

# Lyric

LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO



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**Lyric Opera and the Chicago Urban League join forces for:**

**EmpowerYouth! Igniting Creativity through the Arts**

**High school students begin work to create an original, youth-centric opera**

**Final performance will take place May 31 at the Lyric Opera House**

Chicago (12/12/2017) – In September, **Lyric Opera of Chicago** and the **Chicago Urban League** announced **EmpowerYouth! Igniting Creativity through the Arts**, a groundbreaking, multi-year partnership that immerses African American youth in the creation of an original opera based on their own life experiences. Collaboratively planned and administered by **Lyric Unlimited**, Lyric's community engagement and education arm, and the **Chicago Urban League's Youth Development Center, EmpowerYouth!** is a multidisciplinary afterschool program that will culminate in the presentation of a fully staged, youth-centric opera on **May 31 at the Lyric Opera House**.

The students selected to take part in **EmpowerYouth!** are drawn primarily from south side Chicago communities. On October 4, they began meeting weekly after school on-site at the Chicago Urban League headquarters to work with professional artists, including composer **Damien Sneed**, librettist **Patricia Smith**, and director **Jess McLeod**, to develop skills in areas such as scriptwriting, singing, acting, and movement/dance. A core component of the program involves the students sharing personal stories of navigating life in

Chicago, which will become the basis for the libretto of the new work. Learn more about **EmpowerYouth!** from Sneed and Smith [here](#).

**EmpowerYouth!** students will also work alongside local artists to gain new artistic skills leading up to their final performance. They include **Tanji Harper**, choreographer, teacher, and Artistic Director of The Happiness Club; **Melissa Foster**, Senior Lecturer in Voice at Northwestern University and vocal coach for several Broadway shows in Chicago and nationally; visual artist, painter, and muralist **Rubén Aguirre**; rapper and lyricist **Add-2**; artist, educator, and producer **Tony Santiago**; and Chicago singer-songwriter **Daryn Alexis**. Students will receive leadership development and exposure to careers in the arts including marketing and promotion, wigs, makeup, wardrobe, lighting, stage management, and performance.

**Damien Sneed** is a multi-genre recording artist who is widely admired for his range of musical talents and extraordinary achievements in his burgeoning career. A 2014 recipient of the prestigious Sphinx Medal of Excellence Award, which is presented annually to emerging Black and Latino leaders in classical music, Sneed has garnered attention in a wide range of musical genres, including gospel, jazz, pop, and R&B. A pianist, organist, conductor, composer, producer, arranger, vocal coach, and arts educator, Sneed has worked with jazz, classical, pop, and R&B legends such as Wynton Marsalis, Jessye Norman, Stevie Wonder, Diana Ross, Carlos Santana, and Ashford & Simpson. Sneed is an Artist-in-Residence at Nyack's Christian College in New York City.

**Patricia Smith** is a poet, teacher, performance artist, and author. She's written eight books of poetry including *Incendiary Art; Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah*, winner of the Lenore Marshall Prize from the Academy of American Poets; *Blood Dazzler*, a National Book Award finalist; and *Gotta Go, Gotta Flow*, a collaboration with award-winning Chicago photographer Michael Abramson. Her work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *The Baffler*, the *Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Tin House*, and in *Best American Poetry* and *Best American Essays*. Smith has collaborated with the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, Angel's Pulse Dance Troupe, the Sage String Quartet, and singer Meshell Ndegeocello; her one-woman show "Life After Motown," was produced by Nobel Prize winner Derek Walcott. Smith is a Guggenheim fellow, a National Endowment for the Arts grant recipient, a two-time winner of the Pushcart Prize, a former fellow at Civitella Ranieri, Yaddo and MacDowell, and a four-time individual champion of the National Poetry Slam, the most successful poet in the competition's history.

#### **About Lyric Unlimited**

**Lyric Unlimited** is a long-term, evolving initiative that encompasses company activities that are not part of Lyric's mainstage opera season. Its mission is to provide a relevant cultural service to communities throughout the Chicago area and to advance the development of opera by exploring how opera as an art form can resonate more powerfully with people of multiple backgrounds, ethnicities, and interests. It also leads the development of innovative partnerships with a wide range of cultural, community, and educational organizations to create a breadth of programming through which Chicagoans of all ages can connect with Lyric. In the 2016/17 season, more than 100,000 individuals participated in Lyric Unlimited programs.

For more information about Lyric Unlimited program offerings, visit [lyricopera.org/lyricunlimited](http://lyricopera.org/lyricunlimited).

#### **About the Chicago Urban League**

Established in 1916, the Chicago Urban League is a civil rights organization that empowers and inspires individuals to reach and exceed their economic potential. The Chicago Urban League supports and advocates for economic, educational and social progress for African-Americans through our agenda focused exclusively on economic empowerment as the key driver for social change. For more information, visit [www.thechicagourbanleague.org](http://www.thechicagourbanleague.org).

## About Lyric

Lyric Opera of Chicago's mission is to express and promote the life-changing, transformational, revelatory power of great opera. Lyric exists to provide a broad, deep, and relevant cultural service to Chicago and the nation, and to advance the development of the art form.

Founded in 1954, Lyric is dedicated to producing and performing consistently thrilling, entertaining, and thought-provoking opera with a balanced repertoire of core classics, lesser-known masterpieces, and new works; to creating an innovative and wide-ranging program of community engagement and educational activities; and to developing exceptional emerging operatic talent.

Under the leadership of general director Anthony Freud, music director Sir Andrew Davis, and creative consultant Renée Fleming, Lyric strives to become The Great North American Opera Company for the 21st century: a globally significant arts organization embodying the core values of excellence, relevance, and fiscal responsibility.

To learn more about Lyric's current season, go to [lyricopera.org](http://lyricopera.org). You can also join the conversation with @LyricOpera on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. #Lyric1718 #LongLivePassion



**EmpowerYouth! Igniting Creativity through the Arts** is made possible by leadership support from the **Centene Charitable Foundation**, with additional support from the **Lauter McDougal Charitable Fund**, **Eric and Deb Hirschfield**, and the **Eisen Family Foundation**.

Lyric Unlimited was launched with major catalyst funding from **The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation** and receives major support from the **Caerus Foundation, Inc.**

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