

*Lyric*

OPERA OF  
CHICAGO

*avery r. young*

**safronia**



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**On the cover:** avery r. young.  
Photo: John Shaw/Lyric Opera of Chicago

*At Lyric, you'll be amazed, replenished, and inspired with must-see, must-hear live experiences. Through the timeless power of voice, acting that brings characters to life in triumph and tragedy, the splendor of a great orchestra and chorus — coupled with theater, dance, design, and truly magical stagecraft — Lyric is devoted to immersing audiences in worlds both familiar and unexpected, creating shared experiences that resonate long after the curtain comes down.*



**John Mangum**  
*General Director,  
President & CEO*

**Enrique Mazzola**  
*Music Director*

*Lyric*

# Welcome to your Lyric

# From the Chair and the General Director

Welcome to Lyric!

Lyric Opera of Chicago has long been at the forefront of new opera, presenting world, North American, and Chicago premieres from leading creators in our field. Our art form is a living one, ideally suited to tell stories from our history and of our times that resonate powerfully with audiences of today.

That history continues with avery r. young's *safronia. avery*, Chicago's first Poet Laureate, is an inspiring multidisciplinary artist of exceptional versatility. Not only did he craft the libretto for this work, but he also composed the music, and he will perform in the opera as baar, safronia's father. Lyric first began working with him five years ago, when he played an integral part in our presentation of *Twilight: Gods*, a drive-through reimagining of Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. It was an ambitious pandemic-era production presented in



a Chicago parking garage. avery wrote and performed poetic introductions to the work that framed Wagner's epic through a distinctly Chicago lens. Everyone involved felt that there should and would be more to come.

The work is personal for avery on multiple levels. It's based on his family's history, and its music is derived from the music his characters would have been listening to across the sweep of much of the 20th century. avery's regular band, de deacon board, will perform the score alongside the musicians of the Lyric Opera Orchestra. Paul Byssainthe, Jr., who worked with avery on the orchestrations, conducts in his Lyric debut; he is currently

associate music director for *Ragtime* at the Lincoln Center Theater. Timothy Douglas directs, also in his Lyric debut; his wide experience includes new productions of *Champion* (Boston Lyric Opera) and *Blue* (New Orleans Opera).

Over our more than seven-decade history, Lyric has been no stranger to bold commissions and world premieres. But there's no question this production feels special. *safronia* brings a powerful new voice, and exciting new musical styles, to opera for the first time. We're delighted and honored that avery wanted to tell his story — a quintessentially Chicago story — here at Lyric, through our art form, opera.

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Don Giovanni

Kyle Flubacker / Lyric Opera of Chicago

# A Season to Celebrate!

Lyric Opera of Chicago's 2026/27 Season soars with a mix of classics, concerts, and the return of the summer musical.

By Michael Solomon

**When John Mangum took the helm** of Lyric Opera of Chicago as General Director, President & CEO, he spoke of a company poised to push opera forward — to honor tradition while expanding what an American opera company can be and do. Lyric's 2026/27 Season is the most vivid proof yet of that vision. Seven operas spanning centuries and continents. Five works conducted by Music Director Enrique Mazzola. Two Academy Award-winning films performed live. And, after four years away, the triumphant return of the Lyric summer musical. It's a robust schedule with range, daring, and — above all — some of the greatest singing on the planet.

"This season is a celebration of excellence, discovery, and bold storytelling," says Mangum. "It's also about showcasing the extraordinary expressive power of the Lyric Opera Orchestra and Chorus. We have assembled one of the most robust and diverse seasons in recent memory — seven operas ranging from Mozart and Verdi classics to the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Omar* and the beloved American folk opera *Susannah*. And we are thrilled to bring the Lyric summer musical back to our stage with a spectacular new production of *Guys & Dolls*. There is something here for everyone, and this season shows how Lyric is evolving opera by pushing the boundaries of the art form through new works, bold reinterpretations, and new audience experiences."

Music Director Enrique Mazzola — "Chicago's maestro-around-town" — will conduct five works next season, an eclectic and wide-ranging list that spans Mozart, Donizetti, Haydn, Massenet, and Verdi. "This is

a season of remarkable musical journeys," says Mazzola. "Opening the season with *Don Giovanni* is incredibly meaningful to me — it is one of those operas that has the entire world of opera inside it: comedy, drama, philosophy, and singular musical architecture. And in Verdi's *La traviata*, everything is truth. These are works that speak directly to the heart. I am also thrilled that we will be bringing Haydn's magnificent *The Creation* to Lyric audiences, and I cannot wait to share Massenet's rarely heard gem *Hérodiade* with Chicago — a score I know deeply, having recorded it in Berlin, and one that deserves to be heard at the highest musical level."

**The season also marks** a milestone for the company with the appointment of internationally acclaimed soprano Sondra Radvanovsky as Lyric's Artistic Advisor for the next five seasons. In addition to a mainstage appearance each season — including a concert of duets with tenor SeokJong Baek in 2026/27 — Radvanovsky will work closely with The Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center through masterclasses, mentorship, and career guidance for the world's finest emerging artists.

"Lyric is my artistic home, and I am honored to deepen that bond in this extraordinary new role," says Radvanovsky. "Supporting the next generation of singers through the Ryan Opera Center is one of the most meaningful things I can imagine doing. I look forward to sharing everything I have learned on the world's great stages with these remarkable young artists — and to performing for the Chicago audiences I love so much. We have some magnificent surprises in store!"



*Ariadne auf Naxos*

Dan Rest / Lyric Opera of Chicago



*La traviata*

Lyric Opera of Chicago

### Lyric's 2026/27 Season at a glance

Seven operas, three unique concerts, two films, and spectacular classic musical.

The fall brings Mozart's **Don Giovanni** (October 10 – November 1, 2026), conducted by Music Director Enrique Mazzola and directed by Chicago theatrical legend Robert Falls, with Ryan Opera Center alumnus Christian Van Horn in the title role; the Lyric premiere of the Pulitzer Prize-winning **Omar** by Rhiannon Giddens & Michael Abels (October 23, 25 & 28, 2026), conducted by Kazem Abdullah and directed by Kaneza Schaal in a new theatrical presentation created exclusively for Lyric; Donizetti's sparkling **Don Pasquale** (November 12–27, 2026), conducted by Mazzola and directed by Mariame Clément in her Lyric debut; the concert program **Wagner: Myth & Music** (November 20 & 22, 2026), conducted by the great Wagnerian Alexander Soddy in his Lyric debut; and the family spectacular **Disney's Encanto in Concert Live to Film** (November 28 & 29, 2026), conducted by Gonzalo Farias.

The season continues in winter with **Amadeus LIVE** (January 15 & 16, 2027), conducted by Brett Mitchell, with the Lyric Opera Orchestra and Chorus performing Mozart's music live to picture; the Lyric premiere of Haydn's towering oratorio **The Creation** (January 22 & 23, 2027), conducted by Mazzola; and the long-awaited Lyric premiere of Massenet's rare French gem **Hérodiade: An Opera in Concert** (February 23, 25 & 28, 2027), conducted by Mazzola.

Spring 2027 brings Richard Strauss's irresistible **Ariadne auf Naxos** (March 11–26, 2027), conducted by Oksana Lyniv in her Lyric debut and directed by Bruno Ravella; Verdi's beloved **La traviata** in an expansive 11-performance run (March 24–April 25, 2027), conducted by Mazzola and directed by Tara Faircloth; Carlisle Floyd's defining American opera **Susannah** (April 11–23, 2027), conducted by Daniela Candillari and directed by Patricia Racette, a legendary soprano who has herself performed the title role; and an unforgettable evening with **Sondra Radvanovsky & SeokJong Baek in Concert** (April 30 & May 2, 2027), conducted by Riccardo Frizza.

And summer 2027 belongs to the return of the Lyric musical: Frank Loesser's **Guys & Dolls**, featuring the return of the iconic leadership team of director Francesca Zambello and conductor James Lowe, for 19 unmissable performances, June 4–20, 2027.

This is what it means to live in Chicago: night after night, the world's greatest musical artists gather on one stage to remind the world why this city stands apart. Lyric's 2026/27 Season is no exception — don't miss a single extraordinary moment. **L**

To explore Lyric's 2026/27 Season and customize a package that's right for you, visit [lyricopera.org/subscribe](https://lyricopera.org/subscribe).

Susannah



Cory Weaver / San Francisco Opera



Michael Cooper



Dahyun Baek

Sondra Radvanovsky and SeokJong Baek will appear in concert on April 30 & May 2, 2027.

The cast of *Guys and Dolls* at Shakespeare Theatre Company.



Teresa Cattacane Photography

Lyric presents a world premiere musical work from Chicago's first-ever poet laureate, the celebrated interdisciplinary artist avery r. young. From the first note, *safronia* will draw you in with its compelling storytelling.

Triumph and tragedy converge in a personal yet universal story of the Great Migration. This Afro-surrealist tale is told through the eyes of the Booker family, who return from the northern U.S. to their Southern hometown after five years of banishment to bury their patriarch.



Andrew Cloffi / Lyric Opera of Chicago

**avery r. young confers with conductor and orchestrator Paul Byssainthe, Jr.**

*Lyric*

**safronia**



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# safronia

**World premiere** | Opera in English in two acts

**Commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago**

Music & Libretto by **avery r. young**

Orchestrations by **Paul Byssainthe, Jr.**

April 17 & 18, 2026

## CHARACTERS IN ORDER OF VOCAL APPEARANCE

safronia booker  
baar booker  
magnolia booker  
booker family

**Meagan McNeal<sup>+</sup>**  
**avery r. young**  
**Maiesha McQueen<sup>+</sup>**  
**Sydney Charles<sup>+</sup>**  
**Bailey A. Champion<sup>+</sup>**  
**Miciah Lathan<sup>+</sup>**  
**Eric Andrew Lewis<sup>+</sup>**  
**Renelle Nicole<sup>+</sup>**  
**Jessica Seals<sup>+</sup>**  
**Maxel McCloud Schingen<sup>+</sup>**  
**Kendal Marie Wilson<sup>+</sup>**  
**Jeff Parker**  
**Lorenzo Rush, Jr. <sup>+</sup>**  
**Zachary James<sup>+</sup>**

bossman  
king willie tate  
cholly

Conductor  
Director  
Costume Designer  
Lighting Designer  
Associate Lighting Designer  
Sound Designer  
Video Designer  
Choreographer  
Wig & Makeup Designer  
Assistant Director  
Stage Manager  
Musical Preparation

Fight & Intimacy Director  
Projected English Titles

**Paul Byssainthe, Jr. <sup>+</sup>**  
**Timothy Douglas<sup>+</sup>**  
**Jessica Jahn**  
**Jason Lynch<sup>+</sup>**  
**Sarah Riffle**  
**Stephanie Farina<sup>+</sup>**  
**VAM Studio<sup>+</sup>**  
**Kia Smith<sup>+</sup>**  
**John Metzner**  
**Katrina Bachus**  
**Rachel A. Tobias**  
**William C. Billingham**  
**Morgan E. Stevenson<sup>+</sup>**  
**Chels Morgan<sup>+</sup>**  
**Dyan Yoder of**  
**Captus Creative LLC**

Chicago Casting by Becca McCracken, CSA  
and Celeste M. Cooper, Associate.

First performed by Lyric Opera of Chicago on April 17, 2026.

<sup>+</sup> Lyric debut

•• Alumnus, The Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center

# backstory

## 1887

baar jacob booker is born to baron and sarah jean booker in oscarville, georgia.

## 1902

magnolia mae jeffries is born to willie and danelle jeffries in harrison, arkansas.

## 1909

magnolia and her family are amongst a remaining group of african americans who are banished from harrison, arkansas, during a race riot.

## 1911

in oscarville, georgia, baar meets and marries his first wife andra. they have a son, virgil, a year later.

## 1912

baar and his family are banished from oscarville, georgia. this trauma establishes recurring nightmares; baar starts drinking to obtain deeper sleep, and he starts drinking to cope with the loss of the family he left behind in oscarville. eventually his drinking becomes a dependency.

## 1920

baar (a sharecropper) and magnolia (a washer) meet, marry and establish a life in the city of runnfrum (fictional).

## 1923

baar establishes a distillery where he manufactures whiskey and moonshine (hooch).

## 1930

safronia jean booker is born. magnolia (a seamstress) establishes a fashion design house.

## 1945

baar hires king willie tate after bringing him home from college to grieve the loss of his family from a hate crime.

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Lyric Opera of Chicago thanks its  
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## APPROXIMATE TIMINGS

This production will be performed  
with one intermission.

**TOTAL 2 hours 20 minutes**

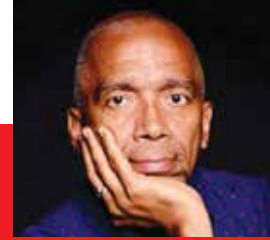
# synopsis

On a sunday evening, a week after the death of baar booker, his family returns to the property from which they were banished five years prior, to complete his final wishes of laying his ashes down upon his land (that they have also come to reclaim)! The family is interrupted and confronted by the two men responsible for their banishment from that land. No one has any idea that baar's youngest daughter, safronia, plans to avenge baar's death over the two men's dead bodies!

# Director's note

'Gonna lay these ashes down and watch them become a Star'

By Timothy Douglas



## Upon merging into the development process

for *safronia*, it immediately became clear to me that I was engaging a living archive in the personhood of Chicago's inaugural Poet Laureate. Commissioned and produced by the Lyric Opera of Chicago, this world premiere opera written and composed by avery r. young demanded that the role of this stage director and dramaturg extend beyond traditional boundaries. It has compelled *listening* as civic practice, *history* as breath, and *music* as ancestral *way-showers*.

avery's artistry lives at the intersection of poetry, soul-centered music, and embodied memory. His language does not sit politely on the page; it pulses. From our first conversation, it was clear that *safronia* would not move in a strictly linear fashion. It would spiral. It would remember. It would testify. As dramaturg, my task was not to "clarify" the work into something more familiar, but to help protect its elasticity, ensuring that its structure honored the rhythms of Black storytelling, where time bends and spirit moves.

The central figures of *safronia* emerge not as heroine and hero in the Western operatic tradition, but as vessels — carrying lineage, rupture, migration, and the unspoken labor of survival. In our workshop phases, we more deeply embodied the Great Migration's history and the artistic renaissance it expanded by way of the sonic lineage of gospel, blues, and house music. We asked: What does it mean for opera — an art form historically rooted in European aristocratic patronage — to hold the interiority of a Black woman shaped by the American heartland?

The answer is not decorative inclusion, but rather the embodiment of structural transformation.

In rehearsal, we paid close attention to breath in response to avery's score, which demands a different muscularity from the singers, a relationship to rhythm that feels closer to sermon and cipher than to recitative. As director, I find myself inviting performers to locate the pulse of the characters beneath the notation, to feel where syncopation meets silence. We embody a pull to bend a phrase toward truth, and give permission to allow stillness to speak, permission to trust that the body remembers what the mind could never genuinely articulate fully.

It is essential that the world of *safronia* feels inhabited, textured by both beauty and constraint. The design reflects this commitment. How does light hold memory?

How does costume signal transformation without caricature? How does articulated space shift from the tactile to dreamscape without losing emotional continuity?

One of the most profound aspects of developing a world premiere is witnessing the elasticity of the form itself. Opera often carries assumptions of grandeur and spectacle, but *safronia* insists on intimacy. Even in its most musically expansive passages, the work returns to the human scale — a mother's hum, a whispered prayer, the weight of unspoken grief. In staging these moments, I learned repeatedly that theatrical power does not reside in volume but in precision.

There remain challenges, of course. Institutional timelines can press against the organic pace required for new work. Questions of accessibility and audience expectation surfaced frequently. How do we invite longtime opera patrons into a sonic language rooted in Black expressive tradition? How do we ensure that Black audiences see themselves not as guests but as rightful inheritors of this stage? These are not peripheral considerations; they shape every absorbable choice.

The rehearsal room becomes one of shared authorship. Singers offer personal stories that illuminate *safronia's* emotional landscape. As director, my role is to hold the container — keeping us aligned with the work's spiritual center while navigating the practical demands of production.

At the start, we give way to the first human voice; a quiet revolution is embedded in the gesture. A Black woman's interior life, rendered through poetry, composition, and collective care resounds through one of the nation's major opera houses. The stage does not feel conquered; it feels consecrated.

Within my role of helping to facilitate the birth of *safronia* is to witness opera stretching toward a more capacious future. It affirms that the canon is not fixed, that tradition can expand without dissolving, and that new work — when nurtured with rigor and trust — can recalibrate an institution's imagination.

In the end, my participation is less about shaping a premiere and more about stewarding a becoming. *safronia* affirms for me that opera, at its best, is not marble. It is breath. And breath, shared in community, is how we remember that we are alive. ■

# Creator's note



By *avery r. young*

**i.**

wont say this is a ghost story. but i will say  
surphonia met me in dream. in an air bnb  
in nola. on elysian fields. a few doors down  
from Baldwin & Co. coffee + books. surphonia said,  
avery. my eyes found her at the front door.  
her face &; carseda's face — identical. but

surphonia's face harder. not hard like rough  
but hard like razored in structure. everything a line  
as opposed to round. i sat up. wiped my eyes.  
said *yes granny.*

& then. at her feet, i was. & she knew  
i write poetry & drip Curtis Mayfield. she knew  
i holy roll in gospel, blues & Funkadelic. she said  
the harmonica in the score blew her skirt up  
in a good way. we laughed.

in her face, i saw all her brothers & sisters.  
her children's children. her mother. her father. she said  
she liked the names that i gave them. magnolia.  
baar [b/air]. she knew the a-f-r- change in her name was  
my honoring of Nina Simone's *Four Women & Africa*. she said,  
*but we be from de blood of jee-sus. alla us.*  
*especially my daddy. so*

*un-crook him spine. yo word(s)  
mus(t) set him bac(k) straight.*

*han(d) him a grace  
amerikka did not. does not.*

*& erywherr yo opera go  
u will give yo people a box on erf.*

then safronia walked out of the door.  
all of my tossing & turning to get her right stopped.  
i slept easy & assured that a story would be told.  
& my message would land.

so children, this is not a story of ghosts. *safronia* invites praise into the art district. speaking a language that announces american classical music is what wonder, armstrong, richard, leadbelly, watts, wolf & so many more of us compose.

this is dramatic story-telling  
with the music blk southerners brought  
with them up north. from their hearts, mouths & limbs,  
so that they could sink their feet into a zion.

remain spine erect  
& breath aligned.

this opera  
is not about dead people.

this opera is about how we live.  
one song in front of the other.

## ii.

Grew up playing church. Out West. Chicago. During a time when [on any given Sunday] the neighborhood of North Austin would be scored by The Winans, The Whispers, and Mahalia/Millie Jackson. Activated on the staircase of a finished basement apartment. Me on tenor on the top step. (My sisters) Angela & Carseda on alto on the middle steps. Then Shana (the baby) on soprano on the first step. Along with whatever cousin who would be over to spend the night, we chose the songs we wanted to sing the lead on &/or direct. We would be the home & visiting choir. Sing the A & B selections [of both choirs]. We would also play shout. But deeper than our play, we would sing, shout, preach &/or direct in the way of the person we were pretending to be. Sister Roscoe had a distinct move in her praise. Auntie Jeffie Mae had not only a particular movement, she also had an unique roar. Her Thank you Jesus could shake the walls of a church house & steeple. & Angela had it down pat! I bring this up because the recalling of this play, I now have a solidified marker of where my life in opera-making, singing & building began.

This opera that woke me up out of sleep one morning, is play-church & jook-joint. The preparation of holiday dinner. No room in the house spared of music. Black music. Soul Train, Jubilee Showcase, Curtis Mayfield. Fry anything while Aretha Franklin is singing *Angel*, & I promise you it will taste better. Remembering all of this makes me pause

at the moment these two nights at Lyric Opera House is. This moment is more than the premiere of the story based on a family's journey from Lexington, Mississippi to Chicago, it is a testament to the rock & roll, plus the praise & soul that scored the tribulations and triumphs of an American family. This moment is about the way a kitchen becomes a concert hall during a card game. This moment is about how the shower becomes the stage for an aria. This moment is about how opera, as a genre and institution isn't rich & White (or at least it shouldn't be). When we talk a classical American songbook, we must understand the songs in that book come with many skins, tongues & stories. This new work of *safronia* couldn't be set in the day & time it is & not sound like the music the bookers listened to &/or sang. Therefore this new work that is *safronia* seeks to present opera not only as a hallelujah dance hall, but it also presents opera as everyday as weather. As close as coat. As near as friend.

Myself, along with Lyric, Tim, Paul, de deacon board & all the other artists involved, that will take the audience (congregation) to that basement staircase. Talk about full-circle. Talk about a wheel in the middle of a wheel. Leave here tonight with the testimony that you saw a door kicked open. Familiarize yourself with the plush seats & the gold & red of the walls. We (family) are *in* here now. And will be many more times to come. **2**



**AVERY R. YOUNG**  
**COMPOSER, LIBRETTIST, baar booker**

**Previously at Lyric:** Librettist & Narrator/  
*Twilight: Gods* (2021).

Chicago's inaugural Poet Laureate and American Poet Laureate Fellow, interdisciplinary artist avery r. young is also a co-director of Floating Museum. Also a Walder's Foundation Platform awardee, his art practice spans film, curation, written and performance works featured in national and international exhibitions, theater, festivals, and anthologies. He scored Lise Haller Baggesson's *Hatorgrade Retrograde: The Musical* and Red Clay Dance's *Rest.Restore.Nourish.Move.Heal*, and produced two albums, *booker t soltreyn: a race rekkid and tubman*. The latter is the soundtrack to his volume of poetry titled, *neckbone: visual verses* (Northwestern University).



**MEAGAN McNEAL**  
**safronia booker**

**Lyric debut**

The Chicago-born singer, songwriter, and producer is known for her soulful, expansive range across jazz, R&B, and contemporary styles. She has appeared on NBC's *The Voice* (Team Jennifer Hudson) and *The Kelly Clarkson Show*, and is a recurring guest artist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, including its *Notes for Peace* concerts. A 2020 3Arts Chicago Awardee, McNeal is also the founder of Pink Elephant Creatives, an arts enterprise dedicated to expanding opportunity for artists. In 2022, she also performed with members of the CSO, conductor Andrew Grams, and children's rocker Justin Roberts in the ensemble's school and family concerts.



**MAIESHA McQUEEN**  
**magnolia booker**

**Lyric debut**

The award-winning vocalist and actor's work spans contemporary theater, soul, classical crossover, and new music. She has appeared on Broadway and extensively across major regional theatres throughout the United States. Her performances have earned regional awards and recognitions, particularly for her portrayals of Mahalia Jackson and Celie in *The Color Purple*. She recently made her solo concert debut at The Green Room 42 in New York City, a performance that was featured and praised in *BroadwayWorld*. A dedicated contributor to the development of new work, McQueen is frequently engaged in workshops, creative laboratories, and composer-driven collaborations. She is a graduate of NYU Tisch School of the Arts and holds a master's degree in teaching from Fordham University.



**LORENZO RUSH, JR.**  
**king willie tate**

**Lyric debut**

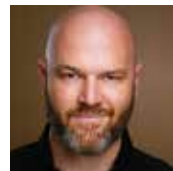
Rush has received Joseph Jefferson Awards for his performances in *Ain't Misbehavin'*, *Five Guys Named Moe*, and *Sophisticated Ladies*. His numerous regional credits include appearances at Marriott Theatre, Paramount Theater, Porchlight Music Theater, Drury Lane Theater, Skylight Music Theater, Goodman Theater, and Court Theater. Television and film credits include *Chicago Fire*, *Fargo*, *Sirens*, and *Chicago PD*. In Memphis, he received a Black Theater Alliance Award.



**JEFF PARKER**  
**bossman**

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

Parker has appeared at nearly every major Chicago theatre, including Goodman, Steppenwolf, Chicago Shakespeare, Writers, Court, Northlight, Victory Gardens, Drury Lane, Marriott, Porchlight, and many others. His regional work includes productions with Manhattan Theatre Club (NYC), Huntington Theatre Company (Boston), American Conservatory Theater and Magic Theatre (San Francisco), Asolo Repertory Theatre (Sarasota), Clarence Brown Theatre (Knoxville), Kansas City Repertory Theatre, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati, and the Kennedy Center. He received a Joseph Jefferson Award nomination for Best Actor in a Musical for his portrayal of Guido in *Nine* at Porchlight Music Theatre, and was a member of the Jeff Award-winning ensemble of Tarell Alvin McCraney's *The Brother/Sister Plays*, directed by Tina Landau at Steppenwolf.



**ZACHARY JAMES**  
**cholly**

**Lyric debut**

James' highlights this season include Amenhotep in Philip Glass' *Akhnaten* with Gran Teatre del Liceu, a role that he also performs with LA Opera and the Stichting Omroep Muziek in the Netherlands; Philip Glass' Symphony No. 15, *Lincoln*, at Tanglewood with the Boston Symphony Orchestra; and a *Pride in Progress* concert with GENVAS in Fort Lauderdale. Highlights on the operatic stage include the Immigration Officer in *Flight* with Dallas Opera; the titular *Sweeney Todd* with Opera Omaha; The Pirate King in *The Pirates of Penzance* with Cincinnati Opera; Lucius/Witch in the world premiere of Paola Prestini's *Edward Tulane* with Minnesota Opera; Sciarrone in *Tosca* with LA Opera; Lincoln in Philip Glass' *The Perfect American* at the Teatro Real (a role he reprised with English National Opera and Opera Queensland); and Terry in the world premiere of *Breaking The Waves* with Opera Philadelphia.



**BAILEY A. CHAMPION**  
**booker family**  
**Lyric debut**

Champion is currently an educator within Chicago Public Schools, where she puts her belief into practice that teachers should continue to perform alongside their teaching careers. As a vocalist, she has toured India, South Africa, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and several U.S. states. She has performed as a background vocalist for artists including Al Green, Sweet Honey In The Rock, Colbie Caillat, Babyface, and appeared as a background vocalist on Chance The Rapper's *Coloring Book* album. In 2021 she was the opening act for Grammy Award-winning artist Charlie Wilson. She received her B.S. in Music Education from Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University and her Masters in Music Education from the University of Louisville.



**SYDNEY CHARLES**  
**booker family**  
**Lyric debut**

The Chicago-born Charles is a 2025 NewCity Hall of Fame inductee. Her stage career moves from storefront theatres to major institutions, including Steppenwolf and Goodman Theatre. Her directing work spans new plays and multidisciplinary projects. In audio, she served as associate director for Make-Believe Association's *Hamlet* and starred and co-created *Lake Song*, both Tribeca Audio Premieres selections, alongside numerous narrative and commercial voiceover credits. Television credits include *The Chi*, *South Side*, and *Shameless*.



**MICIAH LATHAN**  
**booker family**  
**Lyric debut**

The Chicago-based actress and singer has appeared in acclaimed productions such as *Let The Good Times Roll: A New Orleans Gumbo Musical* at The Phoenix Theatre Company, *Reasons: A Tribute to Earth, Wind & Fire* at Black Ensemble Theatre, as well as *Beehive: The 60s Musical* at Marriott Theatre.



**ERIC ANDREW LEWIS**  
**booker family**

**Previously at Lyric:** *Jesus Christ Superstar* (2017/18).

Other credits for the versatile performer include off-Broadway hit *Spamilton* at Royal George Theatre; *Dreamgirls* (Jeff Award) and *Titanique* at Porchlight Music Theatre; *Revolution(s)* and *The Color Purple* at the Goodman Theatre; *The Little Mermaid*, *The Who's Tommy*, and *In the Heights* at Paramount

Theatre; *Shrek the Musical*, *Seussical*, *Dreamgirls*, and *How to Succeed... at Marriott Theatre*; *Gospel at Colonus* and *Five Guys Named Moe* at Court Theatre; *All Shook Up* at Theatre at the Center; *More Than A Miracle* at Congo Square Theatre; *Parade* at BoHo Theatre; and *Once Upon A People* at Black Ensemble Theatre.



**RENELLE NICOLE**  
**booker family**  
**Lyric debut**

The Chicagoland native, now based in Los Angeles, is known for her roles as Gianna on the Starz TV show *Power Book IV: FORCE*, the recurring role of Nurse Trisha on NBC's *Chicago Med*, *High Potential* (ABC), *Bookie* (MAX), *Snowfall* (FX), *Friend Request* (BET), *Empire* (Fox), and more. Nicole has appeared in numerous musical productions throughout Chicago at Mercury Theatre, Porchlight Music Theatre, Paramount Theatre, and TimeLine Theatre, among others. Her regional credits include *Ain't Misbehavin'* at Portland Stage/Maine State Music Theatre. She received her BA from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.



**JESSICA BROOKE SEALS**  
**booker family**  
**Lyric debut**

The Chicago-based native actress and vocalist has been performing since the age of six. Most recently, she presented her solo concert, *A Night with Jessica Brooke*, at the Goodman Theatre. Among her favorite theatrical credits are *The Gospel at Colonus* (Court Theatre), *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *Women of Soul* (Mercury Theater), *The Other Cinderella* (Black Ensemble Theater), and *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Paramount Theater). She continues to expand her artistry through new creative challenges on stage and beyond.



**MAXEL McLOUD SCHINGEN**  
**booker family**  
**Lyric debut**

The performer's numerous Chicago theater credits include *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Arthur and Friends Make a Musical* (Marriott Theatre); *The Little Mermaid*, *Guys and Dolls*, *Cinderella*, *Grease*, and *Shrek the Musical* (Drury Lane Theater); *Brighter Futures* (Paramount Theatre); *Beauty and the Beast* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater); *Cruel Intentions: The 90s Musical* and *Sweeney Todd* (Kokandy Productions); *New Faces Sing Broadway 1971* (Porchlight Music Theatre); *Chicago Celebrates Sondheim* (The Auditorium Theatre); and *Mary Rose* (Black Button Eyes Productions). Schingen's television credits include *Chicago Med*.



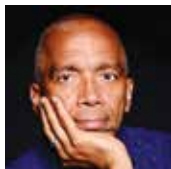
**KENDAL MARIE WILSON**  
**booker family**  
**Lyric debut**

Wilson graduated from Columbia College Chicago in 2024. She has recently been seen in *Revolution(s)* (Goodman Theater), *Diana: The Musical* (Theo Ubique), *Don't Let The Pigeon Drive The Bus* (Young People's Theatre Chicago), and *Milo Imagines The World* (Chicago Children's Theatre). During her undergraduate career she was also a principal actor in *London Road* (Shattered Globe) which took home a Jeff Award for Best Mid-sized Musical Production.



**PAUL BYSSAINTHE, JR.**  
**CONDUCTOR & ORCHESTRATOR**  
**Lyric debut**

The music director, organist, and conductor currently serves as Associate Music Director for the revival of *Ragtime* at The Lincoln Center Theater. He was previously music director and conductor for *Goddess* at The Public Theater and for the Broadway revival of *The Wiz*. Byssainthe, Jr. was associate music director for the premiere of *Hercules* at Paper Mill Playhouse, associate music director/conductor for the world premiere of *American Prophet* at Arena Stage, and conductor for the world premiere of *Grace* at Ford's Theatre in Washington, D.C. For his work on *American Prophet*, he received a Helen Hayes Award nomination for best music direction. Currently pursuing his Doctor of Musical Arts in Organ Performance at the Peabody Conservatory of Johns Hopkins University, Byssainthe, Jr. also holds a Graduate Performance Diploma from Peabody and degrees in orchestral conducting and music from Andrews University. His performance engagements have included organ appearances with The Washington Chorus at the Kennedy Center and Strathmore Hall, Mozart's *Requiem*, and solo recitals at the Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land in America. He recently joined the staff at The Riverside Church in New York City, serving as Associate Organist.



**TIMOTHY DOUGLAS**  
**DIRECTOR**  
**Lyric debut**

Douglas has served as stage director on more than 150 productions of plays, musicals, and opera. He was the Helen Hayes Award winner for Best Musical for *The Color Purple* (Signature Theatre). Recent productions include the world premiere of *She Who Dared* (Chicago Opera Theater), as well as new productions of *Champion* (Boston Lyric Opera) and *Blue* (New Orleans Opera). Representative projects include the world premiere of August Wilson's *Radio Golf* (Yale Repertory Theater), the world premiere of Jason Reynolds' *Long Way Down* (Kennedy Center), *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Richard III* (Folger Shakespeare Theatre), *Frankenstein* (Classic Stage Company), *Nina Simone: Four Women* (Arena Stage), *In The Blood* (Guthrie Theater), *An Octoroon*

(NIDA/Sydney), *Rosmersholm* (National Theatret/Oslo), *Disgraced* (Great Theatre of China), *Mules* (Downstage/New Zealand), and *Primary Trust*, *Mothers and Sons*, and *The Trip to Bountiful* for Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, where he is an associate artist and also serves on the board of trustees. He has served on the faculties of University of Southern California, Emerson College, American Conservatory Theater, UNC School of the Arts, Birmingham School of Acting (UK), and Toi Whakaari (New Zealand Drama School). In 2027, Douglas will stage the world premiere of Maria Thompson Corley and Diane Soloman-Glover's *John Lewis: Good Trouble* for Cincinnati Opera.



**JESSICA JAHN**  
**COSTUME DESIGNER**  
**Previously at Lyric:** Four productions since 2014/15, most recently *Blue* and *Fidelio* (both 2024/25).

Jahn has collaborated with directors Francesca Zambello, Diane Paulus, Tina Landau, Tommy Kail, Jessica Blank, and Kenny Leon, as well as writers Nora Ephron, Eisa Davis, Charles Busch, Charles Fuller, Tracy K. Smith, and Mark Campbell. At Lyric, she designed costumes for *Norma* (2016/17) and *Anna Bolena* (2014/15). Other highlights include *Hamlet* (The Public Theatre), *Coal Country* (The Public Theater), *Blue* (The Glimmerglass Festival), *Orfeo ed Eurydice* (San Francisco Opera), *Monodramas* (New York City Opera), *The Crucible* (The Glimmerglass Festival), *Parsifal* (San Francisco Opera), *Dead Man Walking* (Washington National Opera), and *Loving v. VA* (Virginia Opera). She has taught at NYU, Rutgers University, and Brandeis University's Theater Arts Departments, and is an Assistant Professor in the Theater and Dance Program at Montclair State University. She is currently working toward her Master's Degree in Cultural Anthropology at Hunter College. *Costume Designers are supported by the Richard P. and Susan Kiphart Costume Designer endowment.*



**JASON LYNCH**  
**LIGHTING DESIGNER**  
**Lyric debut**

Recent credits for the award-winning designer include *The Crucible*, directed by Francesca Zambello, and Scott Joplin's *Treemonisha*, both presented by Washington National Opera. Additional opera credits include the world premiere productions of *She Who Dared* at Chicago Opera Theater and *This Little Light of Mine* at The Santa Fe Opera. Off-Broadway highlights include Audible Theatre/Minetta Lane Theatre's *You Are Here: An Evening with Solea Pfeiffer*. Lynch's work has appeared at Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Court Theatre, Goodman Theater, Northlight Theatre, Shattered Globe Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, TimeLine Theatre Company, and others. Recent regional theater credits include work with Alley Theatre, Alliance Theatre, Baltimore Center Stage, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Dallas Theater Center, Denver Center Theatre Company, George Street Playhouse, Geva Theatre, Goodspeed Musicals, Great Lakes

Theater, Guthrie Theater, Huntington Theatre Company, Indiana Repertory Theatre, Kansas City Repertory Theatre, Long Wharf Theatre, McCarter Theatre, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, The Old Globe, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Repertory Theatre of St. Louis, Seattle Repertory Theatre, Signature Theatre, The Old Globe, and Trinity Repertory Company. *Lighting designers are supported by the **Mary-Louise and James S. Aagaard endowment in honor of Duane Schuler.***



**SARAH RIFFLE**  
**ASSOCIATE LIGHTING DESIGNER**

**Previously at Lyric:** Lighting Designer for *Carmina Burana* (2025/26) and *The Three Queens* (2019/20).

Riffle made her debut at Lyric as a Lighting Designer in *Celebrating 100 Years of Bernstein* (2017/18). Other Lyric productions include Assistant Revival Projection Designer/*The Listeners* (2024/25) and Revival Lighting Designer/*Elixer of Love* (2021/22). *Lighting designers are supported by the **Mary-Louise and James S. Aagaard endowment in honor of Duane Schuler.***



**STEPHANIE FARINA**  
**SOUND DESIGNER**

**Previously at Lyric:** Sound mixing for six productions since 2017/18, most recently *West Side Story* and *The Factotum* (both 2022/23).

The Chicago-based sound designer, mixer, and educator has provided sound design for *Highways and Valley* (Michigan Opera Theatre); *Sister Act*, *Beautiful* and *Ain't Misbehavin'* (Drury Lane Theatre); *Titanque* (Porchlight Music Theatre); *Falsettos* (Court Theatre); *Dreamgirls* (McCarter Theatre); *Revolution(s)*, *The Color Purple*, *Naicrema Society*, and *New Stages 2022, 2023, and 2024* (Goodman Theatre); *25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee* and *Fannie* (Indiana Repertory Theater); and *Annie* (Musical Theatre Works). Associate Sound Design credits include *Life After* and *Music Man* (Goodman Theatre); *Forever Plaid*, *Mamma Mia*, and *42nd St.* (Drury Lane Theatre); *Once on this Island* (Oregon Shakespeare Festival); *Fannie* (Seattle Rep, Goodman Theatre); and *Fun Home* (Kansas City Rep). At Lyric, she provided front-of-house mixing for *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Twilight: Gods*, *West Side Story*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Other mixing credits include *Blue* and *Twilight: Gods* (Michigan Opera Theatre), and 10 years at the Goodman Theatre. Farina is Head of Sound Design at The Theatre School at DePaul University.



**VAM STUDIO**  
**VIDEO DESIGNER**

**Lyric debut**

The Barcelona-based, award-winning production company was founded by married creative partners Vincent Martell and Jordan Phelps. Their practice centers on surrealist image-making and visual world-building — translating emotional and psychological landscapes into immersive environments across film and live performance. For nearly a decade, VAM's work has been a fixture of the visual arts scenes in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, presented internationally and featured in *Vogue*, *Rolling Stone*, the *New York Times*, *Pitchfork*, and NPR, among others. VAM has created and directed work for global brands including Apple, Nike, Dr. Martens, and Red Bull, and for artists including Jamila Woods, Madison McFerrin, and Esperanza Spalding, spanning moving image and live performance.



**KIA SMITH**  
**CHOREOGRAPHER**

**Lyric debut**


Smith is a Chicago native and the Founder of South Chicago Dance Theatre. As a freelance choreographer, her recent and upcoming commissions include Madison Ballet, Houston Contemporary Dance Company, Chicago Opera Theater, Giordano Dance Chicago, Opera Laguna, and Scottish Ballet School. Smith's first evening length work, *Memoirs of Jazz in the Alley* for South Chicago Dance Theatre premiered at the Auditorium Theater of Chicago in 2023 and she was named one of *Dance Magazine's* 25 To Watch for 2024. Smith was an Ann & Weston Hicks Choreographic Fellow at the renowned Jacob's Pillow festival and the first fellow in the festival's history to be presented by the Pillow. She was a 2022 Chicago Dancemakers Forum Lab Artist. 



photo courtesy of avery r. young

A collage of avery r. young's extended family, whose narratives help shape the opera. 1, 2, & 3. Mary Ann Booker, young's great aunt and legal guardian. 4. Mary Ann Booker (at right) with friends 5. A family gathering; Willie Booker, young's great-grandfather and the inspiration for baar, is at far right.

# safronia: An Operatic Journey

A world premiere commission exploring remembrance, repatriation, and justice

By antonio c. cuyler, ph.d.

**On May 28, 1893**, in an article about his 9th symphony, also known as *From the New World*, the *New York Herald Tribune* quoted Antonin Dvořák as saying: “The new American school of music must strike its roots deeply into its own soil.... America can have great and noble music of her own, growing out of the very soil and partaking of its nature — the natural voice of a free and vigorous race.”

“Negro melodies,” the great Czech composer continued, should “be the true basis for a distinctively

American School of Music.” In a sense responding to Dvořák’s call to action, avery r. young, Chicago’s first Poet Laureate, presents *safronia*, a new musical drama about the Great Migration commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago.

As the opera’s composer and librettist, young adopts the role of the Griot, alchemizing autobiography, storytelling, Afro-Surrealism, and Black music as key ingredients for manifesting a Black operatic offering of remembrance, repatriation, and justice.

**In Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement** (2022), musicologist Dr. Naomi André described Black opera as “the construction of Black experiences in opera, encompassing a variety of activities, such as operas by Black composers and librettists with stories about Black people sung by Black singers. Yet, having Black people involved in all these facets is not the only configuration for defining Black opera. Black opera can also include interracial partnerships that involve non-Black collaborators; for example, works incorporating Black narratives by non-Black writers or productions where, even if a character’s race is not specified as Black, opera companies give Black singers the opportunity to perform.” Unlike Lyric’s previous productions of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* (2021/22), *Factotum* (2022/23), *Champion* (2023/24), and *Blue* (2024/25), *safronia* does not situate itself within a “classic” presentation of opera. Instead, through Black music and vernacular, young has designed an operatic experience unapologetically *about, by, for, and near* Black people, in line with W. E. B. Dubois’ instructions in *The Crisis* in 1926 — that artworks must serve as instruments for liberation.

**safronia’s Booker family** feels fully formed and blossoming with life because young knows the characters that shape the opera’s narrative well. His family’s Great Migration story loosely serves as the opera’s creative source material. In fact, when I asked young, “how much of *safronia* is autobiographical?” he replied that the work is “extremely inspired by events in the real lives of my great-grandfather and great-grandmother, Lillie Mae and Willie Booker.”

The Bookers: baar (patriarch), magnolia (his wife and matriarch), safronia (their daughter), and king willie tate (her husband) function as the narrative’s primary family unit. They also serve as a quadriptych of archetypes representative of Black Americans’ individual responses to embodied and lived anti-Black trauma. baar and safronia self-soothe the forced abandonment of their dream of building a school on their land with alcohol; magnolia and king willie tate’s pragmatism compels them to prioritize survival over everything else. However, young’s creative vision remains incomplete if audiences do not empathize with the Bookers’ plight by considering two critical questions: How would you feel,



Andrew Cloffi / Lyric Opera of Chicago



Andrew Cloffi / Lyric Opera of Chicago

Paul Byssainthe, Jr. conducts; Meagan McNeal as safronia during a workshop.



Lillie Mae Booker, the inspiration for *Magnolia*

and what would you do, if some uncontrollable force stole your birthright and inheritance?

In *The Difference Between White People and Whiteness*, a recent essay on the Radical Roundtable website, Keryl McCord challenges readers to identify “whiteness” as a system versus a group of people, suggesting that people may opt in and out of white identity as they evolve over their life spans. The distinction proves useful in understanding the motivations of *safronia*’s two non-Black characters, bossman and cholly. *safronia* differentiates European Americans from people who have been tricked into believing that they are white for the nefarious means that President Lyndon B. Johnson articulated in a conversation with Bill Moyers. “If you can convince the lowest white man he’s better than the best colored man, he won’t notice you’re picking his pocket,” Johnson said. “Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he’ll empty his pockets for you.”

As singing characters, young positions bossman (countertenor) and cholly (bass-baritone) on opposite ends of the vocal spectrum so that audiences view them differently, at least on the surface. cholly’s betrayal of his alleged friend baar proves heartbreaking, revealing how sometimes interracial friendships struggle under the weight of whiteness. It’s a potent circumstance that makes for epic operatic storytelling.

**The journalist** D. Scot Miller, an expert in the subject matter, defined Afro-Surrealism in part as both “interested in the present and visiting the past with fresh eyes” — aptly describing the style of *safronia*, in which young deploys and upends language, time, space, and sound to tell the Booker’s story in nonlinear fashion. Foregrounding the musical descendants of Negro Spirituals, young fuses blues, funk, gospel, and hip-hop to conjure *safronia*’s Black sonicity. He aims for audiences to listen intently to sounds of Blackness and also to position Black Americans’ music as “America’s classical music.”

Indeed, many musical idioms birthed in the U.S. can trace their roots back to Negro Spirituals. Still, listen carefully for the transformations that blues, funk, and gospel undergo in *safronia* as a result of the Great Migration. “The music is about what is birthed from musicians going North,” young says. “Blues gets electric once it goes up North. But the conditions don’t switch, especially when you’re talking the Blues, or Gospel, or any of it.” Both *leddem in* and *norf*, among other movements, will likely inspire audiences to tap their feet and move to the music in their seats, as young intends. But Afro-Surrealism also enables the music to create a dream-like state. “How do I start at Curtis Mayfield and push it further, in this story about time travel and how music has, or Black music has, traveled time?” young muses. “It’s magic to propel us forward and it’s magic to make us remember. So, we have hymns and blues that make us remember — and we have hip hop and funk to prove it.”

**Similar to the Booker family**, between 1910 and 1970 some six million Black Americans (descendants of Freedmen) moved from the South to Northern, Midwestern, and Western states, including Alaska. The transatlantic slave trade, U.S. Civil War, and Reconstruction preceded the Great Migration, a period of such cultural, economic, historical, political, psychological, and social import that *safronia* immediately enters into dialogues with iconic works such as *The Warmth of Other Suns*, *The Harlem Renaissance and Transatlantic Modernism*, *The Migration: Reflections on Jacob Lawrence*, *Sky Full of Elephants*, and, most recently, *Sinners*, among others. So why did Black Americans flee the South?

Although the U.S. promised Black Americans a new social contract replete with citizenship, freedom, and equal protection under the law after the Civil War, Black Americans fled the South to escape the Jim Crow system, which governed peoples’ actions and interactions while masterfully dispensing state-sanctioned brutality, cruelty, fear, and treachery. For far too many Black Americans, the “American” dream felt and continues to feel like an “American” horror story.



Andrew Cloffi / Lyric Opera of Chicago

Timothy Douglas (director), avery r. young, and Meagan McNeal at a workshop with orchestra.

In her 2017 Ted talk, *The Great Migration and the Power of a Single Decision*, Isabel Wilkerson (author of *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*) noted that “every four days a Black person was lynched for some perceived infraction of protocol.” It is a grim footnote to observe that Hitler sent Nazis to the U.S. to study Jim Crow in order to replicate and amplify its methods in Germany. “The Great Migration was the first time that American citizens had to flee the land of their birth just to be recognized as the citizens that they had always been,” Wilkerson says. “No other group of Americans have had to act like immigrants in order to be recognized as citizens. This Great Migration was not a move; it was a seeking of political asylum within the borders of one’s own country.”

No one knows the exact number of African souls lost due to the socially engineered false racial hierarchy that some call the Black Holocaust. The Great Migration is “a shared narrative,” young notes, “but it’s not a monolithic narrative.” Cultural, physical, psychological, and spiritual distance from the South’s racial caste system did not relieve Black Americans of America’s problems in the North. In fact, some Black Americans came to believe that they would have been better off staying in the South; the promised safe haven from structural and systemic racism did not materialize. “People are trapped in history,” wrote James Baldwin in 1955’s *Stranger in the Village*, “and history is trapped in them.”

**Although Black Americans** continue to make the Great Migration today, in 2021’s *The Devil You Know: A Black Power Manifesto*, writer Charles Blow (whose memoir was the source material for *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*) argued that Black Americans living outside of the South should return in a reverse Great Migration to reclaim stolen political power. His hypothesis compels the question: Can anyone claim to have achieved freedom and justice if forsaking their place of birth brought them to a fate similar to what they would have endured had they stayed?

In responding to the Great Migration’s harm and violence, to artistically “make things right,” young answers the question by repatriating baar to his land. “That’s all Big Mama wanted to do. She wanted to go back South when she retired because she said her grocery store would be in her backyard,” young says. “One of the elements of the piece is this nostalgia that baar and safronia suffer from, or are trying to cope with. baar and safronia don’t really want to go up North. They would rather fight to the death and stay on their land.”

If the grand art form of opera has another 400 years to hold our attention, let us hope it is with more operas like *safronia* — works that move us in the direction of truly transformative justice for us all. [L](#)

*antonio c. cuyler, ph.d. is Professor of Music in Entrepreneurship & Leadership at the University of Michigan. He served as Lyric’s inaugural Scholar-in-Residence during the 2024/25 season. His Creative Justice in Arts and Culture: Global Perspectives, co-edited with Mark Banks (University of Glasgow), is forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan.*

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### String Bass

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### Flute

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Dionne Jackson,  
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### Piccolo

Alyce Johnson

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Judith Zunamon Lewis,  
*Assistant Principal*

### English Horn

Judith Zunamon Lewis

### Clarinet

Heesoo Kim, *Principal*  
Susan Warner,  
*Assistant Principal*

### Bass Clarinet

Susan Warner,  
*Acting*

### Bassoon

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Lewis Kirk, *Assistant Principal*

### Contrabassoon

Lewis Kirk

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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, 2025/26 Season

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Samantha Holmes  
Krystina Lowe

Joanna Rzepka  
Sarah Santiago

Kate Shattock  
Isaac B. Turner,

*Production Administrators*

Samantha Holmes,  
*Wardrobe Crew Head*

Jane Blank  
Brigid Brown

Miora Brumfeld  
Julianne Campbell

Lauren Crotty  
Emilia Guzman

Dawn-Marie Hamilton  
Claire Kroeger

Mary Luchsinger  
Wendy McCay

Moira O'Neil

Christopher Provyn  
Sarah Santiago

Dulce Santillán  
Ayden Schwartz

Roger Weir  
Samantha Yona,

*Dressers*

John Metzner, *Wig &  
Makeup Designer,  
The Marlys A. Beider  
Endowed Chair*

Necole E Bluhm,  
*Department Coordinator*

Lynn Koroulis, *Shop Manager*

Brittany Powers, *Wig &  
Makeup Crew Foreman*

Victoria Ashmore  
Martha Contreras

Krista D'Agostino  
Eric Daniels

June Gearon  
Nini Jenkins

Chantelle Johnson  
Lauren Mateling

Melissa Musseau  
Mark Park

Megan Pirtle  
Olivia Roach

Alice Salazar  
Melanie Saso

Jessica Scheithe  
Franni Valus,

*Wig & Makeup Run Crew*

Victoria Ashmore  
Davis Campbell

Colin Grice  
Chantelle Johnson

Katie Kurz  
James Ogle

Rebecca A. Scott,  
*Wig Shop Staff*

**Production**  
Rachel A. Tobias, *Production  
Stage Manager*

Katrina Bachus  
Jordan Lee Braun

Adam Da Ros,  
*Assistant Stage Directors*

Alaina Bartkowiak  
Sandra Moore,  
*Stage Managers*

Adrienne Bader  
Alaina Bartkowiak

Alycia Martin  
Sandra Moore

Tommy Novak  
Daniel Sokalski

Peggy Stenger  
Amy C. Thompson,

*Assistant Stage Managers*



**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

*The Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center identifies exceptionally talented emerging artists from around the world and provides them with comprehensive training and performance opportunities. On the world's stages, the Center's impressive roster of alumni continually proves the value of training at Lyric.*



**The 2025/26 Ryan Opera Center Ensemble**

**Sopranos**

Adia Evans  
Emily Richter

**Mezzo-sopranos**

Alexis Peart  
Camille Robles

**Tenors**

Daniel Luis Espinal  
Travon D. Walker

**Baritones**

Sankara Harouna  
Sihao Hu  
Finn Sagal

**Bass-baritones**

Christopher Humbert, Jr.  
Benjamin R. Sokol

**Conductor**

Chi-Yuan Lin

**Pianist**

Michael Banwarth

**Stage Director**

Marinette Gomez

**Stage Manager**

Gemma DeCetra

Kyle Flubacker

Front row, l to r: Emily Richter, Chi-Yuan Lin, Marinette Gomez, Gemma DeCetra, Adia Evans, Michael Banwarth, Finn Sagal, Alexis Peart

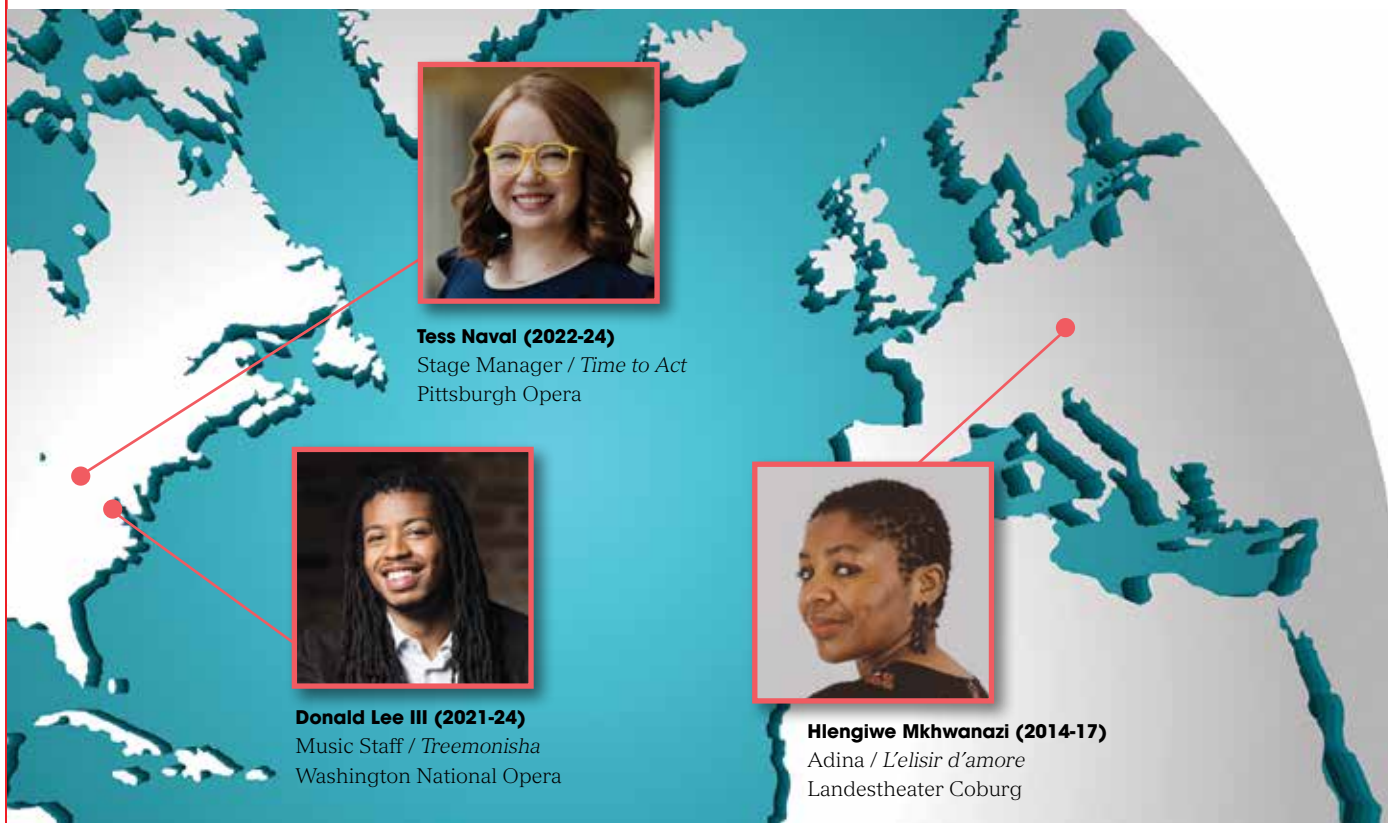
Back row, l to r: Camille Robles, Travon D. Walker, Benjamin R. Sokol, Christopher Humbert, Jr., Sihao Hu, Daniel Luis Espinal, Sankara Harouna

*Lyric*

# Ryan Opera Center

# Ryan Opera Center alumni around the world

## THIS SEASON



**Tess Naval (2022-24)**  
Stage Manager / *Time to Act*  
Pittsburgh Opera



**Donald Lee III (2021-24)**  
Music Staff / *Treemonisha*  
Washington National Opera



**Hlengiwe Mkhwanazi (2014-17)**  
Adina / *L'elisir d'amore*  
Landestheater Coburg

## PROGRAM STAFF

### Administration

Dan Novak  
*Director, The Ryan Opera Center*  
*Board Endowed Chair*

Craig Terry  
*Music Director,*  
*The Jannotta Family*  
*Endowed Chair*

Julia Faulkner  
*Director of Vocal Studies*

Logan Skirm  
*Manager*

Annika Donnen  
*Managing Librarian*

### Faculty

Julia Faulkner  
*Vocal Instruction,*  
*Robert and Ellen Marks Ryan*  
*Opera Center Vocal Studies*  
*Program Endowment*

Deborah Birnbaum  
Renée Fleming  
Dame Jane Glover  
Enrique Mazzola  
Gerald Martin Moore  
Matthew Polenzani  
Sondra Radvanovsky  
Russell Thomas  
*Guest Master Artists*

William C. Billingham  
Alan Darling  
Laurann Gilley  
Susan Miller Hult  
Noah Lindquist

Celeste Rue  
Hugh Russell  
Eric Weimer  
*Coaching Staff*

Isabelle Druc  
Julia Savoie Klein  
Derek Matson  
Klára Moldová  
Morgan Stinson  
Alessandra Visconti  
*Foreign Language Instruction*

Paul Curran  
Peter McClintock  
*Acting and Movement*  
*Instruction*

Orit Carpenter  
Beth Clayton  
*Performance Psychology*

Katrina Bachus  
Louisa Muller  
Rachel A. Tobias  
*Production Mentors*

### Artistic/Production Personnel

Enrique Mazzola  
Donald Paulmbo  
*Conductors*

Kyle Lang  
Keturah Stickann  
*Directors*

Peggy Stenger  
*Stage Manager*

# Artistic roster

## SOPRANOS

Amanda Batista  
 Laura Benanti  
 Ellie Dehn  
 Adia Evans  
 Renée Fleming  
 Karen Chia-ling Ho  
 Jennifer Holloway  
 Alexandra Loutsion  
 Ana María Martínez  
 Sondra Radvanovsky  
 Alexandra Razskazoff  
 Gabriella Reyes  
 Emily Richter  
 Karah Son  
 Jacquelyn Stucker  
 Kara Shay Thomson  
 Elena Villalón

## MEZZO-SOPRANOS

Tanja Ariane Baumgartner  
 Nozomi Kato  
 Sabina Kim  
 Daniela Mack  
 Catherine Martin  
 Yulia Matochkina  
 Cecilia Molinari  
 Alexis Peart  
 Zoie Reams  
 Camille Robles  
 Stephanie Sánchez

## CONTRALTO

Lauren Decker

## COUNTERTENOR

Ryan Belongie  
 Key'mon W. Murreh

## TENORS

SeokJong Baek  
 Zhengyi Bai  
 Brad Bickhardt  
 Alex Boyer  
 Bille Bruley  
 Ryan Capozzo  
 John Easterlin  
 Daniel Luis Espinal  
 Evan LeRoy Johnson  
 Anthony León  
 Matthew Polenzani  
 Rodell Rosel  
 Cameron Schutza  
 Victor Starsky  
 Eric Taylor  
 Russell Thomas  
 Travon D. Walker

## BARITONES

Aleksey Bogdanov  
 Alfredo Daza  
 Rod Gilfry  
 Sankara Harouna  
 Sihao Hu  
 Quinn Kelsey  
 Brian Stokes Mitchell  
 Zachary Nelson  
 Ian Rucker  
 Hugh Russell  
 Finn Sagal  
 Daniel Scofield  
 Luke Sutliff

## BASS-BARITONES

Nicholas Brownlee  
 Federico De Michelis  
 Jongwon Han  
 Christopher Humbert, Jr.  
 Benjamin R. Sokol  
 Alfred Walker

## BASSES

Scott Conner

## CONDUCTORS

Rob Fisher  
 Domingo Hindoyan  
 Roberto Kalb  
 Enrique Mazzola  
 Tomáš Netopil

## DIRECTORS

Julia Burbach  
 Michael Cavanagh  
 Lorena Maza  
 Peter McClintock  
 David McVicar  
 Elijah Moshinsky  
 Matthew Ozawa  
 Roy Rallo

## CHORUS DIRECTOR

Michael Black

## CHOREOGRAPHERS & MOVEMENT DIRECTORS

Andrew George  
 Noelle Kayser  
 Jo Meredith  
 Emily Piercy  
 August Tye

## ASSOCIATE DIRECTORS

Melanie Bacaling  
 Jordan Lee Braun  
 Jonathon Loy

## FIGHT DIRECTORS

Chuck Coyl  
 Samantha Kaufman  
 Chels Morgan  
 Andrew Rathgeber  
 Denise Serna  
 Sheryl Williams



The American Guild of Musical Artists, AFL-CIO (AGMA), is the union that represents the singers, dancers, actors, and staging personnel at Lyric Opera of Chicago.

*Beyond the stage, and beyond the boundaries that often define opera companies, Lyric is igniting creativity across Chicago. Through innovative learning opportunities, creative exploration, and artist and scholar residencies, Lyric, with your support, encourages students, educators, families, audiences, and Chicagoans from neighborhoods across the city to share their voices and embrace the power of opera as a catalyst for growth and change.*



Maestro Enrique Mazzola greets the orchestra at the Merit School of Music.

*Lyric*

**Lyric  
Unlimited:  
Learning  
and Civic  
Engagement**

# Magic at Merit

Lyric’s ongoing relationship with the music school brings professional know-how to this important institution.

By Janie Ragsdale

**“Over the years,** we have cultivated a strong partnership with the Merit School of Music,” says Jill LeCesne Potter, Senior Director of Learning Programs for Lyric Unlimited. “From working with Merit’s music and vocal program staff to their marketing and development departments, our collaborative efforts continue to evolve. Our partnership is built on trust, the opportunities we create together through shared resources, and a simple belief in the power of music to open new doors for the next generation.”

A partner organization of Lyric since the 2011/12 Season, Merit’s self-described mission is to “transform the lives of Chicago-area youth through removing barriers to high-quality music education.” Located in Chicago’s West Loop neighborhood, the school has been executing on that vision since its founding in 1979, offering early childhood classes, group classes and ensembles, and private lessons. The school’s commitment to nurturing young musicians

— especially students from diverse backgrounds — aligns perfectly with Lyric Unlimited’s goal to ignite creativity across Chicago through innovative learning opportunities, community partnerships, and artistic creation and collaboration.

“We are offering the students at Merit an opportunity to engage with Lyric professionals in various areas of expertise to introduce students to opera and support their learning in music education,” Potter says. “These opportunities can reflect anything from coaching sessions in technique, seminars, master classes, and open rehearsals to performances.”

Highlights of the 2025/26 Season partnership include opportunities for Merit students to attend performances at Lyric, and a visit from Ryan Opera Center artists soprano Emily Richter and pianist Michael Banwarth, who performed and spoke with students as part of Merit’s *Live*



Mazzola is an integral part of Lyric’s partnership with the school.



Both photos by Jacyn Simpson



The cello section concentrates during rehearsal — and has some fun along the way.

Jaclyn Simpson

from *Gottlieb* lecture series. Merit will also participate in Lyric Unlimited's *Opera in the Neighborhoods* program this season. The program, which provides complimentary performances to school groups, close to where they live and attend class, will include a free public performance of *Katie: The Strongest of the Strong* at Merit on Sunday, May 3.

**The season also includes multiple opportunities** for Merit students to learn from, rehearse with, and perform alongside Lyric's Music Director Enrique Mazzola. Over the past four years, the Maestro has led the way on a renewed relationship with Merit, adding new layers to the longstanding collaboration by serving as a mentor, guide, and source of inspiration for conservatory students.

Mazzola made his first visit to the school in the 2022/23 Season as part of Merit's Artist Residencies program, which has drawn luminaries such as Marta Aznavoorian, Marquis Hill, Nathalie Joachim, Yo-Yo Ma, Anthony McGill, and others. The program provides students unique opportunities including coaching sessions in technique, seminars, and master classes.

Throughout his ongoing residency with Merit, Mazzola has worked with the school's orchestral ensembles and soloists, offering students a chance to work under one of the world's leading conductors. The Maestro's first visit of the season is always a source of excitement for students, Merit staff, and Lyric staff alike.

The focus of the first meeting is less on pedagogy and more on getting acquainted, looking out over the year ahead, and enjoying one of the most potent and attention-getting methods available to educators: pizza provided by Lyric Unlimited.

Mazzola returned to Merit throughout January and February for rehearsals of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7*. Mazzola focused not just on the performance aspect, but also highlighted the importance of the meaning behind the work, helping the students to understand Beethoven's message of heartbreak and hope as they worked through the piece.

The residency also includes other less formal interactions, with Mazzola conversing with students about careers in music and other relevant subjects. The 2025/26 Season residency culminated in another unforgettable moment for students, as Maestro Mazzola led the Merit Philharmonic in an open rehearsal of the second movement (*Allegretto*) from the symphony.

"Our partnership with Merit is incredibly rewarding, and our colleagues there are exceptional collaborators," says Potter. "We come to the planning table with a shared belief that music has the power to transform our lives — to inspire, to heal, to exchange our stories and lived experiences, and to imagine what is possible. All of this manifests in the curiosity of their students and the range of talent that awakens when the students sing and play!" 

# People of Lyric

A behind-the-scenes conversation



Kyle Flubacker

## Eric Hayes

Senior Director of IT Operations

### Hometown

Chicago

### When did you start at Lyric?

September of 2015. I'll tell you — those 10 years have flown by.

### First opera you saw live?

*The Pearl Fishers* (2017/18)

### Favorite Lyric production?

I was really proud of *Blue* — a raw and sensitive but compelling production.

### Beyond opera, what are your other passions?

I love reading biographies, particularly autobiographies. And visiting iconic locales and sites of historical significance.

### Favorite performer?

I'm a huge Prince fan.

### What is your role here at Lyric?

Basically, I oversee on-premise cloud-based network operations to ensure that we have high availability and optimal performance. That means I oversee the computer network to make sure that all of the workstations are working properly, that they're able to connect to printers, that we're able to connect to the Internet, that we don't have any vulnerabilities such as viruses or phishing attempts. We really lock down the network to make sure that we keep our systems as safe as possible. I also oversee hardware — printers, copiers, the phone system.

### What is the most challenging aspect of your job?

There are so many bad actors out there looking to destroy networks and set off ransomware attacks. And that's 24/7. If I could show you the dashboard, you'd see that there are thousands and thousands of new threats every day. The sheer number of potential threats is astronomical. With the help of our managed detection and response partners, we block millions of potential threat connections per month. We might get fewer than ten that we actually have to look into. I take that part of my job really seriously because we're responsible for making sure that the work our colleagues do is protected. We've got lots of intellectual property that we need to protect.

### The Met got attacked a few years ago.

They were down for quite a while. It shut down their ticketing right at the holidays, and it took them quite a while to recover from that. Since then, they took our lead. They've now implemented some of the things we've done to better protect their network. Lyric has really taken the necessary steps to stay ahead of attacks like that.

### What else would surprise people about your job?

Many people don't know that I'm very involved in some of the day-to-day aspects of our point-of-sale system — the checkout system we use for concessions and also for the Graham Room. I'm making sure that it's running, that it's secure, that it's configured properly, and that it's able to process transactions. Same for the ticket scanners. Particularly at the start of a season or at the start of a new production, I consider myself an extension of the front-of-house team, because it's all hands on deck — and I like to be hands-on.

### What do you like about working in the arts?

I love seeing how the different parts of the organization work together and being part of a team that's really involved in all areas of the organization — making sure the staff can log into their workstations, making sure they can print, making sure they can connect to each other. We make sure that the Wi-Fi is working optimally in the rehearsal spaces and the coaching rooms. I take great pride in being at least a small part of making sure all those operations run properly. We're not necessarily directly involved in what happens on stage — but we help people do their jobs. We're putting world-class performances on our stage. 