

William B. Ray

(1925-)

William B. Ray is a world renowned opera and concert singer, music educator and civil rights advocate. During the mid-20th century, like so many other African-American writers, musicians and dancers, he heard the call to “go east” and headed for Europe. Because of America’s racism, Europe had become a place where black performers could hone their craft and gain respect.

Ray was born in Lexington, KY., in 1925. He became interested in music as a child and started singing at church. As a young opera singer, he was discovered by an agent from Vienna, Austria, while performing in “Il Tabarro” by Puccini at Karamu House, in Cleveland Ohio.

In his European debut as Amonasro in “Aida” with George Solti, Ray achieved star status as the leading baritone with Cuivillies Theater in Munich, Frankfurt. His fluency in German, Italian, and French led to numerous roles as a singer and actor in German and Austrian.

After a celebrated 25 year singing career overseas, he returned to the United States in 1982 to teach at the Peabody Conservatory of Music at John Hopkins University in Baltimore, MD. He retired 10 years later and was soon asked to teach at Howard University. There, he quickly became head of the voice department until his retirement in 2002.

In 2007, Dr. Ray was chosen to receive the National Opera Association’s “Lift Every Voice” Legacy Award, honoring the contributions of African American artists to opera. In 2009, he received a prestigious “Annie Award” in the category of Performing Arts from The Arts Council of Anne Arundel County, MD.

He has two favorite pieces of advice that he learned from personal experience. He tells his students, “If they are asked to perform, always be at their best or don’t perform at all, because you never know who is listening.” To his sons, he said, “Choose a profession you really enjoy and it will give you a living.”



William B. Ray played Renato in “A Masked Ball” by Giuseppe Verdi.



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