



Alexandria Times

Established in 1797 as *The Alexandria Times and Advertiser*

Out of the Attic

Celebrating an Alexandria legacy: Ben Holt

Alexandria Times, February 11, 2021

Image: Ben Holt

In 2020, Alexandria-born Mayme Holt donated a treasure trove of scrapbooks, photographs, documents, artwork and volumes of sheet music and playbills to the Alexandria Black History Museum, documenting the career of her son, Ben.

A talented opera singer, he started his career at age 11 as the boy soprano in Mendelssohn's oratorio "Elijah" and performed in plays and musicals at J.E.B. Stuart, now Justice, High School in Falls Church. Holt attended both the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the Juilliard School. He performed with many American opera companies, and in Italy and the United Kingdom.

One of Holt's most important roles came in 1986, at the world premiere of Anthony Davis' opera, "X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X," where Holt, playing the title role, and his fellow leads made their New York City Opera company debuts. He undertook extensive research for the part, including listening to Malcolm X's speeches and studying his mannerisms in film footage.

Holt said he felt it was the role of a lifetime, "an honor, a challenge, and an education." The reviews praised Holt's combination of musical talent, acting ability, stage presence, and dedication, which made him a truly remarkable performer.

Holt celebrated his heritage throughout his career, both in performances of traditional songs and in musical adaptations honoring the legacy and work of African Americans. In 1985, he performed as Josiah in the opera "Harriet: A Woman Called Moses" by Thea Musgrave at Norfolk Center Theatre.

At the Kennedy Center's "Black Composers Salute the Black Colleges and Universities" program, Holt performed musical interpretations of poems, including Howard University faculty member, Thomas Kerr's adaptation of Paul Lawrence Dunbar's "Riding to Town," Howard Swanson's "Joy" by Langston Hughes and "Death Song" by Dunbar and Margaret Bond's "Minstrel Man" by Hughes.

In 1987, at the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra's "Rejoice! A Musical Celebration of Black History," Holt read Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." A letter in the archive from composer Lee Hoiby explains that after hearing Holt's performance at their first rehearsal, Lee dedicated his musical interpretation of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream" speech to Holt.

Holt's passion was not only performing; he loved engaging others in music, especially bringing opera to a wider audience. Although he moved to New York, Holt frequently returned to the D.C. area where he performed in schools, churches, clubs, libraries and senior citizen centers. He also sang with the University of the District of Columbia's Lorton Prison College program.

Holt's career was sadly cut short by his untimely death in 1990, at just 34 years old. Thanks to the devotion of his mother, his legacy lives on through the Ben Holt Memorial Scholarship at the Juilliard School and the Alexandria Black History Museum.





Office of Historic Alexandria City of Alexandria, Virginia

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria and invited guests.