

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Rodrick Dixon

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Dixon, Rodrick
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 20, 2013
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2013
<b>Physical Description:</b>	10 uncompressed MOV digital video files (4:40:05).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Opera singer Rodrick Dixon (1966 - ) has appeared as a soloist in a number of operas, as well as performing with the tenor group, Cook, Dixon & Young and his wife, concert artist, Alfreda Burke. Dixon was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 20, 2013, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2013_230
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Opera singer Rodrick Dixon was born on June 22, 1966 in Queens, New York. Dixon attended the Mannes School of Music and graduated with his B.M. degree in 1989 and his M.M. degree in 1991. During each summer while at the Mannes School, Dixon also studied at L'Academia Musicale Ottorino in Assisi, Italy and l'Ecole d'Art Americain-Palais de Fontainebleau, France.

Dixon trained in the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists, where he appeared in many productions, most notably as the Prince in the 1992 world premiere of Bright Sheng's *The Song of Majnun*. Other notable operatic debuts were with the Portland Opera *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* (1995); the Columbus Opera's world premiere of *Vanqui* as Prince (2000); the Virginia Opera as Sportin' Life in *Porgy & Bess* (2000); the Michigan Opera Theater as Tonio in *La Fille Du Regiment* (2005); and the Todi Music Festival as Lenski in *Eugene Onegin* (2007). Under the baton of Maestro James Conlon, he debuted at the Cincinnati May Festival (2005); the Los Angeles Opera in *Tannhauser* (2007); the filming of *Der Zwerg* (2008); and the Ravinia Festival with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (2011). Dixon's orchestral debuts include: the Chicago Symphony Millennium Park (2004), May Festival (2005), Philadelphia Orchestra (2008), the Los Angeles Philharmonic in the title role of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* (2009) and Atlanta Symphony (2010). He then joined the Metropolitan Opera roster for *Armida* (2010-2011) and *Rodelinda* (2011). From 1998 to 2013, Dixon performed with the Tenors Cook, Dixon and Young (formerly of the Three Mo' Tenors), filming multiple PBS-TV specials and touring the U.S.

In 2002, Dixon and his wife, opera singer, Alfreda Burke, performed in "Too Hot to Handel: The Jazz-Gospel Messiah" at Chicago's Auditorium Theatre and the Detroit Opera House. Other performances by Dixon and Burke include PBS specials *Hallelujah Broadway* (Prague, 2010) and Miss World 2012 from Inner Mongolia, China. They have appeared as regular guest artists in Old St. Patrick Church's (Chicago) production, *Siamsa na nGael*, at Symphony Center and *Deck the Halls Christmas Concerts*. In 2013, Dixon and Burke co-produced and recorded the new show, *Songs of a Dream*, with the Auditorium Theatre for a U.S. tour.

Dixon's musical recordings include: Arthaus Musik Zemlinsky's *Der Zwerg*; *Recorded Music of the African Diaspora* and *Hallelujah Broadway* (2010). He has also appeared on numerous television programs, including *My Favorite Broadway: The Love Songs* at City Center (2000), *The Mark Twain Awards Honoring Whoopi Goldberg* at Kennedy Center (2002), the United States Air Force 60th Anniversary Gala (2007).

Dixon received a number of grants, scholarships and awards, including the Richard F. Gold Career Grant from the Shoshana Foundation, the Jan Peerce Scholarship, Links Foundation Scholarship, a multi-year grant from the Osceola Foundation and the Mary Dawson Art Guild "Tenor of the Year" Award (1991). He has served as a consultant with the Cincinnati Symphony and Old St. Patrick's Church (Chicago), and been on several boards including the Chicago 2016 Olympic Bid Committee (Arts and Culture Advisory Committee).

Opera singer Rodrick Dixon was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 20, 2013.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Rodrick Dixon was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 20, 2013, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 10 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Opera singer Rodrick Dixon (1966 - ) has appeared as a soloist in a number of operas, as well as performing with the tenor group, Cook, Dixon & Young and his wife, concert artist, Alfreda Burke.

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## 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®.

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## 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.

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## Controlled Access Terms

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

### Persons:

Dixon, Rodrick

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

## Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Dixon, Rodrick--Interviews

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## Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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## Occupations:

Opera Singer

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## HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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## 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 Rodrick Dixon, August 20, 2013. 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).

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## 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.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_001\_001, TRT: 1:28:35 ?

Rodrick Dixon was born on June 22, 1966 in Queens, New York to Dorothy Jean Black Dixon and Samuel Edward Dixon. His mother was born on September 19, 1946 in Shreveport, Louisiana to Roy Black, a mechanic, and Gertrude Black, a homemaker. Dorothy Dixon attended Queens College in Queens, New York and became a daycare director. Dixon's mother was an accomplished gospel singer. Dixon's father, Samuel Edward Dixon, was born on July 7, 1938 in Florida to Henderson Dixon and Alzina Williams Dixon, but was raised in New Jersey. Dixon's paternal grandmother was descended from a slave brought from Africa named Brsteol Blue, who had fought in the Civil War, and Dixon's grandfather's family worked on the Smith Plantation in Orange County, Virginia. Dixon's father attended York College in Queens, New York and worked as an airplane mechanic and police officer before enrolling at New York Theological Seminary. In 1971, Dixon's father became a preacher at First Freedom Baptist Church in Queens, New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_001\_002, TRT: 2:28:08 ?

Rodrick Dixon describes how his parents met in church. He reflects on their personalities, who he takes after, and how they each contributed to his interest in music. He also talks about his siblings, Andrea Dixon, Leroy Dixon, Elijah Dixon, and Jeanette Dixon. Dixon grew up in the South Ozone Park neighborhood of Queens, New York, and recalls playing baseball in Baisley Pond Park. Dixon recalls hearing his mother's singing voice in church and being exposed to classical music through his father, who would play classical music in his car. Dixon attended P.S. 124 Osmond A. Church in Queens, New York, but was more passionate about music, church, and baseball than about school. Dixon was a catcher on his baseball team, and his baseball heroes included the 1969 New York Mets and the Cincinnati Reds. Dixon reflects on the waning popularity of baseball among African American youth. Dixon played baseball from around 1974 until 1979, when he enrolled at the High School of Music & Art in New York City, New York.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_001\_003, TRT: 3:29:17 ?

Rodrick Dixon reflects on the roles of baseball, music, and church life during his childhood and what he learned from his parents. He recalls hearing C.L. Franklin and Aretha Franklin at his father's church, and remembers some of the men who helped facilitate his baseball season. When he was a child, Dixon learned how to play piano first through imitating his father's playing and then through formal lessons. In 1976 and 1977, Dixon enrolled at the Brooklyn Boys Chorus, which was led by James McCarthy and affiliated with Long Island University in New York City, New York. With the chorus, Dixon studied music and sang weekly concerts around the country. After his voice changed, Dixon enrolled at J.H.S. 226 Virgil L. Grissom in Queens, New York City, New York. In 1979, Dixon auditioned for the High School of Music & Art in New York City, New York and after school, he also attended the Harlem School of the Arts in New York City. His first voice teachers were Barbara Mahajan and Jonathan Sprague.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_001\_004, TRT: 4:28:37 ?

Rodrick Dixon attended the High School of Music & Art and the Harlem School

of the Arts in New York City, where he studied under Barbara Mahajan. He recalls his introduction to a Leontyne Price recording that launched his passion for performing classical solo music. In 1984, Dixon sang at the semiannual concert for the High School of Music & Art, where he caught the attention of Walter and Joy Beinecke, who offered to fully fund his education to attend the Mannes College of Music in New York City, New York. Dixon attended Mannes College from 1985 to 1991 and received both his Bachelor of Music degree and his Master of Music degree. In 1987, Dixon studied in Fontainebleau, France with Regine Crespin, where he met Chris Guardino, Bright Sheng, and Leonard Bernstein. After graduating in 1991, Dixon was encouraged by Sheng to audition for the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists in Chicago, Illinois. Dixon reflects on learning foreign languages and how foreign cultures and traditions affect his performances.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_001\_005, TRT: 5:28:56 ?

Rodrick Dixon talks about how musical phrasing changes, how emotion is communicated through a piece of music to its audience, and how his phrasing contradicts the traditional operatic technique of singing legato. He reflects on being labeled a “crossover artist” and the long tradition of African American singers who crossed genres between jazz, gospel, blues, and classical music, including Duke Ellington, Paul Robeson, and HistoryMaker Quincy Jones. In 1991, Dixon auditioned for and was accepted into the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists in Chicago, Illinois, where, in 1992, he starred in the title role in the premier of Bright Sheng’s “The Song of Majnun” and performed at concerts around the city. Dixon describes the prestige of the program and the support of classical music in Chicago. He also reflects on his decision to enter the program rather than take a larger paycheck playing Sportin' Life in Virginia Opera’s production of “Porgy and Bess.”

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_001\_006, TRT: 6:28:28 ?

Rodrick Dixon studied at the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists in Chicago, Illinois from 1992 to 1994. In 1995, he performed in a production of “Les Contes d'Hoffmann” at the Portland Opera. He then worked as a substitute teacher for schools in Chicago, Illinois. Dixon recalls meeting HistoryMaker Alfreda Burke in 1992 through a mutual friend. In 1996, Dixon and Burke got engaged and performed in “Show Boat” at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. In late 1996, Dixon began traveling to Toronto, Canada to rehearse for “Ragtime.” On January 12, 1998, the couple married at First Mennonite Church in Chicago, Illinois, and on January 18, “Ragtime” opened on Broadway. In June of 1998, Dixon returned to Chicago to perform as Booker T. Washington in the production of “Ragtime” before joining Victor Trent Cook and Thomas Young as the “Three Mo’ Tenors” in September 1998. In 2004, the group changed their name to “Cook, Dixon and Young (Formerly of the Three Mo' Tenors)” to avoid a legal dispute.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_001\_007, TRT: 7:31:50 ?

Rodrick Dixon joined the “Three Mo’ Tenors” in September of 1998 with Victor Trent Cook and Thomas Young. Dixon talks about the success of The Three Tenors and how they opened the market for operatic crossover acts. Dixon describes how the Three Mo’ Tenors took this idea further by mixing classical technique with African American genres. Dixon shares his opinion of what made the group unique. In 2000, Dixon first performed “Too Hot to Handel,” a genre-bending reimagining of Handel’s “Messiah.” In 2002, Dixon and HistoryMaker Alfreda Burke began performing “Too Hot to Handel” annually at the Detroit Opera House in Detroit, Michigan; and, in 2006, they began to perform it

annually at the Auditorium Theatre in Chicago, Illinois. In 2010, Dixon and Burke recorded “Hallelujah Broadway” in Prague, Czech Republic with Anthony Kearns and Linda Eder. In 2008, Dixon returned to traditional opera with his performance in Los Angeles Opera’s production of Alexander Zemlinsky’s “Der Zwerg” with conductor James Conlon.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_001\_008, TRT: 8:30:56 ?

Rodrick Dixon starred in the title role of Los Angeles Opera’s production of Alexander Zemlinsky’s “Der Zwerg” in 2008. The opera was part of James Conlon’s “Recovered Voices” project, which featured operas suppressed by the Third Reich. Dixon recounts racist comments he received during the production, and the parallels between his character in the opera, a dwarf who gets mistreated by the Infanta, his own career as an African American tenor, and the presidential race of HistoryMaker and President Barack Obama. Dixon also reflects on the honor of being chosen for the opera’s DVD cover. Dixon talks about Daisy Newman’s Young Musicians Choral Orchestra in Berkeley, California, where he and his wife, HistoryMaker Alfreda Burke, teach gifted young musicians. Dixon also participates in the Music and Medicine Symposium at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio and is a regular performer at the “Siamsa na nGael” celebration at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Center in Chicago, Illinois run by Bill Fraher.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_001\_009, TRT: 9:29:48 ?

Rodrick Dixon reflects on his performance as Frederick Douglass during the "Siamsa na nGael" concert in Chicago, Illinois, and on the historical relationship between Douglass and the Irishman Daniel O'Connell. He talks about the travel opportunities that have been available to him as a singer, and on his future career plans, including a performance at Carnegie Hall of “The Ordering of Moses” by the African American composer Robert Nathaniel Dett. He talks about the history of the piece, which was premiered in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1937 and controversially stopped being broadcast halfway through. Dixon shares his hopes and concerns for the African American community and reflects on how African American musical traditions are viewed within the larger classical world. He also talks about his family, including his marriage to HistoryMaker Alfreda Burke and the company they founded together in 2004, DiBurke, Inc.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_001\_010, TRT: 10:15:30 ?

Rodrick Dixon reflects on how his parents feel about his career and how he would like to be remembered. He ends the interview by narrating his photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_Dixon\_Rodrick\_06\_MED\_001, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_Dixon\_Rodrick\_06\_MED\_002, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_Dixon\_Rodrick\_06\_MED\_003, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_Dixon\_Rodrick\_06\_MED\_004, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_Dixon\_Rodrick\_06\_MED\_005, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section A2013\_230\_Dixon\_Rodrick\_06\_MED\_006, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section  
A2013\_230\_Dixon\_Rodrick\_06\_MED\_007, TRT:

Video Oral History Interview with Rodrick Dixon, Section  
A2013\_230\_Dixon\_Rodrick\_06\_MED\_008, TRT: