

From Classical to Calypso: An Interview with Bahamian Composer and Conductor Cleophas R. E. Adderley

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INTRODUCTION

We conducted this interview for several reasons. Over the course of my time in the music department at The College of The Bahamas, I have been involved in researching classical music composers from the Caribbean region. In order to include students in some aspect of the research, I have incorporated a section on Caribbean classical music in my music history course. In the Spring 2011 semester, students proposed very creative topics around this theme. Two students—Ruebendero Gibson and Crashan Johnson—were interested in interviewing Cleophas Adderley to gain further insight into the topics they had selected for their papers.

Johnson's topic was examining opera works in the Caribbean while Gibson's focus was on the incorporation of folk themes in Caribbean classical works. Because the interview was more extensive than we had envisioned, we decided to transcribe the contents for publication. Since little work has been done

in this area, I believe it will be a useful resource for readers who wish to gain a deeper understanding of one of the foremost Bahamian composers.

Cleophas Adderley is a pillar in the cultural development of The Bahamas. He is currently Executive Director, National Musical Heritage and Research at the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Culture, Government of the Commonwealth of the Bahamas. He is the Founder/Director of the Bahamas National Youth Choir, one of the foremost Bahamian cultural organizations that represent The Bahamas both nationally and internationally.

The interview was conducted Wednesday, March 23, 2011 at 11:00 am, at the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, Nassau, Bahamas. Excerpts of the interview are available on the CariClassical YouTube channel at this link: [INTERVIEW WITH CLEOPHAS ADDERLEY](#). Embedded in the transcript of the interview are links to excerpts to some of the music mentioned.

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INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

CJ: Did you receive formal training as a pianist and composer? If so, where and when?

CA: The majority of my formal training was done locally. I started piano lessons at age five with my aunt, the late Rosalie Bailey. I am from the Bailey/Adderley family, related to R. M. Bailey², who was my mother's father. They were all musical persons, including my grandfather, R. M. Bailey, who played not only the piano but also the violin. Training was not always easy but after a while I started to like it a lot.

I eventually outgrew my aunt as a piano teacher—she could not keep up with my playing. However, I had another aunt who was very accomplished, Gladys Bailey. She used to play the piano and made all the sound effects for silent movies. In their day, the movies were silent (there was no sound), and the pianist had to provide the cinematic effects. If there was a ghost scene, the pianist would play a tremolo. If the Lone Ranger was coming, she had to play his theme. Of course my mother told me many stories about her. She sometimes didn't pay attention. The audience would say, "Miss Bailey, Miss Bailey – the Lone Ranger coming!" So she would start playing the right music. So she taught me organ.

Unfortunately both of them passed away by the time I was twelve. So I started taking organ lessons at Christ Church Cathedral with organists they engaged from England. I can particularly remember Godfrey Davis³ but especially Douglas Potts⁴ because he was excellent. He trained me not only in the organ but also made me listen to opera.

² R. M. Bailey, 1875-1960. Bahamian educator, tailor and musician.

³ Godfrey Davis. Organist and choirmaster at Christ Church Cathedral from 1972-1973.

⁴ Douglas Potts. Organist and choirmaster at Christ Church Cathedral from 1966-1971.

I also started piano with the late Marion St. George⁵ who was the music teacher at Government High School. She was held close to my heart because she encouraged me in music, especially composition, and would take her students with her almost everywhere that related to music. We went to listen to visiting orchestras, she took the entire music class to the United States to see the opera, she taught me music theory from form one (which was equivalent to Grade 7) straight through not only to 12th grade (we also did advanced work), but to upper sixth. That was the A-levels, which served like an associate degree. I studied piano, I studied other instruments, I studied composition, I studied, it seemed, just about everything pertaining to music. I also studied piano with Clement Bethel⁶ for the Royal Schools Grade 8 exam.

After high school I continued my lessons with Clement, and then I developed a love for chorale music and the theatre, and a greater love for things Bahamian. I later went to the University of The West Indies (UWI) to study law, which made everyone upset with me. I practiced law for fourteen years but never really put the music down. Then I was reeled in by the Government to do music. While at university I studied voice with Dawn-Marie Virtue⁷. After university, I continued voice lessons with Pauline Glasby⁸ who successfully prepared me for the Royal School of Music Performance Certificate. Also, while practicing law, I used to fly over on the weekends to the University of Miami where I studied orchestration with Nancy Pettersen⁹ (later Strelau).

⁵ Marion St. George. British art and music teacher at Government High School, Nassau, 1958-1975.

⁶ E. Clement Bethel, 1938-1986. Bahamian ethnomusicologist, composer and pianist.

⁷ Dawn-Marie Virtue James, 1956-. Jamaican opera singer.

⁸ Pauline Glasby, 1942-2007. Music professor at the College of The Bahamas and choral director.

⁹ Nancy Pettersen-Strelau, 1955-. Music professor at Nazareth College, New York and conductor.

CG: Were those informal lessons?

CA: Yes, informal lessons. I was her private student even though we studied on campus. It was the place where most of the equipment and instruments were kept. She insisted on my having a working knowledge of every instrument. Because there were no harps in the Bahamas, I used to practice harp there, work with the pedals, try getting the various arpeggios, etc. Then I would play the timpani. She also gave me homework with orchestration exercises and books; I would fly in the next weekend and she would mark my work. Then eventually I said to her, “I want to write an opera.” She replied, “Good. That would be an exercise that you would have to orchestrate in my class”. That was basically the extent of my musical education.

CJ: How do you feel to be the first Bahamian to have composed an opera in the English-speaking Caribbean?

CA: Well, to tell you the truth you don’t even think about it. I never even realized that until a number of people in the Caribbean inquired of me, such as Geoffrey Fairweather¹⁰. Then I went on a U.S. government program where I travelled to nine states and cities, and I met with musicians, opera composers, and arrangers ... and they also raised this with me. Of course there are many, many operas in the French Caribbean as well as in the Spanish. But it seems as though there is very little known about this sort of work in the English-speaking Caribbean. So this is what I was dubbed – now how accurate it is I don’t know. But the main thing was I got that out of my system—the opera that is.

CG: In what year did you compose the opera?

CA: I composed the opera in 1985. I wrote it in 4 months; the orchestration, however, took a whole year.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Fairweather, d. 2005. Jamaican musician and conductor.

RG: While writing your music, the whole approach to it—do you ever incorporate folk themes?

CA: Well my music teacher Mickey (as we called her—her name is Marion) St. George, she encouraged me in what she called Bahamian Nationalism in music.

I studied the nationalist composers, and she said it is exciting that this is also happening in the Bahamas. She said, “Cleophas, you seem to be a Bahamian nationalist composer; all the work we’ve been doing with you since Grade 7—your style really seems to be this. I have taught you the various styles and you have explored in your compositions the earlier classical period. You’ve written fugues in that style. But now you’ve finally begun to find your own style—exploring the rhythms, folk tunes and nuances of where you live.” I would say the vast majority of my music attempts to explore that.

One of my... I wouldn’t say regrets ...but when I think about it in terms of writing the opera—I don’t feel as if I consciously did that. And as a result, probably in only one or two of the pieces you can hear the Caribbean influence. It isn’t the same as my piano music or songs where I made a conscious effort to draw on elements in this part of the world, specifically in the Bahamas. The opera doesn’t really do that as much.

CG: In which selections in the opera can you see the Bahamian or Caribbean influence?

CA: You can hear it in duet between Reno and Kevin, and a bit of Reno and Gina’s exchange. Also, the theme for the [OVERTURE TO OUR BOYS](#) is very syncopated and the whole idea of the syncopation was to draw on the Caribbean rhythms. (*sings rhythms*). Now one thing that surprised me was that once you have European instruments playing this music, it doesn’t sound as Caribbean as it did in your head, because the instruments are what they are. But I still included some drums to give that “spice” to it. But that

theme was also a very conscious effort to draw on the Caribbean/Bahamian rhythms; and some of the instrumentation with the drums was used to heighten that effect. Incidentally, the theme for the overture, I wrote when I was sixteen years old. At that time I was a student at Government High School and one of our studies was fugues. So it's in fugal form, but it was too syncopated for the lesson (because you have to be able to play it). Then it dawned on me that this is something I need to develop when I have an orchestra or individual musicians. One musician can't play all those cross rhythms.

CG: When you are consciously trying to sound Caribbean or Bahamian, do you do so with musical themes, the actual subject matter or both?

CA: Usually both—because one tends to feed off the other—but not necessarily both. I feel first and foremost that the music has to sound that way, even if the text doesn't.

CJ: What were some of the challenges you faced in composing an opera in the Bahamas?

CA: To be very honest, the only challenge was keeping up with the music that was flowing through my head. Because I would go day and night, into the early hours of the morning...and at the time don't forget I was practicing law. So I would be composing music until three in the morning. And then I would have to get into the law firm by nine, and have all these people's work to get through. Then you virtually can't wait to get home so you can unleash the musical thoughts that were dying to burst free all day. I can remember, I was not long from law school and I was living at home with my parents, and mother coming in the room while I was composing music and I wouldn't even notice that she was there. An hour or two later, I'd see a glass of milk and wonder how it got there. I was just so into writing and writing and writing, and trying to get the music out of my head and on to the paper, while making

notes of the different instrumentation. Because at the time I was also studying orchestration and I realized that this is something I want to orchestrate myself. So any ideas you get – make notes of them! So the challenge at the time basically was keeping up with the ideas and having to work a fulltime job at a top law firm. That part wasn't easy. But once I got all the music down, the rest was really a breeze. The orchestration was no big deal – it just took time.



Figure 1. Cleophas Adderley, 2011. Photograph by Donald Knowles. Reproduced with permission.

CJ: How many times was your opera performed?

CA: It was only done twice. It was composed in '85, it was first performed in '87, and then it was performed again eleven years later – that was '98.

CG: Was that for any special occasion?

CA: It was performed for the 25th anniversary of Bahamian independence.

CJ: Who are your musical influences in regards to your compositions?

CA: Gershwin for sure. I love George Gershwin. One of my songs... I didn't realize how strong the influence was until a number of people said, "Boy, if Gershwin were alive he would have written that." *Nassau Harbour* – there are some passages in that that are very "Gershwin-esque", and this isn't conscious at all. But he really had a strong affinity for music that came out of black heritage. So I can understand why there is the affinity between us. He really appreciates our culture.

CG: What is the instrumentation of that song?

CA: *Nassau Harbour* is a song for soprano and piano. I wrote the music and the words as well.

RG: Do you ever use other folk themes from different countries?

CA: Not when I'm composing. But when I'm arranging of course I do. I have written a number of arrangements for the [BAHAMAS NATIONAL YOUTH CHOIR](#). In fact I would say 95 percent of the folk music they sing—I've arranged it, or composed it. So yes, we have songs from Haiti, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Mexico, Cuba, Japan, China – and I've arranged all this music.

CJ: What do you feel is more important in opera – the music or the drama?

CA: In good opera, both are extremely important. If the opera isn't really that good, you may have inferior music or you may have an inferior dramatic line. I may be wrong, but I can't think of any of the top world operas, the masterpieces, that are weak in either of them.

RG: I had a question, but it dealt with what you were talking about arranging pieces from different countries. When you are arranging a piece, do you showcase the actual Bahamian culture over the classical music?

CA: No, no. It's not one being showcased over another – it's both of them working in tandem to create an original work. For instance I use the classical vocabulary of music as a vehicle to support and create a work that also reflects our cultural essence, so an important—well, a part of that work is the nuances of the Bahamas and the Caribbean – a folk tune sometimes, a folk rhythm, sometimes I draw on our folk materials.

And these are all elements in creating an original work that, in essence, showcases (for want of a better word) life in the Caribbean and in the Bahamas. But it isn't as though I am ... I'm not trying to just simply say that this is Bahamian music, that's it. Because I don't feel that Bahamian music exists in isolation, and especially Bahamian classical music.

I think of classical music as art music or academic music. So if you're talking academic music, what makes it academic? Either you are going to have to invent your own forms, or you are going to have to draw on forms that already exist in the classical vocabulary. I think for the most part, I have used as a vehicle existing forms and devices, and I have just simply used the elements that are unique to us in the Bahamas and in the Caribbean. That's in essence what I do when I write.

I would very much like to come up with a form that's essentially Bahamian or Caribbean. We have what we call Junkanoo music, and we have Caribbean rhythms and other tunes and devices. We also borrow from the African call and response. But in terms of form, I can't really think of any.

CJ: What would be the essential features of your ideal libretto?

CA: Well any libretto that would inspire me should first of all have some Caribbean, or especially Bahamian story line or ingredients that reflect the way of life in this part of the world. For instance I would not be inspired by a libretto—from a country up north or from a country in Asia – that focuses solely on their way of life. That would not inspire me, simply because while I appreciate other cultures, I would not want to duplicate what they are already doing in their culture. They have their own exponents of that. Why would they want an unknown Bahamian composer trying what they are already doing very well themselves?

So the libretto would have to have those Caribbean or Bahamian elements. Well, I like drama, so it has to be very dramatic. I also like contrast, so it has to be contrasting. It can't all be droning along on the same level or screaming and screeching at a high level. Just too much activity or too much heart attack sort of carrying on can give you a stroke! I don't like those sorts of things. That's why when I view some of these plays that constantly prolong "baby mama drama" I can't take it – high-intensity nonstop. No, it has to have contrast.

CJ: What kind of subjects do you consider best suited for opera—mythical, legendary, historical, cultural, or domestic?

CA: That depends on what really makes the composer tick (so to speak) and inspires him. All of those are pretty good areas and they have all produced some wonderful operas. Some of the Wagnerian operas, some of them are quite mythical. And *Dido and Aeneas* (Purcell)—I love that music. But then I love *Porgy and Bess*—the realism and contemporary quality—nothing mythical about that.

CJ: Do you employ the leitmotif system?

CA: Like an idée fixe? Yes, I love that too! I love musical ideas that reoccur throughout a work. I think it really heightens the excitement, especially if it's a wonderful motif that keeps coming back. It just stirs the imagination, especially if you tie it to a particular character or a particular passion or feeling.

RG: While writing or arranging music – when you incorporate folk themes and syncopations, do you find it effective?

CA: Well, you make it effective or don't incorporate it! I really write better when I'm inspired, although I was told I shouldn't wait on inspiration. At the Jamaica School of Music where I attended for informal voice lessons—Pamela O'Gorman¹¹ (she used to be the president)—told me to go to the piano each day and compose. But I can't work like that. It feels mechanical. Now I have written mechanically. And much to my surprise, some of the stuff I've produced is not bad. But the process is easier and so much more enjoyable when you're inspired!

I usually write based on the things that inspire me so I don't have to necessarily think syncopation—I just hear and feel it. Now the challenge then is to write it down accurately—because syncopation isn't the easiest thing to notate accurately. But if you are properly trained and you're really grounded in your theory, you can easily break it down how you want, to properly represent the rhythms in music. In some notations, for example, African music uses different systems, which help them with poly-rhythms. But in the Bahamas, I don't feel we are that complex, even though our influence and our foundation come from Africa.

When I listen to the local bands and Junkanoo bands, there aren't that many rhythms going

¹¹ Pamela O'Gorman, 1935-2009. Australian who taught music in Jamaica for over 40 years.

on; and even if there are, they tend to be fixed—one rhythm, beginning to end. No adjustments or clever transitions.

CG: The choral pieces you write—you mentioned that you arrange a lot for the youth choir and compose original works as well. Do you arrange with the National Youth Choir in mind, or do you think another choir could perform those pieces?

CA: No, I usually think about the singers I have at the moment, and I try arranging based on what I have. Some years I have exceptionally talented kids, other years, just talented kids. Some years, different sections may be more talented than others; or I may have special soloists with amazing ranges, so I'll arrange based on what I have.

At one point I had a problem getting tenors and I thought, “Ok, I'll arrange this music for SAB choir.” But the show has to go on. Fortunately that has never happened. But for instance, there was one piece by the late Freddie Munnings, Sr.¹² that I arranged—*Come to the Caribbean*. That arrangement is an exceptional one because at the time, we had a soprano with almost a four-octave range, so I had to show that off. The piece ends with her singing a glissando all the way from the F below middle C, right up to the super F above the high C above the staff. Of course we haven't been able to sing that for years because I can't find another soprano like that.

Presently the Choir is working on a piece, an original piece that I wrote way back in 1991 for the second choir I had. It's called *The Sun*. It's about the sun in the Bahamas at different times of the day. It's quite syncopated, but each verse has a soloist in each section of the choir to show them off. At the time I wrote that, I could pick and choose and refuse soloists. I had wonderful bass, soprano, alto, and tenor soloists; so it was just

a matter of choosing. Now with other choirs, I had a really good soprano but not so good tenor; or really good bass, but not so good alto.

The present choir I have, there are good soloists in all sections but the choir itself is so small I really can't afford to have them sing solos – I need to have them sing in the chorale group. However, we have tricks to get around that – amplification. But in the past I had large choirs so I could have had many solos occurring at the same time. So it's better to write with what you have if you don't want to find yourself restricted years down the road. However, it is wonderful to explore any exceptional talents in a choir.

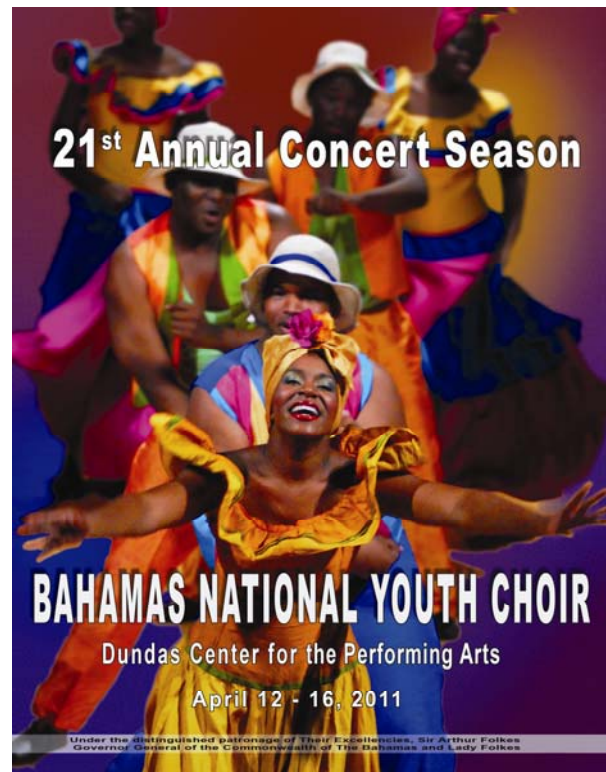


Figure 2. Concert poster for the Bahamas National Youth Choir 21st annual concert, 2011. Photograph by Donald Knowles. Reproduced with permission.

¹² Freddie Alfred Munnings, Sr., 1921-1995. Bahamian musician, composer and arranger.

CG: So the majority of your works are chorale – do you also have many works for the piano?

CA: I have written two major works for the piano. However, the vast majority of my compositions are chorale works, especially after I took over the Bahamas National Youth Choir. I had to put on a new show every year. So imagine the first seven years—I was frantic to just constantly write and arrange music for these shows. I didn't have time to do anything else, and I certainly didn't have time to write any classical pieces. Because the work that I do now, it's hard for me to write any classical pieces. Really there's very little need for it in the work that I do. I have written some pieces that sound classical for the opening of the Bahamas Games, but how often does that come around?

CG: When you were composing your opera, did you write it with anyone particular in mind?

CA: The *Variations* followed my first big work—the *MISSA CARIBE*. I wrote that in my last year at Government High in sixth form, and then I needed something else to do. At that time I had just finished my first year of piano lessons with the late Clement Bethel. He was a composer as well, and he wrote a work called *The Legend of Sammy Swain*. During the summer, I worked with him training the choir to put that on—the folk opera. There is this haunting melody in it.

No, I wrote this actually before I worked with him, because I went to see the production, and heard this haunting melody and I couldn't get it out of my head. So I went home and started writing piano variations on it. I sat there and basically wrote all ten variations in one or two days, and then I got stuck and could not find an ending.

At the same time I came out of high school and was about to leave for university. So usually what I did was store my music away on shelves and revisit it later. After two years

I thought about it again and decided to add a coda to the music. Something I heard while at university in Jamaica influenced me. Hearing the different rhythms from the University Singers¹³ and also encountering the mixture of Chinese people and different races in Jamaica influenced me, and this apparently subconsciously impacted the style of music written to end the variations. In Jamaica their national motto is “Out of Many, One People” – and you really see it there.

I eventually confided in Clement, because I was kind of shy, and told him that I had written some variations on his theme from *Sammy Swain*. He said, “Really? I want to hear them! Why didn't you tell me?” I think that I responded that I wasn't quite sure it was even something that was worthwhile for him to even listen to. But he insisted that I come up and play them for him. He made me play those variations for him with Keva and his guests around. He simply announced, “So Cleophas wrote some variations on my music—come everybody, sit down and let's listen to this.”

CG: So Clement Bethel's piece inspired you to come up with the theme for your *Variations*?

CA: Yes. As I mentioned, I heard *Sammy Swain* at a performance or something and couldn't get the main theme out of my head. So I just went home and wrote the *Variations*, couldn't finish them, two years later wrote the coda. The coda was added on after *Variation 10*.

¹³ University Singers, founded in 1957 on the Mona Campus of the University of the West Indies.

CG: When you wrote that, would you say it was just the theme that has the Bahamian sound to it or did you incorporate any other rhythms?

CA: No, it's not just the theme. I used some Bahamian rhythms, but I also especially used African rhythms. I guess you could say all of the rhythms, well not all the rhythms, a number of the rhythms are African influenced. Surprisingly, *VARIATION 9* (which somebody said to me reminds them of gospel music)—I was trying to get a sort of Bahamian dance flavour in there. The last thing I was thinking of was gospel music. But I think I understand why they said it reminds them of gospel music—because the chords are so thick in that variation. But I focus more on the rhythms in that variation so you get that (sings) so I was trying to get a Caribbean/Bahamian dance in there. But they say it sounds like gospel so, so be it. But to me gospel music doesn't dance like that, but like I said perhaps it's because of the thick chords.

CG: How did it happen that Paul Shaw¹⁴ recorded your piano *Variations*, and how did you feel about his recording?

CA: Paul Shaw found me, and he found me through the University of The West Indies where, as I mentioned, I had studied law. My choir director was Noel Dexter¹⁵, who is also a Caribbean composer, and he writes choral music. Apparently Paul Shaw asked him ... or certainly called the university to find out if there were any Caribbean composers of classical music that they knew of because he was doing this project on Caribbean art music.

They said you have to see Cleophas Adderley in The Bahamas. I just suddenly got a call from him saying he was interested in the

¹⁴ Paul Shaw, Jamaican pianist and music professor at University of Minnesota.

¹⁵ Noel Dexter, 1938-. Jamaican musicologist, composer and choral director.

music. I can't remember what I sent him. I think I sent him both of the major works I have for piano which are the *Variations* and the *Preludes*. And he really liked the *Variations*. He decided to record them. I was really quite amazed by not only his virtuosity, but the very high standard of the recording itself. I don't know of any pianos in the Bahamas that sound as good as that one on the recording. It's really professionally done.

Lee Callender¹⁶—he gave the first performance of the *Variations* and he also recorded them. But the instrument that he played on wasn't as outstanding as the instrument Paul Shaw played on, nor were the recording techniques. But Lee Callender did an excellent job as well.

CG: Was it recorded live or in the studio?

CA: No it was done in the studio.

CG: Your works for the choir—are there scores or recordings available?

CA: I have had five pieces¹⁷ published by Hal Leonard.

¹⁶ Callender, Lee B., 1958-. Bahamian concert pianist and vocal coach.

¹⁷ Adderley, C. R. E. (n.d.). *Big bunch a little bunch*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard. Inventory #HL 08742757

Adderley, C. R. E. (n.d.). *Ripe tomata green peas*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard. Inventory #HL 08742758

Adderley, C. R. E. (1999). *Three Bahamian folk songs*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard. Inventory #HL 08741919 (*A wen down da road; Ol' lady; One a' twenty*)