

Rethinking Music History

Naomi André is one of today's most compelling thinkers on music, tackling the intersection of opera, gender, and race through her musicology research, teaching, and writing. As the inaugural Scholar in Residence at the Seattle Opera, she advises staff and leadership about race and gender in opera; participates in panel discussions and podcasts; and contributes program essays. Here, she speaks about her love for the symphonic tradition, building and educating future audiences, and creating communities of color onstage, backstage, and in administration.

As somebody who thinks about the nineteenth century, I like to juxtapose the two monumental genres: the symphony and the opera. I teach courses about both and though I have very few music majors, I love opening up these works to students in the liberal arts as well as engineers and folks in the business school. In my History of the Symphony class, we focus on Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, sonata form, and the wonderful canonic pieces that were written for orchestra. I want these students to care about hearing complete symphonies, and to feel invested in the history as well as in new works. I want them to see the energy and the excitement—that's important when you're teaching about a tradition from the past that is seen by many today as elitist.

Unlike novels or paintings, music from the past has to be recreated in the current time; it is embodied by people today. How can we watch an opera like *Don Giovanni* and not think of the #MeToo movement right now? With *The Nutcracker* ballet, maybe we need to re-stage the Coffee and Tea movements so they don't keep fulfilling negative stereotypes. In opera, one

complicated issue is, do you use yellowface or blackface in *Madama Butterfly* or *Aida* or *Otello*? Then there's the audience. What does it mean for me as a Black woman to go to a jazz concert where there is an integrated audience, or to go to the symphony and the opera, where frequently I'm one of the only Black people?

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One of the most pressing issues for classical music institutions today is the repertory. We desperately need more works by people of color. Anthony Davis wrote *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* in 1986, and today we're getting more operas on Black topics with Black composers. There's William Grant Still—he didn't just write *one* opera, he wrote a bunch of operas. And there are contemporary women composers, such as Nkeiru Okoye, whose best-known opera is *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed That Line to Freedom*. The Detroit Symphony Orchestra's March world premiere of Okoye's *Black Bottom*

for orchestra and singers was my last live concert before the pandemic shutdown. It was wonderful! And it was great that they presented a bunch of her works, including *Voices Reaching Out*, her response to 9/11.

When I think about how to make changes, I dream about a holistic approach to issues of representation—in the repertoire, on stage, on the board, backstage, and in the audience. In my role as Seattle Opera's scholar in residence, one thing that has really impressed me about the company is that they have a lot of people of color in the administrative area. There are Black, Latinx, and Asian American staffers, and it's not just one or two people. It's fun to see all these minds working together at meetings. Most of them are women and men under 50 and very tuned into the current time. I feel like it's a big moment.

We're trying to build a community in the arts that includes people of color. Let's invite people of color to concerts not just when you do Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, or what you think they might like, but to say, "Hey, now that we have you in the door, we have all these other goodies, Beethoven and Mahler and Shostakovich." I love it when classical groups reach out to Black churches to invite them to a Mozart symphony concert! We need to let everyone know that they're entitled to go to concerts. **S**

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