

# A Black Soprano in Search of Operatic Crown

By H. G. MUDGAL,  
Managing Editor of the Negro World

"The only musical contribution of America has been made by the Negro."

Of late even white America has been paying glowing tributes to the nimble toes, cunning fingers and golden voice of the Negro. But then nothing else substantial is added to this tribute, which appears to be extremely hollow to talented Negroes who would use their genius and natural gifts to create new glory for their race and enrich art itself with their original contributions.

Yes, such and such a Negro is a great singer, a great actor, a great



Florence Lee  
a Broadway star

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dancer, especially if he has made a name for himself first in Europe. It is also true that provincial America does not even recognize white talent unless it is first acclaimed by cosmopolitan Europe.

But the white artist, once recognized, has an unlimited opportunity for development and self-expression, whereas the Negro artist has not. And that makes a world of difference for the Negro artist, and more often than not his career ends in a tragedy—a tragedy all the more painful because the progress of a recognized genius has been willfully checkmated by a blundering society.

In substance such has been the fortune of Miss Ethyl Oughton-Clarke, the famous coloratura soprano, who received spontaneous recognition from European critics but who now finds herself blocked by artificial circumstances from making best use of her special gifts and a splendid voice. Her great ambition is to play the leading lady-in grand operas, so written as to make use of the Negro's talent to best advantage, and to glorify the race.

Miss Clarke is no doubt one of the leading soprano coloraturas of her race. As one critic has put it, her talents merit her elevation to the ranks of the world's leading sopranos, to be ranked with Adelina Patti, Irma di Murska and Luisa Tetrazzini.

She is a versatile artist. Her repertoire includes selections from Italian, German, French, Spanish and English. As another critic had it, she scintillates with lustre in each and all schools of music. Her rich voice is beautifully round, warm and lyrical.

Miss Clarke was born at Kingston, Jamaica, B.W.I. She comes of a cultured and well educated family. Her father was a teacher at a Baptist school.

Her musical environment was exceptionally favorable. Her mother was a talented soprano, and her father was a baritone bass. Since her father was connected with a Baptist school and church, she had exceptional opportunities from early childhood, to sing in the choir as a favorite, especially since they loved her remarkable voice.

Little Ethyl was a sensation and a prodigy. At the age of eight she could recite the whole of Mary Queen of Scots. It was thought that she was destined to become a great actress, and it is still her ambition to become a distinguished actress in grand operas.

Miss Clarke came to New York in 1914. The Negro had gained no recognition as yet in any field. She thought at first of becoming a teacher in the city's public schools, but her friends persuaded her to stick to her music. She was told that her voice

was too good to be spoiled by deserting music.

But what good would music do her without advanced training? But how to get it was one of the problems that faced her at the time. Yes, she was willing to work and earn money enough to pay for her lessons. But she could earn only \$4 a week at the coat room at Wanamaker's. Who could give advanced lessons to such a poor girl?

Young Ethyl was courageous, though. She approached no less a person than the Metropolitan opera star, Adeleine Ormand, who, after hearing her once, saw possibilities in her voice and talent. She actually consented to give her lessons at the exceptionally reduced rates of \$2.50 a lesson.

She studied later on with Rosman, now director of "Dixie Echoes," which are broadcast twice a week over WEAF, with Harry Williams and with Mrs. Abigail Gitterman at Carnegie Hall. With the latter she studied for six years.

Between 1919 and 1922 Miss Clarke gave innumerable recitals, concerts and operas in concert form. Her grand recital at the Carnegie Hall in 1922 was so successful that she was prevailed upon to make a national tour, covering Pittsburgh, Columbus and Cleveland, Chicago, Detroit, Washington, Baltimore and Philadelphia.

In 1928 Miss Clarke went to England to sing with Meny's Band, white, at the Royal Albert Hall. English music critics greeted her with such spontaneous applause and appreciation that her appearances were se-

cured at the Century Theatre, London.

While in England she formed a warm friendship with a celebrated Negro professor of music in London, Mr. Louis Drysdale, who is a distinguished teacher of singing and voice production in the true Italian method (bel canto). As an internationally recognized master-teacher, he immediately appreciated Miss Clarke's remarkable gifts, which were the basis of their friendship.

The same year Miss Clarke appeared at La Salle Hoche at Paris, with Mme. Marguerite Vinci of the International Opera House of Paris, and with M. Leon Moreau, the celebrated composer of Milan, Italy.

After travels of observation in Italy, Germany, Holland and Belgium, Miss Clarke returned to the United States in 1929. Since her return she has been singing over WABC, WAAT, WMCA and WEVD. She is now planning to make another national tour of the United States, covering especially the West and the South.

Miss Clarke feels that she is cut out for high operatic roles, but greatly regrets that she has no field for her ability in that direction. She is extremely proud of her race, and would not play comical roles to humor the whites. She is so sensitive on this point of race dignity that she even refuses to sing spirituals which she considers to be the tickling of the "spiritual toe" of the white folks.

She is quietly preaching to younger writers and artists of the race to take to heart the work of serious drama and genuine opera based on race history and race experience. She hopes to head such a movement in the near

future, soon after her proposed national tour will be completed. And she is utilizing all of her resources only toward the end of realizing her dreams of glorification of her people.

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