

***Two Heroes of Giftedness – A Pianist and Opera Singer***

**André Watts – Concert Pianist and Heroic Genius of Multiculturalism – by Michael Walters (from Heroes of Giftedness, 2009, Gifted Education Press)**

André Watts represents a new trend in American society which is concerned with viewing artistic accomplishments from a multicultural perspective. In this regard, he is similar to multicultural geniuses such as the opera contralto, Marian Anderson, and the modern dancer, Judith Jamison. His mother was from Hungary and his father was a Black American. Watts' mother was his original mentor as she was a pianist, while his father was a career non-commissioned officer in the United States Army. Born in West Germany in 1946, André spent his first eight years in Europe because his father was stationed there. During his eighth year, he and his family moved back to United States where they resided in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His parents were divorced after returning to the United States and André lived with his mother. When he was a child, his mother introduced him to the great 19<sup>th</sup> century composer and pianist, Franz Liszt, who was also a Hungarian.

Watts was a child and teenage prodigy. He appeared with the Philadelphia Orchestra when he was only nine years old and graduated from the Philadelphia Academy of Music in 1963. Leonard Bernstein asked him to substitute for Glenn Gould (who was sick) for the New Years day concert of January 1, 1963. On January 15, 1963 at sixteen years, he was introduced to a mass audience through his television performances with the New York Philharmonic as a part of Leonard Bernstein's *Young People's Concerts*. Later, he studied at the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, Maryland and graduated in 1972. His teacher at Peabody was the great piano soloist, Leon Fleisher. In recent years he has become a world class pianist by performing with symphony orchestras internationally, and is currently a professor of music at Indiana University which has one of the most rigorous music programs in the United States.

I have personally attended many of Watts' performances or observed them on television. Following in his mother's footsteps, he is an expert on 19<sup>th</sup> century music with particular emphasis on Franz Liszt's works, and is similar to Liszt in showmanship and technical proficiency. Watts is also a champion of Beethoven's and Chopin's piano music. When you hear or see him playing the music of these musical geniuses, you can sense and comprehend their relevancy for our present time. He is able to achieve a universal appeal to audiences worldwide through his interpretations of Beethoven, Chopin and Liszt. The listener will connect with the psychological and spiritual attributes of these composers because of Watts' masterful performances. By listening to his performances, young gifted musicians will be inspired to continue his legacy. I recently heard him reach the depths of George Gershwin's popular melodies through his brilliant interpretations. It was like one genius responding to another.

**Selected CD Recordings:**

***Andre Watts Plays Liszt: Vol 1*** (1992, Angel Records).

***Andre Watts Plays Liszt: Vol 2*** (1992, Angel Records).

***Chopin: Piano Concertos Nos. 1 & 2*** (2002, Sony/BMG).

***Beethoven: Piano Sonata No 13, 14 & 23*** (2005, EMI Classics).

***The Gershwin Collection*** (2006, Sony/BMG).



**Plácido Domingo – Genius of Opera Performance and Humanitarian – by Michael Walters (from Heroes of Giftedness, 2009, Gifted Education Press)**

Plácido Domingo was born on January 21, 1941 in Madrid, Spain. At the age of eight he lived in Mexico where his family had a zarzuela theatre which is similar to the American vaudeville and the British variety hall formats. One of his first performances was a minor role in the original Mexican production of *My Fair Lady*. As a young adult in Mexico, he participated in a variety of musical entertainment venues. His parents' company also included performances by the young Domingo in *The Merry Widow* by Lehar. In the late 1950s he even sang backup vocals for César Costa's rock-and-roll band, and later played piano for a ballet company and a cultural program on Mexican television.

In 1962 he signed a brief contract with the Israel National Opera which was extended for two and one-half years. This exposure brought him to the attention of the New York City Opera and the Metropolitan Opera. At one of the Metropolitan's performances, the famous singer Franco Corelli was unable to perform in Celia's *Adriana Lecouvreur*; therefore Domingo was his substitute. One of his co-singers at this performance was the Prima Diva, Renata Tebaldi. His career took off and he premiered with some of the world's leading operatic companies, e.g., the Vienna State Opera, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, La Scala (Milan), the San Francisco Opera and the Royal Opera House (London). Domingo holds an unusual honor; he received the longest ovation on an opera stage which included 101 curtain calls over a period 81 minutes. This was for his leading role performance in Verdi's *Otello* in July 1991 at the Vienna State Opera. Domingo has won many Grammy awards for his opera recordings including Verdi's *Aida* (1971) and Puccini's *La Bohème* (1974). Currently, he is director of the Washington National Opera and the Los Angeles Opera.

In the 1980s he made his mark beyond the realm of opera. He recorded a duet, "Perhaps Love," with the American country-folk singer John Denver. Six years later he and Denver joined Julie Andrews in an Emmy winning show from Salzburg, Austria – *The Sound of Christmas*.

As a citizen of New York City, I have had numerous opportunities to experience Plácido Domingo's performances at Lincoln Center. Among his achievements are the dramatic qualities and presence that he brings to his roles. Those which I have witnessed have been: Wagner's *Parsifal*, Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, and Alfano's *Cyrano De Bergerac*. I have also benefitted from many of his performances on the Public Broadcasting System, e.g., *The Three Tenors Concert* for the 1990 Soccer World Cup in Rome. This concert included two other great singers, José Carreras and Luciano Pavarotti.

Domingo's humanitarian concerts and charities also mark his genius. In 1985 Mexico City was devastated by an earthquake. He returned to the city of his youth and personally labored to rescue survivors. This tragedy was personal, as among the victims were his uncle, aunt, nephew and nephew's son. The original reason for *The Three Tenors Concert* was to raise funds for the José Carreras International Leukemia Foundation. Carreras has survived this disease and he continues to give performances. After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2005, Domingo gave a gala benefit concert to help rebuild the city. In 2007 he performed in Athens, Greece for the victims of the genocide in Darfur, Sudan – an event sponsored by Doctors without Borders. Plácido Domingo's career and humanitarian work are examples of an extraordinary hero of giftedness.

**Recommended CDs:**

*La Traviata* (2007). Deutsche Grammophon.

*PLÁCIDO DOMINGO: Opera Gala* (2007). Deutsche Grammophon.

*Italia ti amo* (2006). Deutsche Grammophon.

*Very Best of Plácido Domingo* (2003). EMI Classics.

*Super Hits: Plácido Domingo* (2000). Sony.

*Verdi - Otello / Plácido Domingo, Scotto, Milnes, Levine* (1998) RCA.

**The Three Tenors**

*The Best of The Three Tenor* (2002). London/Decca.

*The Three Tenors: Carreras • Domingo • Pavarotti: The Three Tenors in Concert / Mehta* (1990). Decca.

