

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Simon Estes

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Estes, Simon
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Simon Estes,
Dates:	February 6, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:02:43).
Abstract:	Opera singer Simon Estes (1938 -) has performed all over the world, with all major international opera companies and in over one hundred roles. He was the first African American male artist to sing at the Bayreuth Festival. Estes was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on February 6, 2006, in Boston, Massachusetts. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_011
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Renowned opera singer and educator Simon Estes was born on March 2, 1938, in Centerville, Iowa. Estes is the youngest of three siblings. Raised in a spiritually-centered family, Estes sang in his church choir as a young boy and throughout his young educational years.

Estes began his university career as a pre-med student in 1957 at the University of Iowa. In 1961, a voice teacher, Mr. Charles Kellis, heard Estes sing in one of the university choirs. Kellis introduced Estes to several classical recordings which led Estes to change his professional career path to singing. Upon graduating from the University of Iowa, Estes enrolled in the Juilliard School in 1964. In 1965, he received a music grant from the NAACP and the New York City Trust Fund to audition for the role of Ramfis in *Aida*. Estes was cast in the role, and made his professional debut at the Deutsche Opera in Berlin. He later won third prize in the Munich International Music Competition in 1965 and the bronze medal at the 1966 Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow. Also in 1966, President Lyndon B. Johnson invited Estes to sing at the White House.

Estes has performed at many major opera houses around the world, and with top opera singers including Leontyne Price and Luciano Pavarotti. Some of his most memorable operatic performances have been performing for Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Cape Town, South Africa, and in *The Flying Dutchman* and *Porgy and Bess*. Estes also sang at the 1999 Nobel Prize Committee where he was introduced to Nelson Mandela.

In 1999, Estes published his autobiography, *Simon Estes: In His Own Voice*. Estes has worked as a voice, humanities, and foreign language professor at Iowa State University, Boston University, and Wartburg College. He has also established several foundations including the Simon Estes Iowa Educational Foundation; The Simon Estes Music High School near Cape Town, South Africa; and the Switzerland-based Simon Estes International Foundation for Children.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Simon Estes was conducted by Robert Hayden on February 6, 2006, in Boston, Massachusetts, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Opera singer Simon Estes (1938 -) has performed all over the world, with all major international opera companies and in over one hundred roles. He was the first African American male artist to sing at the Bayreuth Festival.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Estes, Simon

Hayden, Robert (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Estes, Simon--Interviews

African American male singers--Interviews

Bass-baritones--United States--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Opera Singer

HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Simon Estes, February 6, 2006. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Simon Estes, Section A2006_011_001_001, TRT: 0:30:31 ?

Simon Estes was born on March 2, 1938 in Centerville, Iowa to Ruth Jeter Estes and Simon Estes. Estes' maternal grandparents lived in Centerville. They were poor but raised a tight-knit family. Estes' maternal grandfather, Nathaniel Jeter,

often imparted marital advice to Estes' mother and her siblings. Estes' paternal grandfather, Major Estes, was born into slavery in the late 1850s. Estes' father was born in 1891 and spent much of his youth in Trenton, Missouri before moving to Centerville to work in the coal mines. He later worked at The Continental Hotel, cleaning floors and carrying bags. Estes remembers his father as a kind and loving man and recounts how the discrimination his father faced at a hospital led to his premature death. While growing up in the mostly-white Centerville with his three older sisters, Estes often encountered racism from other children and neighbors. He recalls his mother's lessons in countering such treatment with love and forgiveness and her beautiful singing voice.

African American male singers--Interviews.

Bass-baritones--United States--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Simon Estes, Section A2006_011_001_002, TRT: 0:30:31 ?

Simon Estes recalls childhood memories of his neighbors' occupations, his parents' encouragement and Second Baptist Church in Centerville, Iowa. He enjoyed eating Sunday dinners and listening to the radio with his family. Estes encountered a number of discriminatory teachers during elementary school, and, at the segregated local movie theater, was allowed to sit on the main floor only at his white friends' insistence. Estes enjoyed singing, but did not consider a musical career while growing up. However, in junior high school, he began performing with the Centerville High School choir after a teacher recognized his talent. After graduating, Estes attended Centerville Junior College. He transferred to the University of Iowa, where he initially majored in pre-med before switching to music, and became the first black member of The Old Gold Singers. Estes enrolled in the Juilliard School, but left during his second year after auditioning for the Deutsche Oper Berlin, where he made his professional debut in 1965.

Video Oral History Interview with Simon Estes, Section A2006_011_001_003, TRT: 0:30:20 ?

Simon Estes entered the International Tchaikovsky Competition in 1966. Despite being unable to speak Russian, he memorized songs phonetically and won third-place, launching his career. He was invited to the White House to perform for President Lyndon Johnson. In 1978, Estes performed the title role in Richard Wagner's opera, 'The Flying Dutchman' in Bayreuth, Germany. The highlights of his career included performances before four U.S. presidents, Saint Pope John Paul II, and Nelson Mandela. Estes also appeared at London's Piccadilly Theater as Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in a musical with lyrics written by HistoryMaker Maya Angelou. In the mid-1980s, Estes began teaching at The Juilliard School. He also taught at Iowa State University, Wartburg College, and, most recently, at Boston University. Estes established the Simon Estes Music High School in Cape Town, South Africa and the Simon Estes Educational Foundation. The Simon Estes Riverfront Amphitheater in Des Moines, Iowa was named in his honor.

Video Oral History Interview with Simon Estes, Section A2006_011_001_004, TRT: 0:27:20 ?

Simon Estes published his autobiography, 'Simon Estes: In His Own Voice' in 1999 with the help of his childhood friend Mary L. Swanson. Having made his debut in 1965, at the time of the interview, Estes had sung opera for forty-one years. He was preparing for the 102nd role in his opera career as the Commendatore in Boston University's production of 'Don Giovanni.' In this part of the interview, he describes his gift for memorization, how his vocal range developed over the course of his career and his specialization as a Wagnerian and a Verdi singer. In sharing his future plans, he notes that he intends to retire from opera singing. He recalls meeting Roland Hayes and other notable African

American performers, and describes the discrimination that African Americans faced despite their contributions to opera. He reflects upon his hopes for the genre of opera, his life, his awards and honors, and how he would like to be remembered.

Video Oral History Interview with Simon Estes, Section A2006_011_001_005, TRT: 0:04:01 ?
Simon Estes narrates his photographs.