European classical music in its many forms is an art that is not lost on Americans of African descent. Synched with traditional African rhythms and Christian hymns, work songs and spirituals are reflected in the cultural expressions of Africans, enslaved and free. In fact, as early as June 1868 the opera *Ernani*, a Verdi composition, was performed by the “pupils of the colored public school of Allegheny City” on the occasion of the Emancipation Tableau Vivant, a commemoration of the emancipation of slavery. 1 This may very well have been the first African American performance of classical music in greater Pittsburgh. However, we do know that African Americans such as Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and soprano Sissieretta Jones performed worldwide as classical vocalists during the 19th century. Not as popular as other forms of African American musical expression, European classical music such as opera, symphonic, virtuosi, and other forms have been performed by African Americans for quite some time.

Of special note in Pittsburgh is the work of Mary Cardwell Dawson, founder of the National Negro Opera Company. Dawson, an accomplished soloist with musical training from the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, was called “Pittsburgh’s Opera Impresario” by historian Eric Ledell Smith. 2 Born in Madison, North Carolina, in 1894, Dawson migrated to Pittsburgh around 1900 with her family. Dawson’s musical talent was honed at Park Place African Methodist Episcopal Church in Homestead, Pa. After she went on to the New England Conservatory, Dawson attended the Chicago Musical College before finally studying at the Metropolitan Opera Company. By the late 1920s, she had become an accomplished solo artist and choir director. Her ambition was to direct a major company and she paved the way with the Dawson Choir. In 1927 she married Walter Dawson, a skilled electrician who helped her open the Cardwell Dawson School of Music in the late 1920s in Homewood. Her school attracted many young people from the neighborhood, including future jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal.

The Cardwell Dawson School of Music also trained classical musicians in the black community. Ahmad Jamal may have gone on to be a great jazz pianist, known for calling jazz, “America’s Classical Music,” but other students also went on to be classical performers and opera singers. In 1931 Dawson became the first president of the Pittsburgh Chapter of the National Association of Negro
Musicians (NANM). By the end of that decade, she would be elected president of the national body. She began tinkering with the idea of starting an opera company in the late 1930s and held fundraising performances around the city leading up to her formal founding of the National Negro Opera Company (NNOC) in 1941. The Company’s debut performance was held at the national convention of the NANM to coincide with the premier performance of the NNOC at Syria Mosque in Oakland in 1941. Aida was the kick-off national presentation. From 1941 to 1962 the NNOC was the leading black opera company in America. It was known for its great performances but also as a proving ground for singers such as Robert McFerrin, La Julia Rhea, Napoleon Reed, Lillian Evanti, and Muriel Rahn among others.

Dawson had a vision for the NNOC. It was not to simply perform European classical operas, but to perform operas that reflected the African Diaspora. The NNOC specialized in African-centered productions of noted operas with African diasporic themes or composed by people of color. La Traviata, is derived from Afro-Frenchman Alexander Dumas and adapted by Giuseppe Verdi, Felice, and others. Ouanga is the work of composer Clarence Cameron White; Nathaniel Dett composed The Ordering of Moses; while Aida, the NNOC’s signature production, was composed by Verdi but with an African theme. Dawson was not merely doing black versions of white operas but was exposing talented black performers, composers, and directors to a local and national audience. Her reason was that opera was not a new art form for African Americans, but an art form that African Americans had contributed to or inspired for over a century. She also wanted to prove that in a segregated society much could be lost by marginalizing talented people of color. She was most proud when NNOC alum Robert McFerrin, the father of Grammy Award-winning pop and jazz artist Bobby McFerrin, became the first African American male lead at the Metropolitan Opera in 1956.

Mary Cardwell Dawson later moved the NNOC to Washington, D.C., in 1951 and the Company disbanded after her death in 1962. A house located at 7101 Apple Street in Homewood was the local office of the NNOC and is now a Pittsburgh City Historic Landmark. In 2004, Mary Cardwell Dawson’s niece, Barbara Edwards Lee, donated a collection of papers and photographs to the History Center. In 2016, costumes worn in numerous operatic productions of the NNOC were transferred to the History Center from the Library of Congress. The costumes are from 1940s-50s productions of Aida, Ouanga, La Traviata, and The Ordering of Moses.

Dawson left an inspiring legacy in Pittsburgh that has now been reborn with the transfer of these materials to the History Center.

Flyer for National Negro Opera Company productions.

Costume dress worn in the Opera La Traviata, 1940s-1950s.
HHC Collections, 2016.75.17. Photo by Nicki Laskotta.

Logo: Spirit Form Freedom Corner Monument, Pittsburgh, Pa., © artist Carlos F. Peterson.

1 Pittsburg Weekly Gazette, June 4, 1868, p. 8.
3 The Mary Cardwell Dawson Papers, 1916-2001, are housed in the Thomas and Katherine Detre Library & Archives at the Heinz History Center.