That woman put that role in me. She also said to me, and this is kinda intimate but it's the truth, she said, "Why you speaking in that high voice? That's not your voice. Your voice is lower than that. Your speaking voice is lower than that, you're just trying to be nice. You're just trying to make nice with people so they don't hear the real you." And of course, I was flabbergasted. She was right.

And because of Veronica Tyler, I knew Porgy, and I became Porgy. I knew all the characters, I knew everything around Porgy, and she was right. Porgy took me to Rio, to Finland, to Austria, to every place. She said, "I know what people say about Porgy and everything else but it's gonna teach you how to sing well. If you know that role, and you have to sing and you have to spend three and a half hours on your knees singing a role while everybody else is standing over you? Oh you will—you will be better after this."

And then slowly but surely, things started to open up for me. I finally signed with Columbia Artists management. I was sent out on recital after recital. They used to call me the king of the recitals. I would go out and do fourteen recitals all over the place. I've been to every state. Kellogg, Idaho. Waterloo. Lompoc, California. And sometimes you'd go out there and not be feeling well because you're doing it every other day. In other words, you do a concert, you drive someplace else or you fly someplace else, you set it up again, and off you go. But that, all of that, gave me experience and gave me a knowledge of art songs.

And then slowly but surely, the opera came. And for a while there, I had studied with Simon Estes's teacher, and then, then I needed more. I didn't know where more was coming from, so for six years I had no teacher. I did it on my own. Until I went to work on a French piece with a woman named Gai Silgé. She said to me, "Do you know Daniel Ferro?" I went, "Oh yeah, he teaches at Juilliard." I knew he was a big time teacher and likely

had no time for me. But, she set it up. She set the whole thing up. So I went in and sang for Daniel, and he said, "By the way, seven or eight years ago did you do a part in *Traviata*? Did you do this little part, this Doctor in *Traviata*?" I went, yeah. He said, "I heard you, and I said, now *that's* a great voice." And here we are, years later, we meet. And it was Daniel Ferro who then went on to tear me up! To tear me up! No, you know, you can do this, you can do that, why haven't you learned this piece? What—you need to do this piece. Of course, at this point I'm married, now with kids, and he says pay me what you got. Just pay me what you have. When you make it, then you pay me more. And that went on and on for all of these years. He was the last teacher I had. He died maybe five years ago. But he took care of me. He really took care of me. And was very particular, as I am now, about my music. And those are the people, those are the people that taught me. You know, when I was in Zurich, I could go on the stage and do little parts, or I could be in the audience and I could hear Simon, hear what big time singing was all about. And it was Simon who told me at a certain point, when I had this little part in *Tosca*, you know, Sciarrone, and I would walk out and I did my part, and he was in the audience, and he said, "Wow, you have charisma! You walked out and I had to look!" So you know, all of these things helped to say, "Okay, I'm on the right path. I'm doing what I'm supposed to do."

And so from there it kind of blossomed. It got better and better, and you know I met my wonderful agent Caroline Woodfield, who steadily helped me to really get out there and get better and better and better things to sing and do. And increased my repertoire.

One more person—Speight Jenkins. Speight Jenkins, I'll tell you the whole story now. Caroline said, "Speight Jenkins wants you for Bartolo for *Nozze di Figaro*." Okay, fantastic. I fly out to Seattle, we start rehearsals, right? And the thing with Speight is, as the head of the company he sits in on everything! *Everything*. Most managers, they got business they have to do. He sits in on all of this stuff, Speight. So, I launched into my aria, and after I finish my aria, he gets up and he walks out. And I go "Oh God, oh Lord. I just . . . he doesn't like me. He doesn't like what I've just done, I'm sure." Later to find out, and he said to Caroline, "Now that's a singer. That's a fantastic singer." He had gone back, right after I sang, to call New York to tell Caroline. I thought that

was great and for eighteen years I sang out there. Every kind of role, and the last year that Speight was there, I did every bass role in his entire season. Every bass role. No other bass, you know he did nine performances of every opera, eleven of others, and I sang them all. And then came back and sang for him for his farewell concert.

These are people who really believe in you. You know? And it's not that he sat there and gushed over me which I don't like anyway. You know? Let's do the work. Let's get to it. Let's do what we have to do. Exactly what happened with Speight. We would do the work and everything else, and I knew that he cared. Because he would hire me year in and year out to do all of this fantastic work. I mean, things that you wouldn't normally do, *Bluebeard's Castle*. All of these fantastic roles with all of these fantastic people. *Lucia di Lammermoor*, and this and that. I mean, my repertoire exploded. Exploded! And then he would recommend me to other people.

So . . . a long list of people I am forever grateful for, and who humble me, so that I can get on the stage. And every time I walk on stage, you know it's a funny thing, every time I walk on stage, I remember. I remember that as a little boy I walked without shoes. That if I went to school I put my shoes over my shoulder until we got close to school we'd dust [our feet off], we'd put our shoes on. We had one electric light in the living room in that place in St. Croix. We had one. We had no lights. If you wanted to go from room to room you had a kerosene lamp. That's where I come from. That's my pride. So I don't forget that. And every time I step that first foot on that [stage], I think of those people who came before me. All those people. Third grade education, one grandma couldn't read nor write, all of those different things, but I'm here. I'm here and I represent. Every day, every hour, and every time I open my mouth, it's my history, and their history.

MDC: If you could change one thing about the industry, what would it be?

AW: You know, that is hard—I've thought about that, and that's a hard question to answer. Of course as a performer you wish that things would be easier. That you would get a sense of more confidence, or more . . . kind of pushing you along, gently, saying, "You're okay, you're all right," because as a young artist you're so filled with fear. You're so filled with, "Is this my last gig?" and

all that. You wish there was some way that you could be helped in that way. I'm glad to see so many Black artists out there, you know. The Ebony Classes. I'm glad to see that that is there. You would hope that they would welcome you and that there wouldn't be a skeptical eye out there. Just let you come in and do what you do. I think that's . . . you know, as far as I can think of now, that's about it.

MDC: So are you saying that as a performer you would want a more welcoming audience?

AW: I think the audience is generally ecstatic to see you because you have a name or what have you. So it's kinda hard to put that feeling into words. It's very professional backstage and everything, and every once in a while, you get someone who stops and just makes you feel warmer. Makes you feel like, "Okay, I'm okay." And I know that's a hard thing in our business to do, but it can be done.

MDC: So you would like the business to care about the performer a little more? You'd like to see the industry care?

AW: It's tough, it's really tough. But yes. As you're coming in . . . *especially* as you're coming in. When you're at the highest level, hopefully your homework is done, you've done all the things you need to do and you're a true professional. But it's the beginning that I don't want to see discouragement. I want the young people to feel that they're really being helped along that way. That's what I would like.

At the later professional stage, we've got the gig, and we hopefully know what we're doing. And if we don't, like at the Met, there are all of these people who will tell you, you know, fix this, fix that, and everything else. And you can take it in because you've done this before. And so you're okay. It's the younger people I worry about more than anything else. You know, even when I teach now, it's the same type of thing. A feeling of giving, of saying, "Come here; I got you. Okay? I've got you. Let me help you along. You know I don't want to take away your independence or whatever, but let me just help you along, let me help you get some confidence." Because with the confidence, with that feeling of, "There's somebody looking there and helping you along a little bit," comes the ability to sing even better. To believe in what

you're doing even more. So for the young people that's an absolute necessity I think. I hope that makes sense.

JJM: So Arthur, what advice would you offer to a younger version of yourself?

AW: Be patient. That's the hardest thing. Our dreams and our desires are so big. This profession is not about an instrument that you can hold or that you press. It's all about this [pointing to his throat]. So therefore, if it's in the throat, and it's in the head, and everything else, it's all about *you*. And you need to have the patience to let it develop. Allow yourself—I always say that to my kids—*allow* the voice. Don't push the voice. Don't be super aggressive. Allow this thing that you have, this God-given gift that you have, allow it to come out of you.

And be patient. I go back to what we talked about before. That foot. That trudging, one step after another. Hold on to that. Be patient and allow, so that you may grow to be the best that you can be. Because if you don't, you hinder yourself. Especially in what we do in this unique profession of ours. You can easily hinder yourself or hold yourself back.

It's like when you meditate, and you take that breath in, and you go, *haaaahhhhh* [exhaling]. That's what you want when you're singing. That's what you want so that you can grow. Because it means it's relaxed. It's open, and you're truly giving. And that's what you want. That's what's gonna make you a better singer. It's gonna open you up so that you can learn. You know, it's the Veronica Tylers. That's it. Those are my people. Those are the people who allowed me. Eternally grateful. Eternally grateful to all of them.

[Moniz bio on p. 176]

Dr. Minnita Daniel-Cox, a native of Columbus, Ohio, attended Bowling Green State University, where she received a Bachelor of Music in Music Performance, and the University of Michigan, where she earned both her Master of Music and her Doctorate of Musical Arts degrees.

In 2014, Dr. Daniel-Cox established the Dunbar Music Archive after extensive research regarding the musical settings of texts by poet and Dayton native, Paul Laurence Dunbar. She has presented her archival research for the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS), the National Opera Association (NOA), College Music Society, Society for American Music, National Association for Music Education, International Society for Music Education, Song Collaborators Consortia, Ohio Music Education Association, and the International Association of Sound and

Audiovisual Archives. She has performed Dunbar Archive repertoire recitals in venues across the United States, including the University of Michigan, Bowling Green State University, University of Puget Sound, Ohio Northern University, Central Michigan University, Detroit Musicians Association, Taylor University, and Hanover University, with a recital tour in Stara Zagora, Haskovo, and Plovdiv, Bulgaria. Dr. Daniel-Cox has received two National Endowment for the Humanities grants to plan and implement interdisciplinary curriculum based on Dunbar's work and legacy. In addition to receiving extensive research funding from the University of Dayton, Dr. Daniel-Cox is also a grant recipient of the Mellon Foundation for the recording of *Highlights of the Dunbar Music Archive, Volume 1* with Albany Records.

A performing scholar with roots firmly planted in American Music, her notable roles include Leonora in the world premiere of the opera *Wit-ness* by Zae Munn, and Irene in the world premiere of James P. Johnson's *The Dreamy Kid*, which the Ann Arbor News described as "compelling and beautifully sung." As an active musician within the thriving arts community of Dayton, Ohio, and surrounding areas, Dr. Daniel-Cox has appeared with the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra, the Springfield Symphony Orchestra, the Miami Valley Symphony Orchestra, and the Bach Society of Dayton. In recent seasons she has performed the roles of Anna Gomez in Menotti's *The Consul* and Sister Rose in *Dead Man Walking* with Dayton Opera. She is regularly featured in broadcasts with Dayton Opera and Bach Society of Dayton.

As a dedicated educator, Dr. Daniel-Cox has taught music courses or applied voice for programs at Western Michigan University, University of Michigan, Bowling Green State University, and within the award-winning music program at Grosse Pointe South High School. She began her tenure at the University of Dayton in 2009 as an Artist-in-Residence and is currently Associate Professor of Voice and Coordinator of the Voice Area where she teaches applied lessons and music courses, serves as Artistic Director of the yearly musical/opera productions, and coordinates the Vocal Performance Institute, a summer program for high school-aged singers.

As from the pow'r of sacred lays
The spheres began to move,
And sung the great Creator's praise
To all the bless'd above;
So when the last and dreadful hour
This crumbling pageant shall devour,
The trumpet shall be heard on high,
The dead shall live, the living die,
And music shall untune the sky.

John Dryden, "A Song for St. Cecilia's
Day," Grand Chorus