

The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson

Play by Sandra Seaton
Music by Carlos Simon and Georges Bizet

PITTSBURGH OPERA
E D U C A T I O N

Study Guide to the Play with Music



Denyce Graves as Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson in *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*.
Photo by Jati Lindsay for The Glimmerglass Festival.

Mary Cardwell Dawson: An Impressive *Impresaria*



Mary Lucinda Cardwell Dawson
(1894–1962)

An impresaria is someone who organizes and finances musical or theatrical performers, similar to a film producer. Antonio Vivaldi was both composer and impresario during the 19th century. More current impresarios include Rudolf Bing and Andrew Lloyd Webber. We must now include Mary Cardwell Dawson in our mental picture of what an impresaria looks like. Born into a family of farmers, whose father worked in a brickyard in Homestead, Mary Cardwell

exhibited musical talent early and later graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music as the only African American in her class.

Determined For many young women of that era, that would have been the end of the musical story. But she steeled herself against constant barriers—financial and racist—and provided unprecedented opportunities for aspiring African-American musicians. When Dawson founded the National Negro Opera Company in 1941, it was one of the first professional organizations of its kind in the United States. Karen M. Bryan, a music historian who is working on a biography of Dawson, said, “It was not easy for a woman to run a company like that at that time, and to do so with all the impediments she faced. She was incredibly brave and determined.”

Resolute When the NNOC showcased its talents at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1956, it was a true high point for the company, but Dawson was forced to work around restrictions. The Met banned the company from utilizing house staff and the box office. When the cast was only permitted to perform a static concert version of Clarence Cameron White's opera *Ouanga*, Dawson pushed the limits of a “concert” definition by costuming the company and including dance and movement.

Indomitable Dawson was devoted to bringing opera to African-American audiences. She trained hundreds of people at the NNOC, many of whom went on to perform, teach, and support the arts in their communities—artists like Robert McFerrin, Sr., and jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal. Dawson's decades-long career eventually led her to the White House, where Eleanor Roosevelt wrote a personal check in support of her work. Denyce Graves, who created the title role in *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*, said “There is no one who did what she did. And yet, she fell into obscurity.” Fortunately, through the research by Karen M. Bryan and the play with music, *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*, many more folks can learn about what this impressive, unwavering woman gave to the world.

The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson

- Play with Music in One Act, Based on a true story
- Inspired by Mary Cardwell Dawson's founding of the National Negro Opera Company.
- The story starts in Mary Cardwell Dawson's rehearsal studio in Washington, DC in the summer of 1943, when the company is preparing to present two operas at the outdoor Watergate Performance Facility on a floating barge to evade racially-segregated venues. But when bad weather threatens—pushing the performance to a segregated performance hall—Mary Cardwell Dawson must find a way forward. For the company's ambitious schedule, *La traviata* was performed on the first night with the great soprano Madame Lillian Evanti. Sadly, however, the damp weather was unsuitable, and the attendance was disappointing. Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson is planning for *Carmen* to take place on the next two nights.
- Approximately 70 minutes without intermission.

QUOTES FROM THE PREMIERE

"Madame Dawson was an arts pioneer, a woman of many firsts, whose remarkable story had been all but forgotten until recently. Mary Cardwell Dawson broke through incredible barriers to give voice to singers of color, creating opportunities that eventually brought them to major American opera house stages for the first time."

Denyce Graves

"There are countless brilliant Black artists and innovators throughout history whose contributions have been kept in the dark or erased. They are long overdue to be elevated and celebrated, and Mary Cardwell Dawson's story is chief among them. Her extraordinary accomplishments and advocacy for racial equity in the opera world at the height of the Jim Crow era serve as an inspiration and indication of how much progress we still need to make today."

Kimille Howard

MUSICAL SECTIONS WITHIN THE PLAY

- Divided Soul by Sandra Seaton and Carlos Simon
- Letter Duet from *Carmen* by Georges Bizet
- "Seguidilla" from *Carmen* by Georges Bizet
- "Rebellious Bird" by Sandra Seaton and Carlos Simon
- Habanera from *Carmen* by Georges Bizet
- Transitional Instrumental from *Carmen* by Georges Bizet
- "She Steps Onto A Floating Stage" by Sandra Seaton and Carlos Simon

—Adapted from The Glimmerglass Festival digital program for *The Passion of Mary Cardwell Dawson*



Commissioned by
The Glimmerglass Festival
Cooperstown, New York
Premiere: August 5, 2021

Play	Sandra Seaton
Original Music	Carlos Simon
Text for Original Music	Sandra Seaton
Director	Kimille Howard

Characters

The Glimmerglass Festival cast

Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson

	Denyce Graves
Isabelle	Victoria Lawal
Phoebe	Mia Athey
Frank	Jonathan Pierce Rhodes
Music Director/Pianist	Kevin Miller

Pittsburgh Opera

Madame Mary Cardwell Dawson

mezzo-soprano
An opera singer who trained at the New England Conservatory
Artist: Alyson Cambridge

Isabelle

soprano
Young woman who sings the role of Micaëla
Artist: Meroë Khalia Adeeb

Phoebe

mezzo-soprano
Young woman who sings the role of Carmen
Artist: Jazmine Olwalia

Frank

tenor
Young man who has visited the elegant hall and sings the role of Don José
Artist: Christian Mark Gibbs

Music Director/Pianist

Artist: Marvin Mills

Meet the Playwright

Sandra Seaton is an award-winning librettist and playwright. Her libretto for the solo opera *From the Diary of Sally Hemings*, set to music by composer William Bolcom and commissioned by mezzo-soprano Florence Quivar, has been performed at Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, and other venues. A video with soprano Alyson Cambridge can be viewed on the Glimmerglass Opera website.



In 2020, the opera *Night Trip*, music by Carlos Simon and libretto by Sandra Seaton, premiered at the Kennedy Center. Among her fifteen plays, *The Bridge Party*, Seaton's first play, portrays a group of Black women who fight to maintain their dignity and sense of self in the face of racism. Seaton's other works include *The Will*, about a Black family during Reconstruction, her Civil Rights era play *Music History or a Play about Greeks and SNCC in 1963*, *Call Me By My Name*, a performance piece about Henrietta Lacks, *Sally*, a one-woman drama, in which a vibrant and determined Sally Hemings recalls her life with Jefferson, the spoken word piece, *King: A Reflection on the Life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.* with spirituals sung by tenor George Shirley, and *Chicago Trilogy*, three one-act plays featuring Dr. Shirley.

In 2020, *The First Bluebird in the Morning*, with Carlos Simon, about a prisoner about to be paroled, premiered with LA Opera. In 2022, Seaton's ploratorio (an oratorio and play scenes) *Dreamland: Tulsa 1921*, with composer Marques L.A. Garrett, premiered with Dallas's Turtle Creek Chorale and was nominated for the 2023 Pulitzer Prize.

Courtesy Sandra Seaton

Playwright's Note

I knew, from my own family, that there were stories that had not been told. After speaking with Dr. Karen Bryan, Mary Cardwell Dawson's biographer, and delving into the life of this remarkable woman, I was fired with the ambition to write a play that would dramatize this world of "unrecorded history," the world of Mary Cardwell Dawson, a woman whose life story challenges generally-held assumptions about African Americans of her era, assumptions about gender roles, and the contributions of African Americans to the arts. This play is my tribute to a woman who would not allow herself to be defined by racism but who would instead live fully, dedicated to her art, whatever the obstacles.

During the era of segregation, middle-class white people would rarely come in contact with African Americans who were teachers, doctors, morticians, businesspeople, or even more rarely an artistic director of an opera company. Typically, only maids and servants would come to a white family's home. My family, and many others like them, lived behind the veil in a whole society hidden from view.

Meet the Composer

Carlos Simon is a Grammy®-nominated multi-genre composer, curator, activist, and performer who is a passionate advocate for diversity in music. He is a unique voice and sought-after cultural ambassador for new music globally.



He frequently writes for the National Symphony Orchestra and Washington National Opera, as Composer-in-Residence for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts through the 2026–2027 season. Additionally, his work has been commissioned by the New York Philharmonic, Los Angeles Opera, Minnesota Orchestra, and others. Premieres of his works have been performed with Boston Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Brooklyn Art Song Society, and Minnesota Orchestra—a large-scale tribute to George Floyd and the ongoing movement for racial justice.

Simon's music ranges from concert music for large and small ensembles to film scores with influences of jazz, gospel, and neo-romanticism. "My dad, he always gets on me. He wants me to be a preacher, but I always tell him, 'Music is my pulpit. That's where I preach,'" Simon reflected for *The Washington Post's* 'Composers and Performers to Watch in 2022' list. Having grown up in Atlanta, with a long lineage of preachers and connections to gospel music to inspire him, Simon proves that a well-composed song can indeed be a sermon.

[Carlos Simon | Official Website
\(carlossimonmusic.com\)](https://carlossimonmusic.com)

Timeline for Mary Cardwell Dawson and the National Negro Opera Company

1894 Mary Lucinda Cardwell was born in Madison, NC. When she was seven, her family moved to Munhall, PA. Her father had earlier moved as part of the Great Migration. Homestead became the center of her musical life. She sang in the church choir with her father and siblings. Dawson received training in classical voice, including operatic arias.

1925 Cardwell studied voice and piano at the New England Conservatory of Music, graduating as the only African American in her class. From early days at NEC, she experienced the inequities often faced by Black Americans. One of the operas she saw at Boston Opera was *Aida*, which did not include a single African American in a cast of almost 200. Though she began to wonder why she had chosen this field, she continued her studies in Chicago and New York.



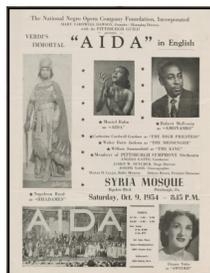
1927 Cardwell married master electrician Walter Dawson and they moved to Pittsburgh. She established the Cardwell Dawson Choir and the Cardwell Dawson School of Music in Homewood, offering classes in music theory, history, recitation, deportment, as well as vocal and instrumental lessons.



7101 Apple Street

Dawson spent her life as an activist, with a goal to provide professional experiences for classically-trained African-American performers. She believed that knowledge and performance of the arts, particularly opera, were essential elements in the culture of her people. Her efforts impacted the arts in Pittsburgh, Chicago, Washington, and New York.

1941 After presenting *Aida* at the National Association of Negro Musicians convention, Dawson launched the National Negro Opera Company. The NNOC produced more than 100 performances, with a repertoire that included six operas, including *Carmen*, *Faust*, and *La traviata*, and an oratorio—*The Ordering of Moses*.



1956 The NNOC performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York—the first appearance of an opera written by a Black composer (Clarence Cameron) and the first time a Black company performed on the Met stage.

1962 Despite its artistic triumphs, the NNOC struggled financially, never receiving government funding or sustained philanthropic support. The company ceased operations following Dawson's death.

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“The richest child is poor without a musical education.”



Mary Cardwell Dawson

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