

# OPERA NEWS

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## THOMPSON: The Mask in the Mirror

**CD** Owens, Patterson Abdou, Lorál, Mann; Humes, Polhamus, Mills; Thompson (piano); The Sanna Opera Project, Tucker. English libretto online. Navona Records NV6209 (2)



**P**AUL LAURENCE DUNBAR (1872–1906) was a poet, novelist and playwright. Though overshadowed by later figures of the Harlem Renaissance such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, Dunbar was the first African–American literary figure to achieve international fame and financial success. *The Mask in the Mirror*, a chamber opera by Richard Thompson, chronicles Dunbar’s rocky relationship with writer Alice Ruth Moore, to whom he was married for eight years. Thompson’s libretto is drawn from letters exchanged between the two, of which there were hundreds.

The piece begins with a narrator, who gives us the setting in a lyrical, recit-style passage reminiscent, maybe intentionally, of the opening to Britten’s *Turn of the Screw*. Then Paul, played by Cameo Humes (also the narrator), reads one of his early poems, which is written in so-called “Negro dialect.” This was the kind of work Dunbar was celebrated for; according to an early positive (albeit patronizing and racist) review in *Harper’s*, adapted here into an aria, Dunbar was “least himself” when he ventured into the realm of “literary English.” Paul reacts indignantly to this. (“Am I to write only dialect poetry? Never!”) In fact, the highbrow/lowbrow opposition emerges as an important theme in the opera, reflected in Thompson’s score. The music is couched in a classical idiom, primarily tonal but frequently unsettled. Thompson shows a keen ear for degrees of calibrated dissonance, an effective tool for depicting the inner workings of turbulent minds. Occasionally, however, we get a dose of something jazzier, particularly in the Act II barroom scene, in which the charming Joplinesque rag played by the house pianist (Thompson himself) turns into a very catchy trio number for Humes, Leberta Lorál and Roland Mills, who sound terrific together.

Most of the score is gripping but deliberately paced, particularly the recitatives, granting suitable weight and importance to the characters and their conflicts. Occasionally, one might wish for more forward motion, but the performances are powerful enough to maintain dramatic tension. As Paul, Humes has a compelling lyric tenor that pulses with the character’s perennially conflicted feelings—about his racial identity, his place in the literary world and his feelings toward the women in his life. In response to the *Harper’s* review by critic William Dean Howells (a suitably stuffy John Polhamus), Paul launches into a personal manifesto and a frank appraisal of the state of race relations, “We wear the mask that grins and lies.” It’s exceptionally powerful, and Hume delivers it grippingly with his glowing, inflamed tenor.

As Alice, Angela L. Owens has an attractively full-bodied soprano, which she deploys with dignity and clarity. Alice’s declaration of love is more reasoned and low-key than Paul’s; it’s clear she’ll be the stable one in the relationship. Alice had one white and one black parent and, in Thompson’s depiction, considers herself in a different class from those with darker skin. In one instance, Owens gives passionate impact to a shocking, climactic declaration about never accepting “the dark, dark others of my race, whom I do so despise!”

Lindsay Patterson Abdou remarkably provides distinct, fully dimensional characterizations to four different supporting roles. In Paris, Paul is immediately tempted by Sarah, sung by Natalie Mann, whose ingratiating vibrato makes her character unmistakably seductive. Mann and Humes sing a love duet that soars, making it clear how easily Paul confuses abiding love with momentary infatuation. Paul and Alice also have a love duet later, when he proposes, but their arching melodic lines are underlaid with foreboding; we can tell the relationship is doomed.

The Sanna Opera Project, conducted authoritatively by Stephen Tucker, plays with colorful timbres and effective intensity. The Mask in the Mirror demands patience at times, but it yields great rewards, and the subject is well worth the investment. The piece is a significant American music drama that deserves to be heard. —Joshua Rosenblum