

RHIANNON GIDDENS
& MICHAEL ABELS

Lyric
OPERA OF
CHICAGO

OMAR

In this issue



The titular character, surrounded by texts, at LA Opera. | pp. 10-29

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Welcome to *Lyric*

Lyric Opera of Chicago is redefining what an opera company can be. We stand at the intersection of artistic excellence and civic purpose, harnessing the full power of opera — voices, orchestra, stagecraft, and story — to illuminate the emotions and narratives that define the human experience. We create one-of-a-kind shared moments, with a dedication to performance at the highest level. We know that this art form moves people in ways nothing else can. And we welcome you to **where life sings.**

John Mangum
General Director

Enrique Mazzola
Music Director



Issachah Savage as Omar



From the Chair and the General Director

Welcome to Lyric!

Across the country and at Lyric, it is a year of telling American stories. We are enormously proud to be bringing this groundbreaking opera to our stage.

With music by MacArthur Fellowship recipient Rhiannon Giddens and celebrated composer Michael Abels, *Omar* is a co-commission of Lyric Opera of Chicago. It premiered at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston in 2022, and won the Pulitzer Prize for Music in 2023. Inspired by the memoir of 19th-century Islamic scholar Omar ibn Said, the opera recounts his capture in West Africa (in a region now part of Senegal), his transit across the Atlantic Ocean, and his brutal enslavement in South Carolina. His short, handwritten autobiography — read all over the city in recent weeks, thanks to our Chicago Reads Omar initiative — is the source material for the opera. This work reveals an indelible set of characters and an inspiring protagonist who confronts harrowing

circumstances, challenges his faith, and emerges with profound dignity.

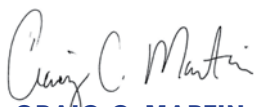
Omar is just one of the countless hidden stories of our nation, brought to life here in a tapestry of musical traditions that weaves together hymns, spirituals, bluegrass, and the threads of many other distinctly American sounds. We are fortunate to welcome the work's original director, the acclaimed Kaneza Schaal, who has reimaged the production for our forces and our stage.

Tenor Issachah Savage, who made a memorable debut at Lyric as Curtis Toler in *Proximity* (2022/23), returns to

perform the title role. *Proximity* also featured Kearstin Piper Brown (Julie), making her debut, and Zoie Reams (Fatima), who joins us for her eighth role at Lyric. Reams most recently dazzled our audience as one of the soloists in last season's *A Night of Mellon Collie and Infinite Sadness*. On the podium is Kazem Abdullah, a formidable expert in contemporary American music and much else besides, who is in demand at orchestras and opera houses around the world.

Fostering new work and cultivating new voices is an ongoing, core mission at Lyric, and no work better represents those efforts than *Omar*. We trust you will find this opera as exhilarating as we do — and please know you have our sincere gratitude for your support. Many thanks, and enjoy the performance!




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A Strong Foundation



Music Director Enrique Mazzola has been an active participant in Lyric's partnership with the Merit School of Music.

Jaclyn Simpson

The Negaunee Foundation, a leading philanthropic force, has made a transformative gift to Lyric, which will enrich students' lives for many years to come.

"I've long believed that great cultural institutions are built through sustained investment — not only in what happens on stage, but in the people and communities they serve," says Richard W. Colburn, president of The Negaunee Foundation. In May, the philanthropy made a \$20 million gift that established two cornerstone funds that will shape Lyric's impact across Chicago and on stage for decades to come.

"This transformational gift is a powerful statement of belief in Lyric's future," says John

Mangum, General Director at Lyric Opera of Chicago. "Funds for The Negaunee Education Programs ensure that our work offstage — engaging young people, families, and communities — will thrive for generations and develop future audiences for opera, while The Negaunee Fund for Mozart deepens our commitment to one of the greatest composers in the operatic canon. These funds greatly support our ambition to expand both the reach and relevance of opera in America."

Lyric Opera of Chicago has been a partner in Chicago arts education and engagement for more than three decades. Through in-school artist residencies that give students hands-on experience with professional artists, opportunities to see opera at small and large scales that spark the imagination through the power of storytelling, and events both in neighborhoods and within the historic Lyric Opera House that provide new experiences fostering a deep connection with music, the initiatives are about igniting a lifelong passion for opera.

Serving approximately 80,000 people through education and community programs throughout the Chicago region each season, Lyric has a program ready to meet every potential young opera lover where they are in their journey to discover and deepen the many ways that opera can enrich our lives.

Half of the gift will create The Negaunee Education Programs, providing perpetual support for Lyric's work with students, families, and educators across Chicago and the broader region. The division formerly known as Lyric Unlimited will now operate as the Education and Engagement department. Among other activities, this is the part of the company that supports artistic residencies, student dress rehearsals, and the smaller-scale touring operas meant for younger audiences. The funding will expand in-school and family programming while deepening existing partnerships with organizations such as the Merit School of Music and supporting a new collaboration with the Music Institute of Chicago.

For the collaborative partnership with Merit School of Music, Lyric brings professional opera artists to the school for coaching, masterclasses, and performances, including rehearsals led by Music Director Enrique Mazzola, providing Merit students with high-level training and access to Lyric professionals. Founded in 1931, the Music Institute of Chicago is a nonprofit community music school that leads people toward a lifelong engagement with music. The institution provides widely accessible resources for high-quality music teaching, performing, and service activities.



The gift also establishes The Negaunee Fund for Mozart, a dedicated contribution supporting an annual presentation of a Mozart opera as part of Lyric's season. This philanthropic investment will enable both the revival of existing works and the development of new productions, including potential future stagings of the Mozart/Da Ponte trilogy, ensuring the enduring presence of Mozart's work at Lyric at the highest artistic level.

"This gift comes at a pivotal moment for Lyric as we look toward an exciting future," says Craig C. Martin, the Chair of Lyric's Board of Directors. "The support and the long-term vision that has made it possible are especially fitting at a time when the arts can bring so much to so many."

Helping bring the arts to the community has been a longtime focus of The Negaunee Foundation — and this latest gift to Lyric underscores its commitment to the power of opera to inspire, educate, and connect communities.

"Lyric Opera of Chicago pairs artistic excellence with a deep commitment to education and community engagement," Colburn says. "Supporting these efforts is a meaningful way to help ensure that this art form continues to inspire future generations." [L](#)



Issachah Savage as Omar

OMAR

Rhiannon Giddens and co-composer Michael Abels deliver a profoundly moving story about the strength of the human spirit. The Pulitzer Prize-winning score — a tapestry of hymns, spirituals, and bluegrass, co-commissioned by Lyric — tells a fundamentally American story drawn from the memoir of 19th-century Islamic scholar Omar ibn Said.



A man in a dark suit, white shirt, and red tie stands in the foreground, smiling. The background is a blurred view of an opera house with warm, golden lights.

Music to our ears!

**Willkie Farr & Gallagher
congratulates Craig C.
Martin, Chair Americas,
on becoming the
Chair of the Board of
Directors of
Lyric Opera of Chicago.**

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OMAR



Opera in two acts in English

Music by **Rhiannon Giddens & Michael Abels**

Libretto by **Rhiannon Giddens**

From *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said*
translated with an introduction by Ala Alryyes.

October 23, 25^M, and 28, 2026

CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE

Omar	Issachah Savage	Katie Ellen / The Caller	Briana Hunter⁺
Fatima (Omar's Mother)	Zoie Reams	Taylor	Daniel Luis Espinal[•]
Abdul (Omar's Brother)	Matthew Dexter⁺ •		
Amadou	Cameo T. Humes	Dancers	Kayla Farrish⁺
Olufemi	Nicholas LaGesse⁺		Aja Singletary
Suleiman	Rocky Eugenio Sellers		Tashae Udo⁺
Slaver #1	Jonathan Wilson		
Slaver #2	Hoss Brock		
Woman #1	Audrianna Hughes⁺	Conductor	Kazem Abdullah
Woman #2	Emily Mwila	Director	Kaneza Schaal⁺
Man #1	Cameo T. Humes	Set Designer	Amy Rubin⁺
Man #2	Fred C. VanNess Jr.⁺	Original Costume Designers	Micheline
Man #3	Samuel James Dewese		Russell-Brown⁺
Woman #3	Jade Dashá⁺		April M. Hickman⁺
Man #4	Fred C. VanNess Jr.⁺	Costume Designer	Charlese Antoinette
Woman #4	MiKayla Hatfield⁺		Jones⁺
Julie	Kearstin Piper Brown	Lighting Designer	Pablo Santiago⁺
Slaver	Jonathan Wilson	Projection Designer	Joshua Higgason⁺
Auctioneer	Daniel Luis Espinal[•]	Chorus Director	Michael Black
Abe	Matthew Dexter⁺ •	Choreographer	Kayla Farrish⁺
Man in the Crowd	Nicholas Ward	Wig & Makeup Designer	John Metzner
Johnson	Kyle Ketelsen	Associate Director	Clarissa Marie Ligon⁺
Enslaved Woman #1	Audrianna Hughes⁺	Assistant Director	Jordan Lee Braun
Renty	Nicholas LaGesse⁺	Stage Manager	Sandra Moore
Enslaved Woman #2	Audrianna Hughes⁺	Musical Preparation	William Garfield Walker
Mary	Jade Dashá⁺		Noah Lindquist
Tess	MiKayla Hatfield⁺		Jerad Mosbey
John	Rocky Eugenio Sellers		
Laborer Man #1	Cameo T. Humes		
Laborer Woman #1	Audrianna Hughes⁺		
Laborer Woman #2	Emily Mwila		
Laborer Man #2	Nicholas LaGesse⁺		
Eliza	Camille Robles[•]		
Owen	Kyle Ketelsen		

First performed at the Spoleto Festival USA on May 27, 2022.

First performed by Lyric Opera of Chicago on October 23, 2026.

⁺ **Lyric debut**

[•] **Current Member, The Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center**

Synopsis

ACT I

SCENE 1: 1806, Futa Toro (a region of West Africa now part of Senegal)

In his peaceful village, Omar ibn Said chants verses from the Qur'an. Omar's mother, Fatima, a spiritual matriarch of the village, leads the community in a prayer to Allah. Worried that his village will fall prey to the slavers pillaging the region, Omar's brother Abdul has been negotiating with them for the safety of his people. Omar believes that Allah has a plan for him, but Fatima cautions him that the plan might not be what he anticipates.

Abdul discovers that he has been deceived, and he warns his family to flee the coming raiders. But it is too late. Warriors overrun the compound and begin taking people prisoner. Fatima is killed in the chaos.

SCENE 2: The Middle Passage

Omar is shackled closely together with other prisoners in the cramped cargo hold of a slave ship. The desperate prisoners, each of them with their own individual life stories, pray to survive their horrendous journey.

SCENE 3: The Charleston Slave Market

The enslaved woman Julie has been kidnapped and dragged to the market for sale. She plans to escape her kidnapper and return to the Owen plantation in Fayetteville, which seems like a better option than the uncertain future that awaits her at the market. Julie recognizes that the newly arrived Omar doesn't comprehend what is about to happen to him. She tries to explain to Omar (who cannot understand her words) that if he manages to run away, he should try to make it to Fayetteville.

The slave auction begins. A family is brought up for sale. The father, Abe, pleads to be allowed to remain together, but the parents are sold separately from their young son. When Omar is led to the podium, his cap is removed and flung into the crowd, and Julie picks it up. In his anguish, Omar sees the spirit of his mother, who signals that Julie has managed to get free of her bonds. He creates a distraction so that Julie can escape. Omar is sold to Johnson.

SCENE 4: Johnson plantation

Enslaved workers sing a work song as they labor. Omar keeps to himself. Johnson shouts at one of the men and strikes him. He then turns his wrath to Omar, asserting his authority in an unfamiliar language and sending him to pick cotton in the fields.

SCENE 5: Johnson plantation, five months later

As Omar sleeps, the spirit of Omar's mother watches over him. Johnson's voice is heard, furiously calling for Omar. At his mother's urging, Omar escapes.

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ACT II

SCENE 1: Fayetteville County Jail

Omar has escaped but is eventually captured. He prays and writes Qur'anic verses in Arabic on the walls of the jail cell. This catches the attention of the townspeople, who wonder where he came from. The plantation owner Owen is urged by his daughter Eliza to buy Omar, who has by now learned to speak English. Owen questions Omar about his background, and their discussion turns to matters of spirituality. Owen sees an opportunity to convert Omar to Christianity.

SCENE 2: Owen plantation

The enslaved workers come to the end of the day's labors. One of them, Katie Ellen, is surprised that Julie has returned to the plantation. Owen and his friend Taylor arrive with Omar and introduce him to the other enslaved workers, who remind Omar that they all must be wary. Julie is impressed that Omar has followed her advice. She tells him that her father used to wear a cap like Omar's. When she was a child, her father was sold and taken away. She has kept Omar's cap all this time because it reminded her of her father, and she gives it back to Omar.

SCENE 3: Owen's study

Owen and Taylor are excited about the prospect of converting Omar to their faith, which will give Owen a great deal of prestige in his community. Owen gives Omar a Christian Bible written in Arabic and asks him to write "The Lord is my Shepherd" in that language. Omar actually writes the words "I want to go home."

SCENE 4

As Omar reads his new Bible under a tree, he asks Allah the meaning of his life journey. He recites and reinterprets Psalm 23 from the point of view of an enslaved Muslim. The scene ends with a choral amen, as Omar intones an Islamic prayer.

SCENE 5

Julie is fascinated that Omar can read and write. She encourages him to write a book. The spirit of Fatima joins Julie in urging Omar to write about his experiences and his faith. As he finds his voice, Omar calls on people of the Carolinas and of America to honor the tenets of their faith. The company joins Omar in praising the omnipresence of Allah in all that has been and in all that will be. 

Synopsis by Mark Lyons, courtesy of Los Angeles Opera Offstage

APPROXIMATE TIMINGS

This production will be performed with one intermission.

Act I	1 hour 5 minutes
Intermission	25 minutes
Act II	1 hour 10 minutes
Total	2 hours 40 minutes

Official Airline



Additional Support



Omar is co-commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago, Spoleto Festival USA, Carolina Performing Arts, San Francisco Opera, LA Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, and Detroit Opera.

Projected English titles for *Omar* are provided by the San Francisco Opera Association.

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No Longer Hidden: Omar ibn Said's American Story

In a commemorative year crowded with national self-narration, Rhiannon Giddens's and Michael Abels's *Omar* asks a sharper question: What is the country actually invested in remembering?

By Justin Vickers



The 2022 production of *Omar* at LA Opera.
The work would win the Pulitzer Prize in 2023.

Cory Weaver / LA Opera

The rituals of national anniversaries can bind a country together, yet they can also reveal a collective habit of selective, curated memory. From the recesses of history, Rhiannon Giddens's and Michael Abels's *Omar* brings forward the life of Omar ibn Said, a West African Muslim scholar who was captured, stolen across the Atlantic, and enslaved in the American South, and who wrote his autobiography in Arabic while still captive in North Carolina. His story unsettles any anniversary language that treats America as a completed moral experiment. It reveals the country as promise and contradiction, aspiration and violence, self-invention and erasure. To encounter *Omar* in this commemorative year, then, is to ask whether national memory can bear the weight — and hear the voices — of the people it has too often made peripheral.

Where current political rhetoric puts pressure on institutions committed to recovering suppressed histories, *Omar* replies with evidence. It deepens our archive of American history, complicates the mythology of a single, unified national voice, and restores attention to a man whom enslavement sought to suppress and contain.

Omar asks for a demanding ear. It invoices a scholar whose archive lives partly in Arabic script and Qur'anic memory, and whose afterlife passes through slavery's ledgers, missionary accounts, and mistranslation. Its commanding overture centers around the "Koromanti" melodies of 17th-century Jamaica, building upon what is believed to be the earliest example of musical expression by enslaved persons in the New World. It asks the nation to love itself through unyielding truth, and with enough moral stamina to hold beauty and brutality in the same field of vision.

Omar ibn Said was born around 1770 in West Africa. Before his capture, he belonged to an Islamic intellectual world shaped by study, prayer, family, and learned transmission. The Library of Congress describes him as wealthy and highly educated. His

15-page autobiography, *The Life of Omar ibn Said* (1831), is the only known extant narrative written in Arabic by an enslaved person in the United States. It begins:

My name is Omar ibn Said [ʿUmar ibn Sayyid]; my birthplace is Futa Toro, between the two rivers. I sought knowledge in Bundu and Futa. The shaykh was called Muhammad Sayyid, my brother, and Shaykh Souleymane Kumba and Shaykh Jibril Abdal. I continued seeking knowledge for twenty-five years.

I came back home for six years. Then there

came to our country a large army. It killed many people, and brought me to the big sea, and sold me into the hands of a Christian [white person] who bound me and sent me onboard the big ship in the big sea.



A portrait of Omar ibn Said (1770-1864), circa 1850.

The opera starts with that historical wound, and then restores the free world that preceded it. Act I opens in Futa Toro in 1806, with Omar chanting Qur'anic verses and his mother, Fatima, leading the village in prayer; soon the community is overtaken, Fatima is killed, and Omar is forced

into captivity. The opera's sonic landscape fractures violently during the kidnapping scene, abruptly replacing serene Islamic prayers with aggressive, discordant orchestral movement. To underscore the profound alienation of the Middle Passage, the audience is immersed in the dense, grief-laden laments of the community trapped within the ship's hull, into which Omar's voice is subsumed.

This sequence gives the opera its ethical architecture. Giddens and Abels present Omar's African and Islamic formation before the Middle Passage, the slave market, the plantation, and the jail, thereby resisting a narrative that depicts Black life from the moment of enslavement. Omar arrives in America as a fully-formed person with his own memories, teachers, personal devotions, and intellectual habits. The brutality of his captivity becomes more tangible because the opera first establishes a rich pre-life that is then unconscionably violated.

The Library of Congress preserves one detail that is especially vivid. After Omar escaped his first enslaver and was captured in Fayetteville, North Carolina, he began writing in Arabic on the walls of his jail cell. The act drew attention from townspeople, who wondered who he was and where he came from — indeed, what the strange hieroglyphs on the walls meant. Confinement became the surface onto which memory, prayer, and intellect were newly superimposed. Those who saw his writing encountered the mystery of the script long before they understood its meaning. Omar’s gesture still carries unmistakable potency: he wrote himself into — *onto* — this nation.

Opera is uniquely suited to honor such a gesture, turning presence into sound. The voice projects inwardness into public space; it gives memory duration, prayer resonance, and thought a body. In *Omar*, Giddens and Abels render the title character as more than a historical subject. He is an envoiced presence, a consciousness heard roiling across the distance between 19th-century manuscript pages and the 21st-century stage. The co-creators’ careful mediation of his voice is a signal act of archival recovery. Giddens describes *Omar* as both the story of one man and the story of many, acknowledging that the operatic Omar represents but one possible interpretation of his writings and life. That quiet humility gives the opera its moral compass.

Its sound, too, is multivalent and reveals a decided shift once Omar is in America. Omar’s prayers transform from an open, communal celebration to a restrained, subversive undercurrent. The score masterfully interlaces the fluid traditional Qur’anic melodies of his homeland with early African-American spirituals, gospel-tinged inflections, and the distinct

twang of the banjo, blending the mournful ache of the blues with the differently-tinged hope of Christian hymnody. This strategic musical camouflage allows his original devotion to endure, transformed into a radical, acoustic act of psychological resistance.

In *I Cannot Write My Life: Islam, Arabic, and Slavery in Omar ibn Said’s America*, the scholars Mbaye Lo and Carl W. Ernst interpret Omar’s surviving Arabic writings, identifying the Qur’anic, theological, juridical, and literary materials that earlier readers repeatedly missed or distorted. Lo and Ernst show that Omar’s voice had been obscured for nearly two centuries by mistranslation, proslavery apologetics, and romanticized fantasies of benevolent enslavement. The opera’s final movement aptly makes writing the central act of survival.

Julie, an enslaved woman who first meets Omar at the Charleston slave market, recognizes the inherent power of his ability to read and write. She urges Omar to write a book, spellbound by what she knows can be an act of conservation. Her urgency — coupled with the spirit of Omar’s mother, Fatima — gives the opera a profoundly moral pulse: the enslaved community needs Omar’s testimony. His memories belong to the historical record, and they ensure a life beyond the existing frameworks of injustice silencing them.

The score carries the musical expansion of Omar’s soundworld with capacious abandon. Michael Abels describes the music as shaped by the many cultures flowing through Omar’s life, hearing the broader Muslim diaspora alongside the musics of Senegal, together with transcriptions of spirituals and hymns from the church. Communal singing, a cornerstone of the Black community and its rich African and African American traditions, makes up the central fiber of the opera.

That musical plurality underscores the opera's American argument. Omar ibn Said's America sounds through several inheritances at once. The score lets West African memory and Islamic devotion inflect Black American song; it allows vernacular string traditions and Giddens's own scholarly and performance expertise with the banjo to press into choral and orchestral lyricism. "American" here poignantly means the full documentation: Arabic script in North Carolina, Islam in the slaveholding South, African scholarship in the archive of American letters, and a Black community singing their own survival.

Omar was co-commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago, Spoleto Festival USA, Carolina Performing Arts, San Francisco Opera, LA Opera, Boston Lyric Opera, and Detroit Opera. At Lyric, *Omar* arrives as a work the company helped bring into being and as an urgent encounter for a city shaped by migration, Black cultural achievement, religious freedom, and contested public memory.

Omar lived for decades in a Christian slaveholding environment, and white observers often narrated his life as a story of conversion. The surviving writings — and the opera — test that comfortable tale. In the slave owner Owen's study, he gives Omar a Christian Bible written in Arabic and asks him to write "The Lord is my Shepherd." Omar instead writes, "I want to go home." The sentence opens outward over the entire drama. Home may mean Futa Toro, lost family, spiritual return, freedom from captivity, or a place beyond the grasp of any "master." The moment turns imposed piety into vulnerability and self-disclosure. Owen seeks proof of conversion and prestige within his community. Omar answers with defiant longing.

His later encounter with Psalm 23 deepens the same tension. We find Omar reading the Bible under a tree, asking Allah for the meaning of his journey, and reinterpreting the psalm from the perspective of an enslaved Muslim. Familiar scriptural imagery acquires new urgency when sung by a man whose memory of water encompasses the Atlantic crossing and whose experience of lordship involves human bondage. The aria becomes an act of disruptive interpretation under constraint. Omar reads across traditions while retaining the integrity of his own address to Allah.

The joys of *Omar* reside in the survival of his intellectual presence. Omar remained enslaved, a fact preserved at the center of the opera's moral gravity. Yet his life exceeds the category imposed upon him. The word "slave" may name an unjust law's claim upon him, but it cannot repudiate the scholar at work, the Muslim at prayer, the son formed by maternal memory, and the witness who inscribed his words before the world. His intellectual life appears in manuscripts, quotations, scriptural memory, translation, and the ongoing labor of interpretation. The mystery remains part of the dignity. Giddens acknowledges that *Omar* continues to exceed any single rendering. It allows the voice of the faithful man

to sound in the present while preserving his resistance to possession by archives, scholars, translators, performers, or audiences. His voice reaches us today through Giddens's and Abels's mediation, which preserves his complexity.

In this year of America 250, *Omar* places our nation's founding beside the lives its ideals failed to protect. It recognizes Arabic writing within the corpus of America's history. It places Islam inside the soundscape of

the American South. It asks the opera house to hear an enslaved man as an intellectual agent whose writings still echo across time.

To hear *Omar*, then, is to hear America expanded. The work gathers our nation's wounds into music while honoring the brilliance that survived them. Omar ibn Said's life belongs to America with its contradictions intact. His Arabic words, his Islamic learning, his acts of interpretation, and his longing for home still vibrate with meaning. Giddens and Abels give those traces sound. As a work that can be heard as a commemorative correction, *Omar* remembers what celebration alone can leave out, and asks us to listen with the seriousness that justice requires. ■

Dr. Justin Vickers is Distinguished Professor of Music at Illinois State University. Author of the forthcoming Benjamin Britten and the Night: Thresholds and Constellations, he is the editor of five books, including Childhood and the Operatic Imaginary since 1900 (Oxford, 2026) and Britten in Context (Columbia, 2022).

***Omar ... asks the
opera house to hear
an enslaved man
as an intellectual
agent whose
writings still echo
across time.***

Director's note

By Kaneza Schaal



The opera we share with you here touches the bones of our country. Whether we are the first generation in our family to sleep on this soil, whether our family has been sleeping on this soil for many generations, or whether this soil birthed our ancestors, this story has built all of our lives. The story of Omar Ibn Said — a Fulani man, forced to the United States and enslaved, literate before being stolen from his home in West Africa, and author of an autobiography.

Slavery, of course, existed before people were torn from their homes in West Africa at gunpoint and enslaved in the United States. The institution of American Chattel Slavery wrought a unique new violence, as an institution of language. American Slavery created and named a permanent condition attached to your body.

The ferocious clarity in American Slavery regarding the power of language was such that one of the most sacrosanct laws was that you could not teach enslaved people to read. Or write.

And here, we have a text! From Omar Ibn Said. Written by Omar. An Islamic scholar. His autobiography is the prayer from which the music and words you hear tonight were created. The glory and triumph that his words exist, even if generated under duress, is holy.

We gather to tell you Said's story through the contest of languages in his life — spiritual languages, cultural languages, spoken and written languages, the language of materials like wood and fabric.

And ultimately, Said's holding of all of these languages simultaneously brims with resistance, omission, refusal, and reincarnation.

We gather around Issachah Savage, who will transform himself into Omar, joined by a company of players to support him, as the mighty bard, in singing you this tale. All of the players follow Savage in donning fabrics printed with Omar's writing, as well as texts from the language of American Chattel Slavery, runaway woodcuts, ship manifests with the names of kidnapped persons, ledgers with the sale of families.

**The glory and triumph
that his words exist,
even if generated under
duress, is holy.**

We gather dressed in indigo. Along with the stolen humans and their labor came science and technology the American colonists had never known. One example is the ornate process of growing, harvesting, and creating indigo dye, a new knowledge brought by Africans to the Americas, which became

a fixation of colonial activity. Mercenaries were sent to West Africa to kidnap and import scientists to expand this industry. Indigo was the second-largest export from South Carolina during Omar's life. After the American Revolution (when this precious dye was no longer being sent back to Europe), indigo as a crop was surpassed by cotton. Together, these two brutal crops, tended by forced labor, led to the rise and life of American blue jeans.

An opera house is perhaps one of the few places big enough for Said's journey — the contradiction, the violence, the holiness, the omissions, the terror and the triumph.

Listening to the story of Omar Ibn Said tonight, together, let us begin resetting the bones. [L](#)

Artist profiles



RHIANNON GIDDENS **CO-COMPOSER AND LIBRETTIST**

Lyric debut

A two-time Grammy Award-winning singer and multi-instrumentalist, MacArthur “Genius” grant recipient, Pulitzer Prize winner, and composer for opera, ballet, and film, Giddens has centered her work around the mission of lifting up people whose contributions to American musical history have previously been overlooked or erased, and advocating for a more accurate understanding of the country’s musical origins through art. Her seventh album, *Hope is the Thing with Feathers*, was recently released on Nonesuch Records. A founding member of the landmark Black string band Carolina Chocolate Drops, and the all-female banjo supergroup, Our Native Daughters, she is the current Artistic Director of the Yo-Yo Ma-founded Silkroad Ensemble, hosts a TV show on PBS, *My Music with Rhiannon Giddens*, and has hosted two podcasts (*Aria Code* from New York City’s NPR affiliate station WQXR, which ran for three seasons, and *American Railroad* from Silkroad). Giddens has published two childrens books and written and performed music for the soundtrack of *Red Dead Redemption II*, one of the best-selling video games of all time. She was a music consultant for 2025’s film *Sinners*, and appeared as a recurring cast member on ABC’s hit drama *Nashville* and as a music history expert on Ken Burns’ *Country Music* series on PBS.



MICHAEL ABELS **CO-COMPOSER**

Lyric debut

The composer is a three-time Emmy nominee, and recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for *Omar*.

His concert works include the choral song cycle *At War with Ourselves* for the Kronos Quartet, and the Grammy-nominated *Isolation Variation* for Hilary Hahn. Abels’s orchestral music has been performed by the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and many others. Recent commissions include *Emerge* for the National Symphony, the guitar concerto *Borders* for Grammy-nominated artist Mak Grgic, and *Unbound*, a symphonic tribute to Olympian Jesse Owens. Upcoming projects include commissions for Cincinnati Opera and the Dallas Symphony. Abels is Composer-In-Residence with the Detroit Symphony for the 2025-2027 seasons. The Detroit Symphony has recorded Abels’s symphonic works for upcoming release on the Pentatone label. The Chicago Symphony will perform his piece *More Seasons* next April. He composed genre-defying scores for the Jordan Peele films *Get Out*, *Us*, and *Nope*; the score for *Us* won a World Soundtrack Award, the Jerry Goldsmith Award, and a Critics Choice nomination, and the score for *Nope* shortlisted for the Best Original Score Oscar. He recently scored the Netflix series *Sirens* starring Julianne Moore, and co-scored *The ‘Burbs* for Peacock. His latest film project, for Korean auteur Na Hong-jin’s action adventure *Hope*, premiered at the 2026 Cannes Film Festival, and is currently in theaters.



ISSACHAH SAVAGE OMAR

Previously at Lyric: Curtis Toler/*Proximity* (2022/23).

The tenor’s operatic highlights include performances with The Metropolitan Opera, Houston Grand Opera, LA Opera, Seattle Opera, Canadian Opera Company, Opéra National de Bordeaux, Dutch National Opera, Théâtre du Capitole de Toulouse, and the Salzburg Festival. He has sung much of the great dramatic tenor repertoire, including the title roles in *Tannhäuser*, *Otello*, *Peter Grimes*, and *Rienzi*; Siegmund in *Die Walküre*; Radamès in *Aida*; Bacchus in *Ariadne auf Naxos*; Der Kaiser in *Die Frau ohne Schatten*; Manrico in *Il trovatore*; and Narraboth in *Salome*. This season, Savage debuts at Opéra de Rouen singing the title role in *Tannhäuser*. On the concert stage, Savage makes returns to the Colorado Symphony and the Baltimore Symphony for performances of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9, the Kansas City Symphony for *Die Walküre* (Act I), The Florida Orchestra for Verdi’s *Messa da Requiem*, the Charleston Symphony for Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*, and The Washington Chorus for *When the Caged Bird Sings*. He has appeared with many of the world’s leading orchestras, including the New York Philharmonic, The Cleveland Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Houston Symphony, The Philadelphia Orchestra, Toronto Symphony Orchestra, St. Louis Symphony, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Danish National Symphony Orchestra, Rotterdam Philharmonic, Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo, and the Melbourne Symphony.



KEARSTIN PIPER BROWN **JULIE**

Previously at Lyric: Chief’s Daughter #1/*Proximity* (2022/23).

In 2027, Brown returns to the Metropolitan Opera as a Flower Maiden in *Parsifal* and makes her debut with Opera Orlando. Last season she appeared as Poppea in *The Comet/Poppea* at the Yale Schwarzman Center and as Bess with Dayton Opera. On the concert stage, she made her debut with Boston Lyric Opera in *She Was There*, honoring Black revolutionary women, and with the Tulsa Symphony in Jessie Montgomery’s *Five Freedom Songs*, as well as with the New York Philharmonic in *Messiah*. Recent operatic highlights include her role debut as Alice Ford with Portland Opera; Poppea in Yuval Sharon’s immersive production of *The Comet/Poppea* at Lincoln Center; Wendy Torrance in *The Shining* with Opera Parallèle, Atlanta Opera, and Utah Opera; Nedda with Florida Grand Opera; Anne Trulove in *The Rake’s Progress* with the Lakes Area Music Festival; Mimi with Opera San José; and Micaëla in *Carmen* with Indianapolis Opera. Brown created the title role of Esther in Ricky Ian Gordon’s *Intimate Apparel* with Lincoln Center Theater, earning multiple honors, including the Theatre World Award for Outstanding Debut Performance in an Off-Broadway Production. She subsequently

made her Metropolitan Opera debut as Evelyn in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. Additional highlights include Musetta and Bess with New Orleans Opera, Dorothy Jean Hamer in Chandler Carter's *This Little Light of Mine* with Santa Fe Opera, and Clara in Jake Heggie's *It's a Wonderful Life* with San Francisco Opera.



ZOIE REAMS FATIMA

Previously at Lyric: Seven roles since 2018/19, most recently Neris/*Medea* (2025/26) and *Mother/Blue* (2024/25).

The mezzo-soprano began the 2026/27 Season touring Europe as soloist in *A Night of Mellon Collie and Infinite Sadness*, which she premiered at Lyric last season. Upcoming engagements include the title role in *Carmen* with Madison Opera, a New Year's Eve concert in Toronto, her first Verdi *Requiem* with the Santa Fe Symphony, and a return to the Washington National Cathedral for Handel's *Messiah*. Last season, Reams returned to the Canadian Opera Company as Maddalena in *Rigoletto* and sang the title role in *Carmen* with Piedmont Opera. Her varied concert calendar included appearances with the LA Phil as Siegrune in Act III of *Die Walküre*, under the baton of Gustavo Dudamel; the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Symphony Hall and Tanglewood for Beethoven's 9th Symphony; the Northwest Florida Symphony for her first performances of Mahler's 2nd Symphony; Austin Opera for their 40th anniversary concert; and recitals with Art Song Chicago and Lawrence University. She concluded the season in a return to Cincinnati Opera, singing Zipporah in the world premiere of Kevin Day and Tifara Brown's *Lalovavi*.



KYLE KETELSEN JOHNSON / OWEN

Previously at Lyric: 10 roles since 2004/05, most recently Don Giovanni/*Don Giovanni* (2026/27) and Howard/*The Listeners* (2024/25).

Last season, the American bass-baritone debuted at the Opéra national de Paris in the title role of *Don Giovanni*. He returned to Staatsoper Hamburg to sing Jochanaan in a new production of *Salome*, and to the Metropolitan Opera to sing Escamillo in a new production of *Carmen* and to reprise the role of Richard in *The Hours*. Recent highlights at Lyric include soloist in Mozart's *Requiem* (2023/24) and King of Scotland/*Ariodante* (2018/19). Other appearances include a return to Wiener Staatsoper in the title role in *Don Giovanni*, and concert engagements including Beethoven's *Missa solemnis* with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra conducted by Riccardo Muti, and his first performances of Mendelssohn's *Elijah* with the Utah Symphony. He recently returned to LA Opera as Golaud in *Pelléas et Mélisande*. In previous seasons, Ketelsen made house debuts at Wiener Staatsoper in the title role of *Don Giovanni* and at Teatro de la Maestranza as Golaud in *Pelléas et Mélisande*. He returned to Canadian Opera Company in the title role of *Bluebeard's Castle*, and sang Escamillo in *Carmen* with the RTVE Symphony Orchestra in Madrid. He returned to the Bayerische Staatsoper Munich for his role debut as Kaspar in *Der Freischütz* in a new production by Dmitri Tcherniakov, and to Dutch National Opera for his role debut as Adahm in Rudi Stephan's *Die ersten Menschen*.



BRIANA HUNTER KATIE ELLEN / THE CALLER

Lyric debut

This season's highlights for the mezzo-soprano include a return to the Metropolitan Opera for performances of *The Magic Flute*. Recent seasons have seen her performing Mercédès in *Carmen*, Inez in *Il trovatore*, Sister Lilianne in *Dead Man Walking*, and Ruby/Woman Sinner in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* at the Met. She made her debut in 2022 with LA Opera in the West Coast Premiere of *Omar*, and was previously seen in numerous roles with Washington National Opera, The Glimmerglass Festival, and Santa Fe Opera, among others. On the concert stage, she recently joined the New World Symphony in Miami to perform as soloist in Julia Perry's *Stabat Mater*, a part she sang previously in her Carnegie Hall debut under the auspices of the Bard Music Festival. She has sung the role of Mercédès in *Carmen* with the Detroit Symphony Orchestra; performed as the mezzo-soprano soloist in Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the Phoenix Symphony; and appeared as the mezzo-soprano soloist in Mahler's Symphony No. 8 with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra's May Festival.



DANIEL LUIS ESPINAL AUCTIONEER / TAYLOR

Previously at Lyric: Five roles since 2024/25, most recently Second Villager/*El último sueño de Frida y Diego* and Third Jew/*Salome* (both 2025/26).

A third-year Ryan Opera Center member, the Cuban-Dominican tenor from Sarasota, Florida, debuted last summer at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis (Frederic/*The Pirates of Penzance*) and the Grand Teton Music Festival. He also participated in the 2026 Internationale Meistersinger Akademie in Neumarkt, Germany. Espinal was a national winner of the 2024 Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition, received a 2025 Sara Tucker Study Grant, and was in residence at the 2025 Aix-en-Provence Festival Académie and Ravinia Festival's Steans Institute. At Lyric the tenor has appeared in *Pagliacci*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, and *Fidelio* (debut as Jacquino). A graduate of the Manhattan School of Music, Espinal continued his studies at Yale University, where he received a Master of Musical Arts degree. His roles there included Tom Rakewell/*The Rake's Progress*, Rinuccio/*Gianni Schicchi*, and Male Chorus/*The Rape of Lucretia*. The tenor previously participated in San Francisco's Merola Opera Program for two summers. In Lyric's 2026/27 Season, Espinal will sing Officer/*Ariadne auf Naxos* and Giuseppe/*La traviata*. Daniel Luis Espinal is sponsored by **Lead Sponsor the J. Thomas Hurvis Endowment, in loving memory of Dick Kiphart**, and cosponsors **Fred & Phoebe Boelter, Margo & Michael Oberman & Family, and Jennifer L. Stone**.



CAMILLE ROBLES ELIZA

Previously at Lyric: Third Frida Image/*El último sueño de Frida y Diego* and Lola/*Cavalleria rusticana* (both 2025/26).

A second-year Ryan Opera Center member, the mezzo-soprano appeared at Lyric last season in *Medea* and also performed with The Joffrey Ballet. The Puerto Rico native was a Jan Miller Studio Artist at Pensacola Opera for the 2024/25 Season. While there, she covered the role of Cherubino/*Le nozze di Figaro*.

and performed the Dolphin in the world premiere of *Mato and the Bear Who Couldn't Fish*. Previously, she was invited to the Aspen Music Festival as a Fellowship Artist for two summers and appeared as the Sandman/*Hansel and Gretel* and in scenes from *Carmen*, *Werther*, *La favorita*, and *Die Walküre*. Robles received the American Opera Society of Chicago Award in 2026 and a Gulf Coast Region Encouragement Award in the Metropolitan Opera's Laffont Competition in 2024. Following undergraduate studies at the Puerto Rico Conservatory of Music, she earned her Master of Music degree from the Shepherd School of Music at Rice University, where she appeared as Olga/*Eugene Onegin*. *Camille Robles* is sponsored **Anonymously in Honor of Heidi Heutel Bohn**.



**MATTHEW DEXTER
ABDUL / ABE**

Lyric debut

The first-year Ryan Opera Center bass-baritone from McKinney, Texas, recently earned his Master of Music degree in Early Music Voice from Yale University and the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. While at Yale, he performed in *Jephtha*; *Siddhartha*, *She*; and *Il martirio di Sant'Orsola*. He also sang Raphael/*Die Schöpfung* on an international tour with Yale Schola Cantorum. As an undergraduate at the University of North Texas, Dexter appeared as Micha/*The Bartered Bride*, Bartolo/*The Marriage of Figaro*, Zuniga/*Carmen*, and The Conductor/*Lisa DeSpain's That Hellbound Train*. A vocal fellow at Spoleto Festival USA for two summers, he appeared in the 2022 world premiere of *Omar* and the 2023 production of Barber's *Vanessa*. Competition successes include an Extraordinary Promise award from the 2026 Lotte Lenya Competition and third place and audience favorite award in the 2024 James Toland Vocal Arts Competition. Dexter was a 2025 Grant Park Music Festival Vocal Fellow and has toured twice as a soloist with Apollo's Fire Baroque Orchestra. In Lyric's 2026/27 Season, Dexter will sing Elder Ott/*Susannah*. *Matthew Dexter* is sponsored by **Lead Sponsor The C.G. Pinnell Family** and cosponsors the **Robert & Isabelle Bass Foundation, Inc.**, the **Boykins, Ford, and Mages families**, and **Maria C. Green & Oswald G. Lewis**.



**CAMEO T. HUMES
AMADOU / MAN # 1 / LABORER #1**

Previously at Lyric: Lyric Chorus since 2012/13.

A full-time member of the Lyric Opera Chorus, Humes has performed with Elbphilharmonie Hamburg, the Richmond Symphony, Chicago Philharmonic, Fort Wayne Philharmonic, the Orlando Philharmonic Orchestra, SANAA Opera Project, and the Orchestra Sinfonica dell'International Chamber Ensemble in Italy. Previously at Lyric, he sang Second Jew/*Salome* (2025/26) and Mano Alfaro/*Champion* (2023/24). His most recent engagements include a debut with The Ear Taxi Festival as tenor soloist in Damien Geter's *An African American Requiem*, as well as debuts with Lucerne Festival, Schleswig-Holstein Musik Festival, and Teatro alla Scala in the roles of Peter, Crab Man, Mingo, and Robbins in *Porgy and Bess*. Other operatic credits include the title role in *La clemenza di Tito*, Reverend Milton Allison in the world premiere of Errollyn Wallen's *Quamino's Map* with Chicago Opera Theater, Ottavio (*Don Giovanni*) with Operafestival di Roma, Almaviva (*Il barbiere di Siviglia*), Gastone (*La traviata*), Prunier (*La rondine*), Peter (*Porgy and Bess*) with Lyric Opera of Chicago (cover), Dayton Opera, and Skylight Music Theatre of Milwaukee; Crab

Man (*Porgy and Bess*) with The Princeton Festival, Nelson (*Porgy and Bess*) with Cincinnati Opera, and Ensemble (*Show Boat*) with Houston Grand Opera.



**NICHOLAS LAGESSE
OLUFEMI / RENTY / LABORER MAN #2**

Previously at Lyric: Lyric Chorus since 2026/27.

A baritone in Lyric Opera of Chicago's Supplementary Chorus, last season LaGesse returned to Washington National Opera (WNO) to sing Parson Alltalk in Denyce Grave's directorial debut of Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*. Additional credits with WNO include singing the role of Jim and covering Jake in *Porgy and Bess*. Other career highlights include several roles with Boston Lyric Opera, including Mercutio in Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, Young Emile in Terence Blanchard's *Champion*, and Silvio in *Pagliacci*. LaGesse has been a frequent collaborator with Pacific Opera Project, where he performed the roles of Harlekin in *Ariadne auf Naxos*, Danilo in *The Merry Widow*, and covered the title role in *Don Giovanni*. He debuted the role of Jameson in the mobile opera *Hopscotch* with director Yuval Sharon's Los Angeles-based experimental opera company, The Industry. He holds a Bachelor of Music degree from Northwestern University and a Master of Music from UCLA.



**ROCKY EUGENIO SELLERS
SULEIMAN / JOHN**

Previously at Lyric: Lyric Chorus since 2021/22.

A member of Lyric Opera of Chicago's Supplementary Chorus, Sellers has appeared with the Metropolitan Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Opera Memphis, New York City Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Penn Square Music Festival, Portland Opera, Sarasota Opera, Opera Saratoga, Opera on the James, Pacific Opera Project, The Japan Society, Utopia Opera, Dell'Arte Opera Ensemble, Delaware Valley Opera Company, Opera Naples, Opera Ebony, Natchez Festival of Music, Wagner Society of Cincinnati, Regina Opera, and the Seoul International Opera Festival. Sellers has received awards from the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition, Anna Sosenko Assist Trust, Mendelssohn Club of Albany, Kennett Symphony Voice Competition, Dell'Arte Opera, and the American Prize Competition in Vocal Performance. He holds a Bachelor of Music degree in Vocal Performance from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.



**AUDRIANNA HUGHES
WOMAN #1 / ENSLAVED WOMAN #1
/ LABORER WOMAN #1 / ENSLAVED
WOMAN #2**

Previously at Lyric: Lyric Chorus since 2026/27.

A member of Lyric's Supplementary Chorus, the Paducah, Kentucky, native previously sang Constanza in University of Kentucky Opera Theatre's workshop of *A Nation of Others* by Paul Moravec; Ellen Craft and Charlotte Giles in *Sanctuary Road* by Paul Moravec; Marcellina in *Le nozze di Figaro* and Angelina in *La cenerentola* at Bay View Music Festival; and alto soloist in Mozart's *Requiem*. She recently performed Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody* with the Paducah Symphony Orchestra. Previous highlights include performances with Houston Grand Opera as well as the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Porgy and Bess*. Young

artist program experience includes Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Chautauqua Opera Company, Des Moines Metro Opera, and Bay View Music Festival. Hughes is a member of the American Spiritual Ensemble and a new Denyce Graves - Generational Voices Fellow.



EMILY MWILA
WOMAN #2 / LABORER WOMAN #2

Previously at Lyric: Lyric Chorus since 2021/22.

Originally from New Zealand and Zambia and now based in Chicago, Mwila recently made her Haymarket Opera Company and Newberry Consort debut in Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (2026) singing the role of Euridice. A member of Lyric's Core Supplementary Chorus, she sang Sina/*The Listeners* (2024/25) and Lucia Paret/*Champion* (2023/24). She made her Lyric debut as Evelyn in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* (2021/22), and has appeared with the Metropolitan Opera, Detroit Opera, Opera Omaha, and Eternity Opera in New Zealand. She made her U.S. debut in the chorus of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* at the Met in 2021 and later toured with the cast of Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, performing with Detroit Opera, Opera Omaha, and the Metropolitan Opera. In 2023/24 she was a soloist in Mozart's *Thamos, King of Egypt* at Lyric. Other roles include Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Mae Jones in Weill's *Street Scene*, and Euridice in Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Beyond opera, she has appeared as the soprano soloist in works such as Faure's *Requiem* (2025) with Camerata Chicago, *Carmina Burana* with Elmhurst Chorale (2026) and Oak Park's Handel Week Festival (2025, 2026). She holds a Master of Music and Professional Studies Diploma in voice from Mannes School of Music.



JADE DASHÁ
WOMAN #3 / MARY

Previously at Lyric: Lyric Chorus since 2026/27.

A member of Lyric's Supplementary Chorus, the Chicago-based mezzo-soprano has been seen with Lyric's Education & Engagement Department, Opera Festival of Chicago, Thompson Street Opera, Chicago Fringe Opera, Cedar Rapids Opera, Opera Steamboat, Central City Opera, Opera Neo and Chicago Opera Theater. Among other accolades, she was named an Encouragement Winner at the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition.



MIKAYLA LYNN HATFIELD
WOMAN #4 / TESS

Previously at Lyric: Lyric Chorus since 2026/27.

Originally from Van Buren, Arkansas, Dr. Hatfield recently completed her Doctor of Musical Arts in Vocal Performance at Shenandoah Conservatory. She is a soprano in Lyric's Supplementary Chorus. She served as a Resident Artist with Lyric Opera of Kansas City during the 2025/26 Season, where she made her professional debut as Clorinda in *La cenerentola* and performed as Strawberry Woman in *Porgy and Bess*. Recent operatic roles include Alice in Verdi's *Falstaff*, Galatea in Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, Lidochka in Shostakovich's *Moscow, Cheryomushki*, and Eugénie in Germaine Tailleferre's *La Pauvre Eugénie*. In 2022, she attended the American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz, Austria, and recently received the Stephen Feinberg Scholarship through the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.



SAMUEL JAMES DEWESE
MAN #3

Previously at Lyric: Lyric Chorus since 2023/24.

In the 2025/26 Season, the baritone debuted at Houston Grand Opera in the ensemble of *Porgy and Bess*, and performed as the male soloist in *The Ballad of the Brown King*, benefitting The Caring Place Foundation in La Grange, Illinois. This season, he will appear in *Earth to Kenzie*, the touring production of Lyric's Education and Engagement Department. In the 2025/26 Season at Lyric, he appeared as Diego Rivera in *Frida Kahlo and the Bravest Girl in the World* and in 2024/25 he covered Policeman #3 in *Blue*. Additional operatic highlights include Sam/*Trouble in Tahiti*, Father/*Hansel and Gretel*, Astrophel/*The Arcadians*, and Marcello/*La Bohème*. In concert, Dewese has been a soloist at Portsmouth Cathedral (UK), Highgate Choral Society, and the Illinois Wind Symphony. He has appeared in numerous world and U.S. premieres including *The Perfect Opera* (Edinburgh Fringe), *Would You Eat Me?* (Thompson Street Opera Company), *La Jetée* (Chicago Fringe Opera) and as the title character in *John Henry* (Tête à Tête, London). An alumnus of the Royal College of Music, London and the Florentine Opera apprentice program, he has been honored in competition by James Toland Vocal Arts, the Metropolitan Opera Laffont Competition, the Hariclea Darclee Competition, and the Luminarts Foundation.



FRED C. VANNESS JR.
MAN #2 / MAN #4

Previously at Lyric: Lyric Chorus since 2026/27.

The Grammy-nominated tenor is a former Jane and Steven Akin Emerging Artist at Boston Lyric Opera, and is a member of Lyric's Supplementary Chorus. He currently performs with the Metropolitan Opera as a member of the Extra Chorus and recently covered the roles of Peter the Honeyman and Nelson in *Porgy and Bess*. Operatic credits include performances with Boston Lyric Opera, Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Commonwealth Shakespeare Company, MassOpera, Opera del West, Toronto Summer Opera, NEMPAC Opera Project, and Longwood Opera, appearing in productions such as *Lysistrata*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Omar*, *Freedom Ride*, *Candide*, *Don Giovanni*, *Carmen*, and *La Bohème*. He is also featured on the Grammy-nominated recording of *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* by Boston Modern Orchestra Project. VanNess has appeared with numerous orchestras and choruses, including Commonwealth Chorale, Masterworks Chorale, Castle of Our Skins, Firebird Pops Orchestra, and Salem Philharmonic Orchestra.



JONATHAN WILSON
SLAVER #1 / SLAVER

Previously at Lyric: Lyric Chorus since 2019/20.

Wilson joined the Lyric Opera Chorus in 2020. He performed the role of the Usher in *Rigoletto* (2024/25), was bass soloist in Mozart's *Thamos, King of Egypt* (2023/24), and sang Jailer/*Tosca* for one performance in the 2021/22 Season. Other recent roles include Schaunard in *La Bohème* and Silvio in *Pagliacci*, both with Opera Festival Chicago, along with the title role in *Eugene Onegin* and Escamillo in *Carmen* with Chicago Nova Opera. Additional notable roles include Dottore Malatesta in *Don Pasquale*, Pelléas in *Pelléas et Mélisande*, and

John Brooke in Adamo's *Little Women*. On the concert stage, he has been a featured soloist with the Northwest Indiana Symphony Orchestra, the New Philharmonic Orchestra, the South Shore Orchestra, and many Chicago-area sacred organizations. Also an avid performer of chamber opera, Jonathan has sung roles for many regional premieres in the Chicago area, with recent roles including Manfred in *Two Remain* (Heggie, Scheer), Hannah-before in *As One* (Kaminsky, Campbell, Reed), and the title character in a Tom Waits adaptation of *Woyzeck*, each with Chicago Fringe Opera. He also regularly sings with many of Chicagoland's top symphonic and choral ensembles including the Chicago Symphony Chorus and the Grant Park Chorus.



KAYLA FARRISH **CHOREOGRAPHER AND DANCER**

Lyric debut

Farrish's commissions include Limon Dance Company, Whim W'him, Ririe Woodbury, Armstrong Now!, Danspace, Little Island, Harlem Stage, American Dance Festival, and others. She has created live works, films, site-specific/immersive pieces, and collaborations with musicians such as Esperanza Spalding, Trixie Whitley, Moor Mother, and Melanie Charles. Presenting spaces include Chelsea Factory, Danspace, Lincoln Center, Park Avenue Armory, Symphony Space, National Sawdust, and Joyce Theater, and she has received support from The Pocantico Center, The Watermill Center, Works & Process, Brooklyn Filmmakers Collective, Baryshnikov Arts, La Mama Theater, and others. Farrish has received the Sundance Uprise Grant for Emerging BIPOC Directors, Bessie Awards for *December 8th* and NYLA's *Motherboard Suite*, and the Harkness Promise Award for 2022. She premiered reimagined archival work for Limon at Joyce Theater (2024) and toured *Put Away the Fire, Dear* supported by NEFA National Dance Project. She received Watermill Center's Baroness Nina Von Maltzahn Fellowship and the Ellis-Beauregard Foundation Choreographer Award (2023). She is a 2025 CUNY Dance Initiative Artist, NYFA/NYSCA Choreography Fellow, 2026 NY Support for Artists Grantee, and Danse Mirage Foundation Choreography commissioned artist.



AJA SINGLETARY **DANCER**

Previously at Lyric: *The Factotum* (2022/23).

The multidisciplinary performer, a Philadelphia native, has worked at Steppenwolf, Writers, Goodman, Red Orchid, and Timeline theatres. Her most recent credits include *Amadeus* at Steppenwolf and *Hula Hooping Queen* at Young People's Theatre of Chicago. In February 2027, she will direct and choreograph *For Colored Girls* at ChicagoDanztheatre Ensemble. Her choreography has been featured at Bramble Theatre, A Red Orchid, and Chicago Shakespeare Theater. Singletary received a BA in Theatre Performance from Fordham University in NYC. While there, she trained at the Ailey School.



TASHAE UDO **DANCER**

Lyric debut

The New York City-based dancer, choreographer, and educator is a former company member of Antonio Brown Dance and has performed and toured with artist Esperanza Spalding throughout Europe, South America, Oceania, and Asia. Her performance credits include Apple TV, ARTE TV in Poland, Billboard Live Tokyo, Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall, and Carnegie Hall, among others. As a choreographer, Udo's work has been presented at Arts on Site, White Wave Festival, and The Craft NYC. She holds a BFA in Dance from Montclair State University and began her dance training at BCIT Medford in Medford, New Jersey.



KAZEM ABDULLAH **CONDUCTOR**

Previously at Lyric: *Proximity* (2022/23).

Recent highlights for Abdullah include Anthony Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* at the Metropolitan Opera. He has led the premieres of several significant American operatic works including *Omar*, Gregory Spears's *Castor and Patience*, and works by John Luther Adams, Caroline Shaw, Anthony Davis, George Lewis, Dai Fujikura, and Daniel Bernard Roumain. Recent orchestral credits include the Oregon, Indianapolis, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, Kansas City, Seattle, and Cincinnati symphony orchestras. He recently conducted an opera Gala for the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam, the American premiere of Charles Wuorinen's opera *Brokeback Mountain*, *Tosca* for Seattle Opera, and *Hansel and Gretel* for Cape Town Opera. Abdullah was the Generalmusikdirektor in Aachen, Germany, from 2012 to 2017, where he conducted more than 25 operas. Prior to 2012, Abdullah led the Orquestra de São Paulo on its third United States coast-to-coast tour and the New World Symphony at the Ives In-Context Festival. He conducted the Tanglewood Music Center Orchestra in performances of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* in collaboration with the Mark Morris Dance Group. He was also an assistant conductor at the Metropolitan Opera, where he assisted and prepared more than 20 operas, including *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Wozzeck*, and *Lulu*.



KANEZA SCHAAL **DIRECTOR**

Lyric debut

Kaneza Schaal is a New York City-based artist working in theater, opera, and film. She directed the world premiere production of *Omar* at the Spoleto Festival in 2022, which subsequently travelled to opera houses in Los Angeles, Boston (Lyric), and San Francisco. Previous Chicago productions include her original works *Jack&* and *KLII* at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Her first feature film collaboration, *BLKNWS: Terms and Conditions*, premiered at Gene Siskel Film Center as part of Chicago's 31st Black Harvest Film Festival. This season she premieres a new production of Verdi's *Aida* at Houston Grand Opera, which will also be presented by Opera Philadelphia. She makes her New York Philharmonic debut with a concert staging of Leonard Bernstein's *MASS* conducted by Gustavo Dudamel. In her commitment to artist-centered institutions, Schaal co-founded the Gihanga Institute for Contemporary Art in Kigali, Rwanda, and served as co-director of Under The Radar

Festival in New York City from 2023-2026. Schaal is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Doris Duke Artist Award, LA Opera Eva and Marc Stern Artist Award, Project& Evolving Democracy Fellowship, Herb Alpert Award in Theatre, United States Artists Fellowship, Joyce Award, Ford Foundation Art for Justice Bearing Witness Award, and Princess Grace George C. Wolfe Award.



AMY RUBIN SET DESIGNER

Lyric debut

Rubin is a designer of environments for theater, opera, and dance. Recent designs include *Macbeth* (Boston Lyric Opera), *Omar* (Boston Lyric Opera, Detroit Opera, LA Opera, San Francisco Opera, Spoleto), *Romeo and Juliet* (American Repertory Theater), *Highway 1, USA* (LA Opera), *Orpheus Descending* (Theater for a New Audience), *Lucy* (Audible Theater), *The Snowy Day* (Houston Grand Opera), *Blue* (Detroit Opera), *Aging Magician* (New Victory Theater), *Most Happy in Concert* (Williamstown Theatre Festival), *Octet* (Signature Theatre), *Cyrano with music by The National* (The New Group), *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* (Signature Theatre), *Gloria: A Life* (Daryl Roth Theatre, ART), *Miles for Mary* (Playwrights Horizons), and *Acquanetta* (Prototype Festival).



APRIL M. HICKMAN ORIGINAL COSTUME DESIGNER

Lyric debut

Hickman is a Connecticut-based costume designer and costume illustrator for theatre, opera, and film. Notable credits include *Next to Normal* and *Cold War Choir Practice* at Trinity Rep, *2.5 Minute Ride* at Hartford Stage, *Maria di Rohan* at University of North Carolina School of The Arts, *The Thanksgiving Play* at Dorset Theatre Festival, *Trouble In Mind* at Dallas Theater Center, and *Nine Night* at Roundhouse Theatre. She was associate costume designer for *The Shark is Broken* on Broadway. Her work for *Omar* was seen previously at LA Opera, Spoleto Festival, and Boston Lyric Opera. Hickman currently holds a position at Wesleyan University.



CHARLESE ANTOINETTE JONES COSTUME DESIGNER

Lyric debut

The costume designer's work will be seen in the upcoming Paramount Pictures film *Children of Blood and Bone* (January 2027). She previously led costume design for *AIR* (Amazon MGM; NAACP Image Award nomination), *Judas and the Black Messiah* (Warner Bros.; Costume Designers Guild Award nomination), and numerous other film and television titles. She is also leading costumes for Houston Grand Opera's new production of *Aida* which opens in January 2027. *Costume Designers are supported by the Richard P. and Susan Kiphart Costume Designer Endowment.*



PABLO SANTIAGO LIGHTING DESIGNER

Lyric debut

The Mexican-American lighting designer's credits include work for Santa Fe Opera, LA Opera, San Francisco Symphony, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and Beth Morrison Projects. After spending 15 years working on major motion pictures, Santiago returned to school to earn a MFA in Theatrical Lighting Design from UCLA. He is the winner of the Richard Sherwood Award and Stage Raw Award and a four-time Ovation Award nominee. He has collaborated with James Darrah (*Breaking the Waves, Threepenny Opera*), Ellen Reid (Pulitzer Prize-winner *p r i s m, Desert In*), Jose Luis Valenzuela (*Destiny of Desire, Mac Beth*), Missy Mazzoli (*Proving Up, Breaking the Waves*), Bill Rouch (*Mother Road*), Patricia McGregor (*Skeleton Crew, Place, and Good Grief*), Ted Hearne (*Place*), Christopher Rountree (*Sound Box, Proving Up, Flight, and Giustino*), Adam Rigg (*Lord of Cries, Rev 23, and p r i s m*), and Yuval Sharon (*War of the World, Galileo, and Die Walküre*). *Lighting designers are supported by the Mary-Louise and James S. Aagaard Endowment in honor of Duane Schuler.*



JOSHUA HIGGASON PROJECTION DESIGNER

Lyric debut

The video, lighting, scenic, and interactive designer recently designed augmented reality and projections for *Parsifal* at Bayreuther Festspiele. Other recent highlights include *Minor Music at the End of the World* (Amsterdam, Venice) and Michael R. Jackson's *White Girl In Danger* (Second Stage NYC). Higgason has designed for Sufjan Stevens, Zvidance, Radiolab, Ira Glass, Daniel Fish, Lucinda Childs, Big Dance Theater, and The Windmill Factory. His work has appeared at BAM, La Scala, Volksoper Wien, Staatsoper Berlin, Lincoln Center, TED, and SXSW. He is a Professor of the Practice at MIT.



MICHAEL BLACK CHORUS DIRECTOR

The Australian chorus director joined Lyric full time in the 2012/13 Season, after having served as interim director the season before.

He was named Head of Music at Lyric, a new position, in the 2023/24 Season. Black was Chorus Director at Opera Australia in Sydney from 2001 to 2013, and has worked in this capacity for such distinguished organizations as the Edinburgh International Festival and Opera Holland Park (London), and, in Australia, the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, the Philharmonia Choir, Motet Choir, the Cantillation chamber choir, and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. In Chicago, Black became the first chorus director to work with the choruses of Lyric, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the Grant Park Music Festival, where he served for six seasons, including preparation of *The Damnation of Faust* chorus and Haydn's *Creation*. In 2025, he worked with the Young Artists at Opera Australia and the apprentice singers at the Santa Fe Opera, and he has lectured or given masterclasses at the University of

Chicago and Northwestern University. Black has served as chorus director for close to 140 different operas on four continents, and his work has been recorded and/or aired on ABC, BBC, PBS, for many HD productions in movie theaters, and on television. *Michael Black* is supported by the **Howard A. Stotler Chorus Director Endowed Chair**.



JOHN METZNER WIG AND MAKEUP DESIGNER

The versatile designer first joined the staff of Lyric for the 2022/23 Season. He has previously collaborated with Chicago Shakespeare

Theater, Lookingglass Theatre, and Court Theatre. He served for nine years as Head of Wig and Makeup for Webster University's Conservatory of Theatre Arts, and designed hair and makeup for more than 50 performances at The Repertory Theatre of St. Louis. Other regional credits include work at The Muny, Great River Shakespeare Festival, and Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, where he designed for *The Pirates of Penzance*, among many other productions. His advanced training includes wig styling at the Wig Room Training Academy and London School of Wig Making. *John Metzner* is supported by **The Marlys A. Beider Wigmaster and Makeup Designer Endowed Chair**.



CLARISSA MARIE LIGON ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR

Past projects for the director, performer, and stage manager include: *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (Detroit Opera), *Blue* (Detroit

Opera), *Queen of Versailles* (Broadway), *Stereophonic* (Broadway), *The Heart of Rock & Roll* (Broadway), *Is This A Room* (Broadway), *Dana H* (Broadway), *Fortuity* (Off-Broadway), *The Last Bimbo of the Apocalypse* (Off-Broadway), *Titanique* (Off-Broadway), *White Girl in Danger* (Off-Broadway), *A Raisin in the Sun* (Off-Broadway), *Assembly* (Off-Broadway), *Black Light* (Off-Broadway), *Cruel Intentions* (Off-Broadway), *Jack &* (Touring Production), *Longing Lasts Longer* (Off-Broadway), *Untitled- danceshowpartything* (Virgin Cruises), *Measure For Measure* (Off-Broadway), and *St. Vincents* (Off-Broadway). [L](#)

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Enrique Mazzola
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MUSIC STAFF

Kedrick Armstrong
 Michael Banwarth^{AAA}
 Kseniia Polstiankina Barrad
 William C. Billingham
 Aaron Breid
 Austin Chanu[^]
 Susan Miller Hult
 Tess Jacskon
 Myungseo Kim^{AA}
 Noah Lindquist
 William Long
 Francesco Milioto
 Jerad Mosbey
 Luke Poeppel^{AA}
 Stefano Sarzani
 Madeline Slettedahl^{AAA}
 William Garfield Walker

ORCHESTRA

Violin I

Robert Hanford, *Concertmaster*,
Mrs. R. Robert Funderburg
Endowed Chair
 Emily Nebel,
Assistant Concertmaster
 Eleanor Bartsch
 Alexander Belavsky
 Kathleen Brauer
 Renée-Paule Gauthier
 Laura Miller
 Liba Shacht
 Heather Wittels
 Bing Jing Yu

Violin II

Yin Shen, *Principal*
 John Macfarlane,
Assistant Principal
 Injoo Choi^{**}
 Diane Duraffourg-Robinson
 Ann Palen
 Irene Radetzky
 John D. Robinson
 David Volfe

Viola

Carol Cook, *Principal*
 Terri Van Valkinburgh,
Assistant Principal
 Rose Armbrust Griffin^{**}
 Amy Hess
 Rebecca Swan
 Melissa Trier Kirk

Cello

Calum Cook, *Principal*
 Ana Kim,
Acting Assistant Principal
 Mark Brandfonbrener
 Mara McClain^{**}
 William H. Cernota
 Walter Preucil

String Bass

Kevin Fink, *Principal*
 Samuel Shuhan,
Assistant Principal
 Andrew L. W. Anderson
 Gregory Sarchet
 Collins R. Trier

Flute

Marie Tachouet, *Principal*
 Dionne Jackson,
Assistant Principal
 Alyce Johnson

Piccolo

Alyce Johnson

Oboe

Paul Lueders, *Principal*
 Judith Zunamon Lewis,
Acting Assistant Principal

English Horn

Judith Zunamon Lewis

Clarinet

Heesoo Kim, *Principal*
 Susan Warner,
Assistant Principal

Bass Clarinet

Susan Warner,
Acting

Bassoon

Preman Tilson, *Principal*
 Hanna Sterba,
*Acting Assistant Principal***

Contrabassoon

Hanna Sterba, *Acting***

Horn

Abigail Black, *Principal*
 Fritz Foss, *Assistant Principal/*
Utility/Acting Third Horn
 Samuel Hamzem
 Neil Kimel

Trumpet

William Denton, *Principal*
 Rebecca Oliverio,
Acting Assistant Principal

Trombone

Jeremy Moeller, *Principal*
 Mark Fisher, *Assistant*
*Principal**
 Hugo Saavedra,
*Acting Assistant Principal***
 Will Baker

Bass Trombone

Will Baker

Tuba

Andrew Smith, *Principal*

Timpani

Edward Harrison, *Principal*

Percussion

Douglas Waddell,
Acting Principal
 Eric Millstein,
Acting Assistant Principal

Harp

Lynn Williams, *Principal*

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Acting Principal

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Karin Gambell, *violin*
 Rich Janicki, *percussion*
 Noah Lindquist, *piano*

The Lyric Opera Orchestra string sections utilize revolving seating. Players behind the front desk change seats systematically and are listed alphabetically in the roster above.

* On leave, 2026/27 Season
 ** Season Substitute
 ^ Solti Foundation U.S. Opera Residency
 ^^ Ryan Opera Center Ensemble Member
 AAA Ryan Opera Center Alumni

CHORUS DIRECTOR AND HEAD OF MUSIC

Michael Black
The Howard A. Stotler
Endowed Chair

REGULAR CHORUS

Soprano

Angela De Venuto
Cathy Dunn
Hayley Fox
Desirée Hassler
Rachael Holzhausen
Kimberly McCord
Heidi Spoor
Stephani Springer
Sherry Watkins
Kelsea Webb
Tara Wheeler

Mezzo-Soprano

Marianna Kulikova
Emily Price
Ola Rafał
Yvette Smith
Marie Sokolova
Maia Surace
Corinne Wallace-Crane
Pamela Williams
Michelle K. Wrighte^{AAA}

Tenor

Geoffrey Agpalo
Timothy Bradley
Hoss Brock
William M. Combs
John J. Concepción
Kenneth Donovan
Jared V. Esguerra
Joseph A. Fosselman
Cullen Gandy
Cameo T. Humes
Tyler Samuel Lee
Joseph Shadday

Bass

David DuBois
Christopher Filipowicz
Robert Morrissey
Rafael W. Porto
Craig Springer
Nicholas Ward
Ronald Watkins
Nikolas Wenzel
Max Wier
Jonathan Wilson

CORE SUPPLEMENTARY CHORUS

Soprano

Cara Collins
Emily Mwila
Ariana Strahl

Mezzo-Soprano

Christina G. Adams
Carla Janzen
Quinn Middleman

Tenor

Joshua Benevento
Ace Gangoso

Bass

Michael Cavalieri
David Govertsen^{AAA}
Adam W. Kim
Ian R. Prichard

SUPPLEMENTARY CHORUS

Soprano

Andrea Alderman
Nicole Besa
Regina Ceragioli
Anna Donnelly
Cassandra Douglas
Victoria Ellington
Megan Fleischmann
MiKayla Lynn Hatfield
Elise Hurwitz
Alexandra Kassouf
Claire Kuttler
Rosalind Lee
Thalia Moore
Marlaina Owens
Amanda Payne
Emlynn Shoemaker
Molly Snodgrass
Diana Stoic

Mezzo-Soprano

La'Shelle Allen
Jade Dashá
Leah Dexter
Elizabeth Frey
Savannah Gordon
Miya Higashiyama
Audrianna Hughes
Georgia Jacobson
Any Newsome Hill
Stephanie Schoenhofer
Marissa Simmons
Leeza Yorke

Tenor

Charles M. Anderson
Jerek Fernández
Lance Fisher
Alec Fore
Klaus Georg
Ernest C. Jackson Jr
Luther Lewis III
Jordan Loyd
Taiwan Norris
Nathan Oakes
Steven Michael Patrick
Brett Potts
Brian Skoog
Chase M. Taylor
Fred C. VanNess Jr.

Bass

Brandon Coleman
Lifan Deng
Samuel James Dewese
Chris DiMarco
Dimitri German
Sankara Harouna^{AAA}
Earl Hazell
Nicholas LaGessee
Joseph Lodato
Dorian McCall
De'Ron McDaniel
Douglas Peters
William Powell III
Leo Radosavljevic
Dan Richardson
Rocky Eugenio Sellers
Justice Yates

SUPERNUMERARIES

Sebastian Pedersen
Jayden Brown

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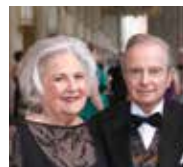


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*Wig and Makeup Designer,
The Marlys A. Beider
Endowed Chair*
Necole E. Bluhm
Department Coordinator

Lynn Koroulis
Shop Manager

Brittany Powers
*Wig and Makeup Crew
Foreman*

Katrina Brown
Nick Cochran
Martha Contreras
Krista D'Agostino
Eric Daniels
June Gearon
Nesrin Ismail
Nini Jenkins
Lauren Mateling
Melissa Musseau
Megan Pirtle
Alice Salazar
Nora Sammons
Melanie Saso
Wig & Makeup Run Crew

Victoria Ashmore
Colin Grice
Chantelle Johnson
Katie Kurz
Wig Shop Staff

Production

Rachel A. Tobias
Production Stage Manager

Katrina Bachus
Jordan Lee Braun
Assistant Stage Directors

Adrienne Bader
Alaina Bartkowiak
Sandra Moore
Daniel Sokalski
Stage Managers

Adrienne Bader
Alaina Bartkowiak
Alycia Martin
Sandra Moore
Tommy Novak
Daniel Sokalski
Peggy Stenger
Amy C. Thompson
Assistant Stage Managers

Facilities

John Yelen
Senior Director of Facilities

Joe Minogue
Chief Engineer
Michael LaPorte
Lead Engineer

Phillip Casica
Dennis Cody
Anthony Fasano
Brian Laurence McMahon
Bernard McNeela
Kevin O'Keefe
Thomas Setina
Eric Zawaski
Engineers



Local 2: Stagehands
Local 476: Studio Mechanics
Local 769: Theatrical Wardrobe



Local USA 829 of the IATSE is the union representing scenic, costume, lighting, sound and projection designers in Live Performance

Ryan Opera Center

For more than 50 years, **The Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center** has nurtured emerging talents from around the globe — and every season, the training program's alumni continue to showcase their talents on the greatest stages of the world.



FIRST
BALCONY



**The 2026/27 Ryan Opera
Center Ensemble**

Front row, left to right:
Camille Robles, Alexis Pearl,
Adam Partridge, Josie Larsen,
Kylie Kreucher, AJ Helms,
Myungseo Kim.

**Back row: Matthew Dexter,
Lin Fan, Sihao Hu, Benjamin R.
Sokol, Daniel Luis Espinal,
Luke Poeppel, Sid Chand,
Alexi Ortega Chavez**

Ryan Opera Center alumni around the world



J'Nai Bridges (2012-15) as Carmen and Ryan Capozzo (2022-24) as Don José in *Carmen* at Seattle Opera.

OTHER APPEARANCES



**Paul Corona
(2007-2010)**
Sacristan/*Tosca*
Metropolitan Opera



**Madeline Slettedahl
(2017-2020)**
Aida music staff
Houston Grand Opera



**Wm. Clay Thompson
(2022-2024)**
Title role/*Don Giovanni*
Opera San José

For more information, please visit lyricopera.org/ryanoperacenter

Accessibility at Lyric

At Lyric, opera is for everyone. Every patron deserves an experience built for them, and our accessibility services help make that possible.



American Sign Language

ASL interpretation is available at select performances for all operas in English and for select performances in other languages.



Audio Description

Expert audio-described performances are scheduled for each production.



Auracast

Lyric has introduced new Auracast assistive listening technology for every performance. Built on Bluetooth Low Energy audio, Auracast broadcasts sound directly from the stage and orchestra pit to compatible hearing aids, cochlear implants, and earbuds.



Braille Programs

Braille programs may be borrowed from the coat check located between aisles 2 and 3 on the main floor for any mainstage production.



Large-Print Programs

Large-print programs are available for all performances from the coat check located between aisles 2 and 3 on the main floor.



Opera Glasses

High-powered opera glasses are available at no cost from the coat check located between aisles 2 and 3 on the main floor. A valid ID or major credit card is required as a security deposit.



SoundShirts

SoundShirts, which provide wearers the ability to feel the music on their upper body, are available at select performances.



Touch Tours

Guided Touch Tours, tailored to patrons who are blind or have low vision, are given prior to select performances at 12:00 p.m.



Wheelchair Accessibility

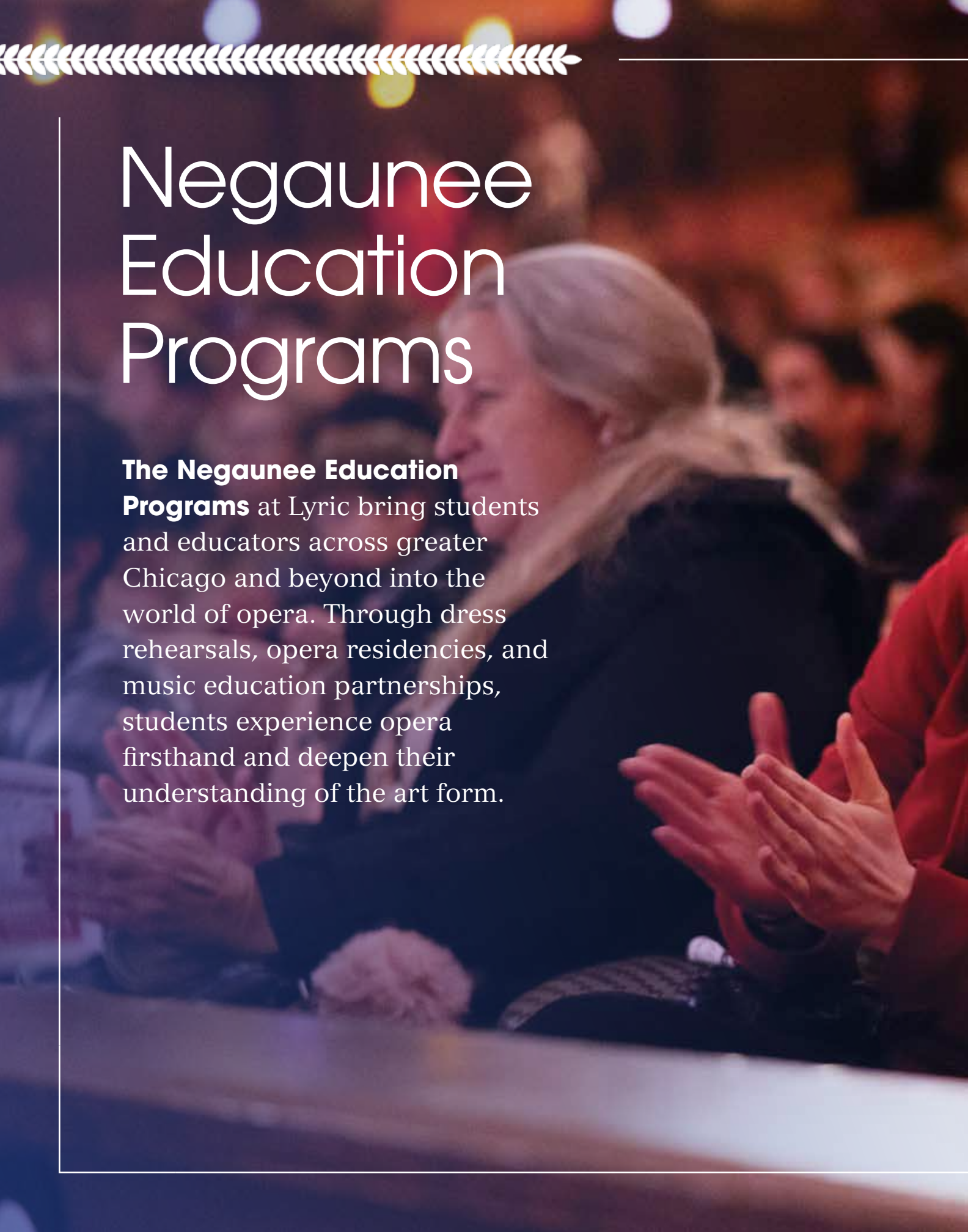
Wheelchair platforms are available throughout the opera house for patrons wishing to remain in their wheelchairs for the performance.



For more information on accessibility at Lyric, please scan this QR code; or contact Audience Services at 312.827.5600; or by email at audienceservices@lyricopera.org



Patrons wearing SoundShirts.



Negaunee Education Programs

The Negaunee Education Programs at Lyric bring students and educators across greater Chicago and beyond into the world of opera. Through dress rehearsals, opera residencies, and music education partnerships, students experience opera firsthand and deepen their understanding of the art form.

Engagement Programs

Engagement Programs at Lyric connect audiences and communities of all ages with opera through artist interactions, exhibitions and activities at the opera house, and performances throughout the city's neighborhoods.



Opera on the go!

Opera in the Neighborhoods returns to stages across the community with *Earth to Kenzie*, a heartwarming and thought-provoking opera for young people.

By Janie Ragsdale

How far can your imagination take you? For students attending Lyric Opera of Chicago's *Opera in the Neighborhoods* fall tour of *Earth to Kenzie*, the answer could be anywhere from the stage to outer space!

Composer Frances Pollock and librettist Jessica Murphy Moo had children ages 7-12 in mind when creating *Earth to Kenzie*, a Lyric co-commission with Seattle Opera. The contemporary children's opera introduces students and families to Kenzie, a fifth grader with homework, asthma, a vivid imagination, and a taste for adventure.

When Kenzie and her mother are forced to move into a family shelter, everything becomes confusing and uncertain. Struggling with her new reality, Kenzie finds refuge in her favorite video game — a world full of endless possibilities. With the help of her avatar,

Edwin, she's ready to battle space kitties and real-world problems, though her asthma reminds her that life isn't all starships and spacesuits. Through her imaginary space adventures, Kenzie soon comes to realize that home is not a place, but rather a feeling that comes from being surrounded by those you love.

A one-act operatic adventure, *Earth to Kenzie* explores themes and conversations relevant to young audiences in an engaging manner. In just 45 minutes, the production takes on housing insecurity, technology's role in the lives of children, overcoming obstacles, practicing empathy, and finding your place in the world. *Earth to Kenzie* meets young audiences where they are, tackling complex, real-world topics in a way they can understand, without talking down to



Kenzie encounters plenty of challenges — but she also has fun along the way.



Frida Kahlo and the Bravest Girl in the World toured the community during the 2024/25 Season.

them or minimizing their struggles.

By bringing opera directly to students, *Opera in the Neighborhoods* ensures that young audiences across a wide range of communities can enjoy and be inspired by live performances and the meaningful topics they bring to the stage. *Opera in the Neighborhoods* is free to school groups, and Lyric offers bus scholarships for qualifying schools, reflecting Lyric's commitment to increasing access to the arts for all students.

The *Opera in the Neighborhoods* tour will introduce the art form to thousands of students this fall, with 11 school performances and two public performances. This season, the longstanding program continues to expand its reach across the community, bringing the magic of opera to new partners including the DuSable Museum, Old Town School of Folk Music, and the Music Institute of Chicago's historic Nichols Concert Hall.

Many of the children attending *Earth to Kenzie* will be experiencing opera for the first time. To help students and teachers familiarize themselves with the operatic world — and work through these sensitive topics — Lyric offers resources for teachers to bring the arts into their classrooms and integrate production themes into their curriculum.

In recent seasons, these learning resources have included a unique offering: children's books. Complimentary picture books are provided to teachers ahead of performances, providing classes the opportunity to read the story prior to attending *Opera in the Neighborhoods*. Free books are also made available to families at public performance venues. Previous *Opera in the Neighborhoods* productions, including *Frida Kahlo and the Bravest Girl in the World* and *Katie: The Strongest of the Strong*, told the stories of real-world figures — famous Mexican artist Frida

Kahlo and legendary strong-woman and activist, Katie Sandwina — and Lyric provided books based on their lives. This season, Lyric had to get creative when choosing a children's book to accompany *Earth to Kenzie*.

"While *Earth to Kenzie* is a fictional story and there is no book that directly corresponds to the opera, teachers and families alike have expressed great appreciation and dire need for a book component to the program, as long as the story is in alignment with the themes of the opera," explains Sheran Goodspeed Keyton, Lyric's Director of Engagement Programs.

Although Kenzie is fictional, she faces real-world challenges familiar to many families. *A Place to Stay: A Shelter Story* by author Erin Gunti and illustrator Estelí Meza was selected as the companion book for *Earth to Kenzie*, as both stories bring visibility to issues of homelessness and housing insecurity and use the power of imagination to cope with difficult realities.

"These books provide teachers and families with a valuable additional teaching tool and help start important conversations with young people before and after attending the opera," says Keyton.

Through the powerful combination of live performance, education, and community engagement, Lyric's *Opera in the Neighborhoods* program has the unique ability to connect with, inspire, and educate young audiences across the community. From the classroom, to the theater, or even outer space, there's no telling how far the power of imagination sparked from experiencing opera for the first time may take young audiences.

The Opera in the Neighborhoods fall tour of Earth to Kenzie kicks off in October, with public performances at the Music Institute of Chicago's Nichols Concert Hall on Saturday, October 24 and Logan Center for the Arts on Sunday, November 1. [L](#)

People of Lyric

A behind-the-scenes conversation



Charity Franco
Senior Manager, People &
Culture Operations

Hometown

Parañaque, in the Philippines just outside Manila.

When did you start at Lyric?

January 2017 — it will be 10 years soon!

First opera you saw live?

I've only seen opera at Lyric. My first was *Norma* in 2017, with Sondra Radvanovsky.

Favorite opera?

I'm always drawn toward operas with a large chorus. I like that big sound. So the ones that come to mind are *Tosca*, *Aida*, and *El último sueño de Frida y Diego*.

Favorite performer?

I enjoy going to a venue here in Chicago called Winter's Jazz Club. So anyone that performs there.

What was your path to working at Lyric?

I started as an intern in what was then known as the Human Resources department. I was in my final semester at Lewis University in Romeoville, where I majored in Human Resources Management. An entry level position opened up and I started full-time the day after graduation. I've been really fortunate to start my career here and to be given the opportunity to grow and develop. Through the years, I've been surrounded by really amazing colleagues who are such a pleasure to work with and leaders who have believed in me.

Had you been hoping to work in the music world?

I joke that I'm a retired musician, actually. I grew up playing several instruments. I have three sisters, and we all learned to play the violin. My youngest sister eventually decided to play the cello, then I taught myself viola, and we became our own string quartet. In human resources, we're usually not involved with the final product, whatever it is. Here at Lyric, I'm not on stage or in the pit. For me personally, it is important to work in an organization I could support, and having a background in music makes working at Lyric feel meaningful.

What does it mean to work in operations?

My work is primarily focused on benefits administration, the maintenance of our human resources information system, and onboarding and offboarding. There are different employee groups — some of which are non-union, and some of which are in one of our 11 unions. With this comes a lot of nuances with benefit offerings, processes, and procedures. Operations is a very detail-oriented and deadline-driven function.

What's especially enjoyable about your job?

Despite how cyclical operations can be, no two days are alike. There's always going to be something different that comes up, and that keeps it exciting. My role gives me the opportunity to serve all of Lyric's employees in some capacity. We can employ anywhere between 900 to maybe 1,100 employees per year. Also, I like to sit in on rehearsals. I bring my laptop and do my work in the theater every time I get the opportunity.

Do you have a favorite Lyric moment?

It actually wasn't a big show, but *Twilight: Gods*, which was in a parking garage in Millennium Park. It was really exciting to get back to live performance, be in a really unique setting, and be able to work with my colleagues in a different way. I was a volunteer dressed in a jumpsuit with a traffic wand directing cars to the next station.

Beyond opera, what are your other passions?

I like to travel. I've been to six of the seven continents. Within each of the past few years, I have gone on an international trip and like to do something adventurous. I did the Inca Trail hike to Machu Picchu. I was on a group tour that traveled through a few countries in Africa and did some safaris, which was a dream come true. Last year, I went to Nepal, India, and the Philippines, where I learned to freedive. This year, I did a solo trip to Banff where I snowboarded and learned how to ice climb. It was a little scary, but we were harnessed and it was a fun experience. [L](#)