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## Countertenor John Holiday steals the festival

BY SEAMUS KIRST  
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John Holiday spent a month and a half training to sing Mandarin for the role of First Male Voice in the world premiere of "Paradise Interrupted" at this year's Spoleto Festival USA.

What the 30-year-old countertenor did not spend months training for was the role of Zaida in the opera "Veremonda, l'amazzone di Aragona." But when his friend Michael Maniaci was unable to sing the part due to health issues, Holiday stepped in, learning the music in a day. He sung from the pit the next night as Maniaci acted out the part on stage.



[Enlarge](#) John Holiday PROVIDED BY LOVE LEE

"Like Placido Domingo always says, 'If I rest, I rust,' " Holiday said. "I feel blessed to not only be originating a role in the world premiere of a wonderful opera, but to also unexpectedly become a part of a second incredible production."

John Kennedy, the conductor of "Paradise

Interrupted," said that Holiday has a voice that stands apart from other countertenors he has heard during his decades of conducting and composing.

"For countertenors, there is oftentimes vocal quality that may be beautiful, but not as colorful or full as other major voice types," Kennedy said. "But John has an extraordinarily beautiful voice, with all of the technical qualities: body, and range of color and volume."



Holiday attributes his vocal versatility to his upbringing in Rosenberg, Texas. He said he started singing when he was 2, and that his oldest memory of performing is with his grandmother, who was the head musician of their Baptist church.

"Growing up in a household where my grandmother was a musician made it kind of possible for me to start singing at an early age. She never pushed me, but I think once she found out that I could sing she was kind of like, 'Ohhh. Oh, look. My grandbaby can sing,'" Holiday said. "She kind of started showing me off, so I'd be on top of tables singing."

Because it is a new opera, some of the music in "Paradise Interrupted" was not delivered to singers, like Holiday, until weeks before the premiere, Kennedy said. The opera's music, composed by Huang Ruo, is not only in Mandarin, but also has parts that are made up of sounds with irregular syllabic patterns. This type of proto-speaking was demanding for singers to learn, as they were singing sounds and couldn't make word associations like performers often do when singing in a foreign language, Kennedy said.

Holiday expanded his singing from gospel in church to classical music after he joined his high school choir. While earning his Bachelor of Music degree in vocal performance from Southern Methodist University, he picked up jazz and even opened for Jason Mraz at a 2006 concert in Dallas. Holiday received his Master of Music degree in vocal performance from the University of Cincinnati College's Conservatory of Music and an Artist Diploma in Opera Studies from the Juilliard School.

"I'm happy that I was raised in a Missionary Baptist church, where I was surrounded by gospel music, which is packed with riffs," Holiday said. "Baroque employs techniques of ornamentation, and jazz and gospel are full of ornaments. In that way, these three styles have shaped each other during my musical journey."

Holiday performed at Carnegie Hall with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra in 2012 in Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms," and he won third place at Placido Domingo's Operalia, The World Opera Competition in 2014

Diane Richardson, the assistant conductor of the Spoleto Festival, coached Holiday for his part in "Paradise Interrupted."

"I've known John for five years, and he is one of the most exquisite countertenors I have worked with," Richardson said. "Not only does he have a beautiful voice, he also has a beautiful soul with great integrity and a powerful message."

Holiday, who grew up in a single-parent home, worked at McDonald's, Kmart and a movie theater before his music career took off.

"I cannot help but express my gratitude for the black opera singers who came before me like Marian Anderson, Leontyne Price, George Shirley and in my voice type, Derek Lee Ragin," he said. "I'm happy that they tore the door down so I could just walk through."

Holiday believes one of the best ways to honor those who broke through racial barriers in the opera world is by creating more culturally inclusive operatic content, he said.

"There are so many stories that should be told, so many civil rights stories, so many American stories," he said. "I thank God, I am able to be on the stage after them, it's an honor, and I hope that in carrying the torch, I do it the right way."

An advocate for new operas, Holiday has appeared in other contemporary works, such as productions of Philip Glass' "Galileo Galilei" with the Cincinnati Opera and Portland Opera.

Holiday also remains a devotee of classical operas. He will sing the role of Caesar in the U.S. premiere of Vivaldi's "Catone in Utica" at the Glimmerglass Festival this summer. His European debut begins in November when he performs in Versailles, France, and Krakow, Poland, as Aquilio in Pergolesi's "Adriano in Siria" with Parnassus Arts.

In opera, where tradition is cherished, Holiday is aware that not everyone is going to be receptive to change, he said.

"People may not always like new works, but it's crucial to consider there could be something out there just as great as an operatic warhorse like 'La Boheme,' or just as beautiful as 'Madama Butterfly,' or 'Aida,'" he said. "We have to remember that when these operas were written by people like Puccini, Mozart and Verdi, they were the first to do it. They knew somebody had to be the first to write these operas and face the critics."

With major companies such as Opera Philadelphia, Los Angeles Opera, and the Metropolitan Opera presenting contemporary productions in recent years, Holiday said he believes opera, as a whole, will continue to move in this direction.

"I don't think it means the classics will have any less play time," he said. "But, I think it's time to give others a chance to shine, too. There's so much beautiful music out there."

Seamus Kirst is a Goldring Arts Journalist from Syracuse University.