

Norman Johnson: Performance/accomplishment biography

Norman Johnson came to Winston Salem in 1968 to join the faculty of the North Carolina School of the Arts. At the fledgling institution, he was responsible for guiding the growth of the choral and opera programs. In 1976, he founded Piedmont Opera Theatre (now Piedmont Opera). He worked for both institutions until his death in 1994.

Norman Johnson received his bachelor's and master's degrees in piano from the Juilliard School in New York. In 1955, became an associate conductor of the Oratorio Society of New York, working under William Strickland. During this time, he was one of the most sought-after accompanists in New York, playing for Metropolitan Opera Artists Mack Harrell, Rise Stevens, Robert McFerrin and Judith Raskin among others. He would go on to become a coach for the Metropolitan Opera National Touring Company.

In 1962, he made his professional conducting debut with Colorado's Central City Opera Festival. His work there would lead him to be named Artistic Director of the Denver Lyric Opera in 1967. A high point of his work with Denver Lyric, he conducted the world premiere of Pulitzer Prize winner Dominick Argento's *Colonel Jonathan the Saint*.

Johnson was still working both in Denver when he was brought to Winston Salem in 1968. By the 70's he had begun to invest in the city. The voice and opera program were growing at the School of the Arts, and in 1975, he became the Chorus Master of the Winston Salem Symphony, a post he would hold until 1980. Between his work with the Symphony and his work at NCSA, Johnson wisely recognized that in Winston Salem, there were all the ingredients to create a first-class opera company. What's more, opera is the one art form that combines all art forms into one whole. IF Winston Salem was going to call itself the City of the Arts, it needed that cohesive art form, in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In 1976, Johnson, along with two enthusiastic supporters, signed the incorporation papers to create Piedmont Opera. The company produced it's first opera, Verdi's *Rigoletto*, in 1978.

The company quickly grew, and by its fourth season, it was providing the city with two operatic productions annually. In 1994, as Johnson was in the midst of preparations for the first opera of the company's 19th season, he died unexpectedly. It is a credit to him that, nearly 25 years after his death, the company he started is still thriving, attracting opera fans from across the triad, and far beyond.