

Written by Patricia Turnier
Thursday, 01 September 2011 22:31



Gina Williams was born in Edmonton, Alberta of Jamaican parents. She began playing piano at the tender age of 8. The former musician child prodigy is an accomplished concert pianist, singer, songwriter and composer who has won several awards for her Bach performances. She chose the works of Chopin when she had to do a performance for her Master's thesis recital at the University of Alberta. She was commissioned to pen the anthem "Glory" for the 25th anniversary of Grenada's Independence. Williams also wrote music for solo piano such as Titanic, penned a string quintet, etc. One of her piano works, *Look, I don't want to hurt again*, was aired on CBC for

Alberta Arts and Beyond

. It was also broadcast overseas in Poland. Gina Williams won MusicCity TV's vocal talent search and has appeared on a number of TV shows and is the vocalist in a Capital City Savings TV commercial in the late 90s. She landed her first acting role in the movie

The Jack Bull

with John Cusack and John Goodman. She appeared in the film

Whitecoats

with Dave Thomas. She was involved in the pilot

The Beat

which aired on CBC. One of Williams' singles, "You Are Not Alone", is the theme song for the Russian movie, Love is the Best Medicine in which she sings in the film. "You Are Not Alone" is

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from Williams' debut CD, "In Spite of the Storm"; it had its first Official Music Video release October 2010. Both "You Are Not Alone" and "Don't Wanna Be Here", another single were chosen as one of the top picks for the Province Playlist in B.C. It is important to note that Williams had principal roles in both English and French during her acting career. The actress also speaks Japanese and is planning to learn other Asian languages. She was also featured in a video promoting the Fine Arts Degree program at Canadian universities and colleges. The actress is passionate about music. She has performed in several countries: Canada, U.S, Korea, Russia, Grenada, etc. Currently, she is working on new tracks and anticipating a tour on Eastern Europe. Gina Williams was reviewed in *Edmonton J*

,
United Church Observer

,
Celebrating Women in the Arts
Magazine,

Who's Who in Black Canada

by Dawn P. Williams (and

www.whoswhoinblackcanada.com

) and is listed in

Who's Who in Professional & Business Women

, etc. She also appeared on CBC TV (6:00pm News Story), CBC Radio, Polskie Radio II (Poland), Radio I (Japan), etc.

In the following interview, Mrs. Williams shares with us her experience on her professional journey. In this respect, Mega Diversities had the opportunity to speak to the award winning artist. The interview was conducted by the Editress-in-Chief, Patricia Turnier, the 28th of March 2011.

Patricia Turnier, LL.M talks to Gina Williams, MA:

P.T. You are a respected concert pianist. You chose Chopin's work for your master's thesis in music. What inspired you to study this Polish composer?

G.W.

As a kid, I won competitions playing Baroque music which I hated. I could not stand it, and for some reasons that I can't explain, I always won by playing this genre. However, it provided me

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with a good foundation to play Bach and other composers from different musical realms. My heart is with the romantic. My late mentor, Jablonski was specialised in Chopin's music. He had Polish origins and passed his culture on to me.

Chopin, one of the great masters of Romantic music, was also known as the poet of the piano. He made major innovations to the piano sonata, etc. He was the first to write ballads. Chopin's compositions were often inspired by the emotional and sensual experiences of his own life. His music is penetrated by a poetic feeling that has an almost universal appeal. It emphasized nuance with thorough emotions and expression. He brought in the classical realm a deeper level of sophistication with a great range of melody. As a musician, I could definitely relate to that because I never have been drawn to easiness. Chopin's work is challenging and dense in terms of technic. So, for me it was natural to choose this prodigy for my Master's.

I would like to add also that I love the Russian composer, pianist and conductor Sergei Vasilievich Rachmaninoff. This late composer is considered one of the finest pianists of his era and one of the last great representatives of Romanticism in Russian classical music. Even if I didn't choose his work for my thesis, this composer is definitely among my favorites and his work inspired me. **P.T. When you were growing up, which singers inspired you?** **G.**

W.
Growing up, my siblings and I didn't listen to any Top 40s [Laughs]. We were only allowed to listen to high Anglican music. It was this genre of music which was accessible to us at the time. I started to listen to what was considered secular at 17.

P.T. That late?

G.W.

Yes. Everything I did was late [Laughs]. Pretty crazy, right?

P.T. I won't ask you to be more specific [Laughs].

G.W.

Maybe, it was earlier that I started to listen to secular music. I think the first time I heard pop on the radio, I was 13 or 14. I heard it in malls, etc. So, it already was part of my life through social networking. However, at home we didn't listen to this kind of music until I made a conscious choice about it. To go back to your question, the main singers who inspired me are Whitney Houston, the Christian artist Michael W. Smith, Mariah Carey, Céline Dion, etc.

P.T. Seeing that you can sing, is there an iconic chanteuse you would love to portray in a movie?

G.W.

Whitney Houston for sure, because she has a lot of depth in her personality. Like I said earlier,

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I don't like easy tasks. So portraying Whitney Houston would be challenging. I believe also that she is probably one of the most misunderstood geniuses around [Silence]. I consider her as the godmother of today's pop music. Artists such as Christina Aguilera were influenced by Whitney Houston who has roots in the gospel tradition. So, many people are influenced by the church. Marian Anderson would definitely be another artist that I would like to portray. So, I would love to do both Anderson and Houston [Laughs]. Playing Anderson would be a classy role. She was a contralto and one of the most celebrated singers of the 20th century. It would be another challenging role because she had a broad repertoire: concert literature, opera, traditional American songs, spirituals, etc. It would be fascinating to portray her also because she was an important symbol in the struggle for Black artists to overcome racial prejudice in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. People like the First Lady of the era Eleanor Roosevelt supported her and recognized her talent. Mrs. Anderson had international status and broke barriers for African-American artists by being the first Black artist to perform, for example, at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1955. In 1958, she was officially designated delegate to the United Nations. In 1961, she sang for former President John F. Kennedy during his inauguration. Also, who can forget also her performance in 1963 at the March on Washington for jobs and freedom? It would be awesome to play this figure who was not only an artist but also an activist and a philanthropist. She left a legacy which inspired many writers and artists. To finish, the gospel artist Mahalia Jackson would be my third choice if a movie was not already in progress with Fantasia. As you can see, it is difficult for me to choose one singer that I would like to portray. Mahalia Jackson had a powerful contralto voice.

P.T. I believe that Mahalia Jackson is one the greatest singers of all time. She had an amazing voice. Dr. MLK, a close friend of hers, used to say "A voice like hers comes along once in a millennium."

G.W.

I am in awe of her also. She was one of the most influential gospel singers in the world. Having Fantasia playing her will be amazing because she was a figure in many areas such as a civil rights activist where she sang at the 1963 March on Washington when Dr. MLK delivered one the most important speeches of the 20th century I Have a Dream. Harry Belafonte named her "the single most powerful Black woman in the United States". She mentored the Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin. Like Marian Anderson, she was a philanthropist and founded the Mahalia Jackson Scholarship Foundation for young people who want to attend college. A biopic is definitely needed to honor Mahalia Jackson's contribution to the music heritage and I can't wait to see Fantasia's performance.

P.T. So far, what have been your most challenging roles and why?

G.W.

I would say my roles in French because it is my second language. Once for a lead role, I had to sound like a Quebecer. It was a double challenge because I had to learn the script and the

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Québécois accent. It was a great experience and I would love in the future to make more French movies.

P.T. Do you think that most movies are political? If so, why?

G.W. I thought about that. I honestly don't think that most films are political. I believe that most movies are relational. They can be heavy on social relationships. It can be political, emotional, psychological and so on. It depends on what the director and script writer bring out in the story. Nevertheless, it is important to add that there are also filmmakers who have biases or agendas that they want to perpetuate.

P.T. Is there a novel you would like to see turned into a movie and also star in?

G.W. This is a hard question for me. I am not really into novels. For other type of books, I have a preference for the ones related to music.

P.T. So, can you name us a musician or a composer that you would love to portray in a movie?

G.W.

I think it would be interesting to portray the late Dorothy Donegan. Her work was recognized in the jazz world. She played at the prestigious Montreux Jazz Festival in 1987, one of her career highlights. She was an African American classically trained jazz pianist. She performed in the stride piano and boogie-woogie style. She also had the talent to play bop, swing, jazz and classical music. In other words, she was very versatile with an eclectic mixture of style. It would be very interesting to portray her as a musician. She had a flamboyant personality and since I love challenges, this character trait would make her an even more interesting character to play. I think also that it would be interesting to make a movie on the German pianist Robert Schumann because he was the most representative composers of the Romantic era. He also composed in a wide variety of genres. Schumann possessed an unusual taste and talent for translating feelings and characteristics in melody. He had a considerable influence in the nineteenth century and beyond. I would like to add that a biopic on Andre Watts would also be very interesting. He was a black classical pianist inspired by the composer Franz Liszt. Watts played in the U.S and Europe in renowned circles such as New York City's Lewisohn Stadium, Hollywood Bowl, etc. His contribution was recognized and he received Honorary Doctorates. In addition, it would be nice to have a fictitious character that is black, female, and has the profile of a Martha Argerich who has an international prominence. By the way, I would like to mention that this interview is fun! [Laughs].

P.T. Thank you! Here is my next question: What speaks to you in a script?

G.W.

Psychology, the relationship and complexity between the characters. I am interested in what

is not said, nonverbal communication. The pauses, silences (which can transmit torture, aggression, blissfulness, beauteousness...), the expression of emotions such as anger are powerful. Everything doesn't have to be in words. Sometimes a look or unspoken intimacy can represent a thousand words. If I can figure out these subtleties in a script, it makes me happy as an actress.

P.T.□ What does it mean to you to have been approached to write the anthem “Glory” for Grenada’s 25th Anniversary of Independence?

G.W.□

That means the world to me. I believe that it was the finger of God and divine intervention to have this opportunity. I heard the music in my head with the choir while I was doing dishes before I composed it. It was like divine inspiration.

P.T.□ What has been your biggest challenge in your career and what did you learn from it?

G.W.

My biggest challenge was going from classical opera into pop rock. I started late, in my twenties. The transition debuted exactly when I was 23 and believe me it was very difficult. My voice broke, etc. My coach and my parents were nervous. It was brutal and it became unstable at some points. I kept working, trying and using my imagination. What I learned from this experience is that there is nothing like perseverance and motivation. I tried so hard by paying attention to my coach's advice and one day I got it!

P.T.□ You said in

Who's Who in Black Canada

that you love to help other people to achieve their dreams. Can you give us a concrete example of that?

G.W.□

I teach adults how to sing. I really enjoy it because I know how challenging this can be. I love to help adults find their voice. I believe that everybody can sing but you have to use your proper voice. For instance, some people who are sopranos are convinced that they are baritones. My job is to make them discover what their voice is really suited for. Also, what people hear is not necessarily in concordance with the perception of the individual who is singing. So again, my work is to make sure that the singer can match what is in his head with what the public hears. This is a physic approach that I use to help them find their true voice. I let the people choose the type of songs they want to work on. But at some point, if I notice that it is out of their league, I let them know [laughs] and we find other material to work with.

P.T. Do you have a special project that you will do in the future that you can share with us?

G.W. I would like eventually to get involved with homeless people. I have a lot of interest with this part of the population and with people who have mental health problems. I am interested in people who are misunderstood and who are considered as outcasts. They need help and if I can do something for them, I will. I like street psychology. If I could live another life, I would like to be a psychiatrist. I am intrigued with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, etc. **P.T.**

What message do you have for people who want to make it in the music and movie business without compromising who they are?

G.W. Compromise is the big one. It can be a struggle to not compromise your integrity. It is important to have a thick skin in the entertainment business. I could say that "whatever you do, be sure that you are comfortable doing it" because at the end it is your name that is in the list of credits and not your character [Laughs]. "So, if you know that you are not cool with it (for personal values, religious reasons...), don't take on that role. Don't do it, there will be other roles, other opportunities." Making a risqué move can even cost a career, in other words it might become a setback for long-term success. Without being preachy, I think that it is important to not sell your soul because by the end of the day you are the one who will have to live with the choices you made. It takes a lot of hard work to make it and you have to be patient. Success does not happen overnight. I turned down roles with big money because of my integrity. At some times in my life, I was even poor, but it was important to not sell my soul. My favourite axiom is "Set your standards high... even though it can be by painful effort."

P.T. Thank you Mrs. Williams for this great conversation. I played piano with classical training for several years so I could definitely relate to some things you said in this interview. It was a real pleasure to speak to you!

You Are Not Alone video: <http://youtu.be/Eowo5lgF-7s>
awilliams.com

Official website : www.ginawilliams.com

Education :

MA, Music, University of Alberta, 2000

Awards:

Silver Jubilee Grenada National Award, 1999
BAASA Award, 1998
Outstanding Musicianship Award

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Berklee in LA

Clarence “Big” Miller Award

Back Trophies

MusicCity TV Finals Cert., Best Song