



VOICES LIFTED – TWO CENTURIES OF BLACK COMPOSERS OF OPERA

Abstract

Black musicians – instrumentalists, singers, composers, conductors, entrepreneurs have been crucial to the development of American music of all genres. This study explores this history.

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POWERPOINT SLIDE NUMBERS ARE IN RED AND PLACED WHERE THEY EACH SHOULD BE SHOWN.

1. TITLE PAGE

"Voices Lifted - Two Centuries of Black Composers of Opera" – MCDA – July 20, 2023

2. CONTENTS OF PRESENTATION

This presentation will discuss the work and agency taken by Black composers of opera in the face of barriers of racism and prejudice. We will explore:

- the musical forces (folk, dance, classical, spirituals) that existed in both Europe and the United States (Celtic and West African)
- the musical milieu in the 19th Century African American community
- four historical composers of opera and what they had in common
- Black musicians' fundamental place at the heart of the development of an "American" sound in many genres of American music – folk, pop, jazz, and classical.
- Current practices to correct harms done
 - Five living composers of note
 - Opera America
 - Opera Theatre of St. Louis

3. JOSEPH BOULOGNE, CHEVALIER DE ST. GEORGE

We begin in the Caribbean, before the American Revolution. Fencing master, Colonel in the French Revolution, conductor, virtuoso violinist and composer, **Joseph de Boulogne, Chevalier de St. George** (1744-1799) was considered the finest violinist and conductor of his time among the nobles and royalty of 18th Century France.

Boulogne was born on the French Caribbean Island of Guadeloupe, the son of a French plantation owner and Nanon. Nanon was an enslaved woman of Senegalese origin, was 16 and Boulogne's wife's maid. In 1757, his father was named Gentleman of the King's chamber, serving as a personal assistant to King Louis XV.¹ As a result, from the age of eight, Joseph was educated in France. Joseph performed as a concert violinist and conducted several orchestras at the same time, composing works for orchestra. In 1781, he became conductor of the

¹ Notes for the Los Angeles Opera production of *"The Anonymous Lover"* by Joseph de Boulogne. To be performed November 14, 2020.

newly formed orchestra *Le Concert Olympique* which premiered Haydn's six *Paris Symphonies* in 1786, with Queen Marie Antoinette in attendance.²

Although he was renowned as a soloist, conductor and composer, he was met with barriers when trying to get his operas performed. When he applied for the directorship of the Paris Opera, three of the company's leading sopranos declared that they would not work under the direction of a mixed-race person.³

Nevertheless, he wrote several operas, managing to get performances in smaller, private theatres.

4. BOULOGNE AT LAOPERA

Los Angeles Opera presented the American premier of his opera, "*The Anonymous Lover*" in a virtual performance on November 14, 2020. Here is a brief excerpt.

5. LAOPERA CLIP "THE ANONYMOUS LOVER"

6. JOSEPH BOULOGNE

Boulogne was seminal in developing a uniquely French genre for orchestra called the Symphony Concertante. "A hybrid of the Baroque concerto grosso and the Classical concerto, a symphonic concertante usually featured two or more soloists in a virtuosic dialogue that emulated a musical duel. Boulogne wrote eight such pieces between 1775 and '76, a testament to the demand for them among French audiences.

In 1778, Mozart traveled to Paris, staying from March to September and briefly under the same roof as Boulogne, hosted by Count Sickingen. It is implausible, to say the least, that Mozart did not hear Boulogne's music during this period.

Intriguingly, Mozart's first composition after his return to Austria was his *Symphonie Concertante* in E-flat (K.364). And in an article published in 1990 in the *Black Music Research Journal*, Gabriel Banat points to the remarkable similarities between an excerpt from a Boulogne violin concerto (Op. 7, No. 1) from 1777 and a passage from Mozart's K. 364, from the following year. The gesture in question recurs in Boulogne's solo string writing – a difficult sequence climbing to the highest register of the instrument, immediately followed by a dramatic dip – but had never appeared in Mozart's work until this Presto in K.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

364.”⁴ Here is an example from the Allegro in Boulogne’s “Symphonie Concertante in G” played by the Buskaid Orchestra of South Africa.

7. BUSKAID ORCHESTRA CLIP

I am happy to report that the SLSO performed Bologne’s Violin Concerto #2 in October 2022 with Hannah Ji, violin and Jonathon Heyward, conductor.

8. KORA AND RITI

Celtic/West African String Ensemble Traditions

Although it is not known whether Joseph Boulogne’s mother was a musician, the Senegalese have a long tradition of string music, both bowed instruments and plucked instruments. This is true of other West African cultures as well. In her book, *FIDDLELING IN WEST AFRICA*, Jacqueline Cogdell Djedje lists 89 different ethnic groups in 16 countries where a one-stringed, bowed instrument is played.⁵ Instruments such as the Kora and the riti correspond to the Celtic harp and the eventual use of the violin (fiddle) in traditional music of the Celts of Scotland, Ireland, Brittany and Gaul.

Players of the Kora and the Celtic harp were even used in similar ways. The players were the clan historians and they served the clan chiefs. In Mali and the Senegambia, Kora players are in guilds made up of families that specialize in learning the histories and playing and singing them. The apprenticeship is a seven-year process where, traditionally, the son would go to an uncle for his seven years of training. At the end of the seven years, he was required to go from town to town demonstrating that he knew all of the histories and the music. Let’s listen to the African Classical Music Ensemble and Kasse Mady Diabate. The English translation of the story he is telling is “There Was a Time”. You can hear how “operatic” this music is – both in the singing and in the story-telling.

9. KASSE MADY DIABATE CLIP

10. RUSTIC DANCE 1833 BY WILLIAM SIDNEY MOUNT

It is not surprising that when enslaved West Africans were brought to the Americas, there were many musicians among them. At the same time, in Colonial America, there were fiddle players from Scotland and Ireland. Old Williamsburg,

⁴ *The New York Times* September 9, 2020; “*His Name Is Joseph Boulogne, Not ‘Black Mozart’*” by Marcos Balter, first published July 22, 2020, updated July 24, 2020.

⁵ *FIDDLELING IN WEST AFRICA: Touching the Spirit in Fulbe, Hausa, and Dagbamba Cultures*; Jacqueline Cogdell Djedje, Indiana University Press, 2008

VA. has documented the music being played there for dances and concerts and most of it was Scottish in the earliest days.⁶

Robert Burns and other poets and folklore loving Scots had begun collecting the poetry and song of their oral traditions and, by the late 17th century, these tunes were being published both in Scotland and England. Many of these publications have been found in Old Williamsburg and are listed in the replica manuscripts.

Also found in the replicas is the mention that many of the fiddlers at the dances were Black. Black fiddlers were both enslaved people and freed people. Being a musician was a skill that provided a bit of freedom to enslaved musicians and a bit of income to freed Black musicians. Enslaved musicians were “rented out” and most of the money they earned went to the white enslaver. There are many stories, however, of freedom being bought by these musicians after years of saving the small wages they may have received.

11. 18TH CENTURY MAP OF NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

Occramar Marycoo/Newport Gardner, (1740s?-1826) Marycoo was forcibly transported to the American colonies, possibly on the 1764 voyage of the ship “The Elizabeth,” owned by sea captain Caleb Gardner. Of 120 captives on board, only 89 survived the crossing to Newport, Rhode Island. Most of these men, women and children were shipped to the Caribbean, but Gardner kept Marycoo as his property, renaming him Newport Gardner. Marycoo’s brilliant intellect was quickly recognized. He became fluent in English and French and learned the fundamentals of music. He was said to have been composing within four years of his arrival in America. In 1791 Marycoo joined a lottery and the winnings enabled him to buy his freedom. Marycoo’s wife, Limas, and their eight children were still enslaved. Friends from Marycoo’s church led by Dr. Samuel Hopkins (a protégé of the Great Awakening pastor Jonathan Edwards), urged Marycoo that they would fast with him to pray for his family’s deliverance. According to various memoirs, on the very day that Marycoo and his friends prayed and fasted, Gardner called in Marycoo and said he decided to manumit his family.⁷ Marycoo’s fiddle tune “Crooked Shanks,” a jig, was published under the name Gardner in “A Number of

⁶ Music books at Old Williamsburg, VA.: The Tine Whistle Book, A Little Keyboard Book, and Colonial Keyboard Book.

⁷ EMA Early Music America article by Sophie Genevieve Lowe, June 19, 2023 “America’s First Published Black Composer?”

Original Airs, Duetto's, and Trio's" in 1803. For more details see: [America's First Published Black Composer? » Early Music America](#)

12. RECORDING OF CROOKED SHANKS

As people moved west, both black and white musicians carried the music via the Ohio River Valley and into Missouri and the Missouri River plantations.⁸ Black fiddlers were still playing for both black and white dance parties all over Missouri as late as the 1940s and 50s.

13. MID 19TH CENTURY PAINTINGS – BLACK MUSICIANS – MOVING WEST

14. BILL DRIVER AND BILL KATON – MISSOURI FIDDLERS

Bill Driver and Bill Katon are two examples whose music can be found on recordings.⁹

This brings us to the question of the music of Appalachia which has been portrayed as a strictly Anglo and Scots-Irish phenomenon. This notion was introduced in the late 19th century by several early ethno-musicologists that visited Appalachia with the newly invented recording machines they brought to document their work. This was at the beginning of Jim Crow laws that codified racial segregation and these writers played right into that mentality.

15. COVER OF JAMISON BOOK “HOEDOWNS, REELS, AND FROLICS”

Recent research is slowly disproving this monochromatic view. A terrific source of information can be found in Phil Jamison's book, "Hoedowns, Reels and Frolics: Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance."¹⁰

It was the recording industry that greatly influenced our concepts of who played which music. Marketing strategies separated "race music" from old-time and later Country and Bluegrass. Recording companies were willing to record Black musicians who played the blues but, increasingly less willing to present them playing other forms of popular music.

16. JIM PERRY COWBOY FIDDLER AND THE BANJO LESSON BY H.O. TANNER

Why have I spent so much time on roots of our folk music? Because, just like with baseball or basketball, the more home-made ball fields and hoops people are playing with, the more players prepare themselves for an opportunity to make that sport their life's work. You can say the same for music, the more skill you

⁸ Johnson, Sara L., "Popular Music of Cincinnati & The Ohio River Frontier from 1788 to 1825" 1998

⁹ Article from Missouri Traditional Fiddle & Dance Network, "African-American Fiddlers in Central Missouri" 2017

¹⁰ Jamison, Phil, "Hoedowns, Reels, and Frolics – Roots and Branches of Southern Appalachian Dance" University of Illinois Press, 2015

build and the greater the pool of players, the more likely it is that musicians will explore other forms of music. The other thing is, symphonic and operatic forms of classical music require string players and these string players were playing folk music.

Black musicians were hearing the classical music of their times and also learning to read music. Many references are made to the musicians connected with the Hemingses of Monticello and surrounding towns.¹¹

17. SUMMIT AVE. ENSEMBLE – ATLANTA, GA 1889

The musical milieu for 19th Century Black Americans was deep and rich. There were many instrumentalists: fiddlers, violinists, pianists, and much more. When musicians didn't have a violin, they would make one from any number of materials, including corn stalks. Classical music was studied and played in concert.

18. PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR AND COL. CHARLES YOUNG

Biographies of great Black Americans from abolitionists to military men¹², to poets tell us that most played violin and many also played piano and could play popular, folk and classical music.

19. ANNA MURRAY DOUGLASS, JOSEPH AND FREDERICK DOUGLASS

Frederick Douglass is probably the most famous of these. His wife, Anna Murray Douglass, was a free woman and professional violin teacher in Baltimore. She read music and played both classical and fiddle styles. Douglass went to her for lessons while he was still enslaved and one of their grandsons, Joseph Douglass, became a concert violinist and taught at Howard University.¹³

20. JIMMY PALAO – ORIGINAL CREOLE ORCHESTRA

The violin was the lead instrument even in very early New Orleans jazz groups.¹⁴ This is an area waiting for more musicological research. This leads us to our opera composers.

African American Opera Composers in History We will look at composers who wrote operas as early as 1868 and as late as 2022. They are connected to each other in several ways from actually being mentored or studying with one another, or through their connections to other forms of music such as folk music, jazz, and Broadway musicals. It appears that, for black strings players, popular forms of

¹¹ Gordon-Reed, Annette, *"The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Epic"* W.W. Norton and Co., 2008

¹² Shellum, Brian G., *"Black Officer in a Buffalo Soldier Regiment- The Military Career of Charles Young"* University of Nebraska Press, 2010

¹³ Stauffer, John, *"Giants: The Parallel Lives of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln"* Twelve, 2009

¹⁴ Singleton, Joan, *"Keep It Real: The Life Story of James 'Jimmy' Palao – 'The King of Jazz'"* iUniverse, 2011

music have always been a source of income when classical music institutions were unwilling to hire or commission African American classically trained musicians. Attitudes of white supremacy and exclusion ruled these venues, even in the face of extraordinary talent and hard work.

21. JOHN THOMAS DOUGLASS

John Thomas Douglass – 1847-1886 – in 1868, his opera, “Virginia’s Ball” was copyrighted. This title is logical for 1868. Douglass would have known the connection between Virginia balls and Black musicians. It was performed at least once that year at the Stuyvesant Institute on Broadway, but has been lost. Douglass was a renowned violinist, toured as a concert artist, and played in a string ensemble and in minstrel orchestras, including Hyers Sisters and Georgia Minstrels.

22. HARRY LAWRENCE FREEMAN

Harry Lawrence Freeman – 1869-1954 – grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. His father was a successful carpenter and Freeman received a good education and displayed early musical talent. By the age of 10 he was playing organ in church. At 18 he began composing, having been inspired by attending a performance of Wagner’s “Tannhauser”. By age 22 he was in Denver and had founded the Freeman Opera Company and the Freeman School of Music. In 1891 his opera “Epithalia” was performed at the Deutsches Theater in Denver. His second opera, “**The Martyr**” premiered there in 1893. “The Martyr” was also produced by the Freeman Opera Co. later in Chicago and Cleveland (1894). **This was the first opera in the USA to be produced by an all-Black production company.** He moved back to Cleveland, married and continued composing and teaching in Cleveland, Chicago and at Wilberforce University (1902-1904). About 1908 the family moved to Harlem where, **in 1912, he helped Scott Joplin with revisions to his opera “Treemonisha”** which was produced by OTSL in 2000 and 2023. He was head of the Freeman Music School in New York, taught privately and produced his own operas with critical acclaim. Freeman composed at least 23 operas, many of which were successful in his lifetime but are not performed today. **He was a colleague of musicians and artists in New York and is associated with the Harlem Renaissance.** Excerpts from his opera “**VOODOO**” can be found on Youtube. There is an archive of most of his scores and his papers at Columbia University in New York. For more information visit The Harry Lawrence Freeman Foundation at: [Contact - Harry Lawrence Freeman Foundation](#)

23. SCOTT JOPLIN

Scott Joplin – 1868-1917 - Joplin was born near Texarkana, Arkansas. His parents were Giles Joplin, formerly enslaved in North Carolina, and Florence Givens, a freewoman from Kentucky. Giles was a railroad laborer and Florence worked as a cleaner. Giles had played the violin for plantation dances back in North Carolina and Florence sang and played the banjo. As mentioned earlier, Black musicians playing for both Black and white dance parties was very common and continued right up into Missouri as late as the 1950s and 60s. His parents gave Scott his earliest musical training and, from the age of seven he was allowed to play the piano while his mother cleaned.¹⁵

Florence bartered maid work for use of a piano and Scott studied music with mixed race musician Mag Washington, Black Indian Professor J.C. Johnson, and German Julius Weiss. Johnson and Weiss encouraged Joplin to pursue a musical career. With the publishing of “The Maple Rag” in 1899, by the John Stark Publishing Co. of Sedalia, MO. Joplin emerged as the King of Ragtime. Joplin composed the opera “A Guest of Honor” (1903) and “Treemonisha” (1911) which he self-published and presented in a barebones production in New York City (1915).¹⁶

“Treemonisha” was innovative in several ways. First, it brought together African American musical ideas with European operatic traditions. Second, it featured a Black community deciding to commit to education as a way to make their lives better rather than reiterating stereotyped characters promoted under Jim Crow laws and racist views. Third, it promoted the idea of an educated woman being the leader of the community long before women even had the right to vote in the USA.

24. WILLIAM GRANT STILL

William Grant Still – 1895-1978 – composer of at least 150 works, including five ballets, five symphonies and eight operas. The best known of these composers Still was the first African American composer to have an opera produced by the New York City Opera. Born in Mississippi, he grew up in Little Rock, Arkansas. Still started violin at age 15 and was self-taught on many other instruments before graduating high school at 16. He went to Wilberforce Un., Oberlin

¹⁵ Berlin, Edward A. (1994). p.6, KING OF RAGTIME: SCOTT JOPLIN AND HIS ERA. Oxford University Press. Accessed in Wikipedia

¹⁶ Seniors, Paula Marie, Ph.D. “Scott Joplin’s Treemonisha”—Gunter Schuller, arr. (1976). Essay added to the National Registry: 2016.

Conservatory of Music and was a student of George Whitefield Chadwick and Edgard Varese in composition.

Howard Hanson considered Still to be the premier American composer and premiered many of his works at the Eastman School of Music with the Eastman Rochester Symphony.

Still was the first African American to conduct a major American symphony orchestra, have a symphony (his 1st Symphony) performed by a leading orchestra, have an opera performed by a major opera company, and first to have an opera performed on national television. He had a close association with Alain Locke and Langston Hughes and is considered part of the Harlem Renaissance. He worked with Freeman, and others, and mentored younger Black composers such as Ulysses Kay.

Still is an excellent example of the career trajectory of most African American Classically trained musicians. He found work from 1919 on arranging music for popular bands, starting with Fletcher Henderson and moving on to Paul Whiteman in 1929. Meantime, he played in the pit orchestra for Eubie Blake's musical, "Shuffle Along" and was the arranger of "Yamekraw", a 'Negro Rhapsody' composed by the noted Harlem stride pianist, James P. Johnson. In the 1930s and 40s, he arranged for Willard Robison's "Deep River Hour" and Paul Whiteman's "Old Gold Show", both popular NBC Radio broadcasts as well as arranging for films starring Bing Crosby, Jane Wyatt and Ronald Colman among others. In 1936 he conducted the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orch., becoming the first African American to conduct a major symphony orchestra in the USA. He went on to conduct other major orchestras and his works have been played by the Berlin Philharmonic Orch., the London Symphony Orch., and the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra. Here is an excerpt from the finale of the fourth movement of his Afro-American Symphony (1930). His orchestration of the winds and his "billowing" effect – where the music seems to billow like clouds out of itself is characteristic of his sound.

25. EXCERPT FROM AFRO-AMERICAN SYMPHONY - 1930

26. WILLIAM GRANT STILL

Hearing of all of these successes, one would think that William Grant Still was one of the "lucky ones" who was "allowed" to find success, but the truth is, that Still had to face many instances of racist decisions about whether or not he would have success.

The most tragic incident, though, was surrounding his opera "Troubled Island", written in 1938, with libretto by Langston Hughes and Verna Arvey, but not

produced until 1949. The New York City Opera took on the project and expectations were extremely high because of the successes of Still's symphonic works. Everyone connected with the production anticipated a huge success. The work was contracted for three performances over a six-week time-span. Before the first performance, John Briggs, music critic for *The New York Post*, told Still that all of the critics were going to pan his opera and, in fact, that is what happened. Even though there were twenty-two curtain calls for the composer at the end of the first performance, the critics were determined to scuttle the whole show.¹⁷ After the third contracted performance, the opera has never been performed again. Here is Celeste's opening aria which comes just after a very short overture. The text is:

Celeste's Aria, Act 1

Little black slave child, no slave to me!
You are my son, child, who must be free.
We are here, child, no place to rest.
Lay your dark head, child, on mother's breast.
Sleep now, my baby,
Sleep now, my son,
Mother will free you ere night is done.
Dream your sweet dreams, child, that have no name.
Mother will dream now a dream of flame.
Flame that will sweep our slavery away!
Sleep on, my little one, till the new day.
Sleep on, my little one, till the new day.¹⁸

This was recorded live in 1949 at the first performance.

27. CELESTE'S ARIA – OPENING OF "TROUBLED ISLAND"

28. WHAT THESE COMPOSERS HAD IN COMMON

What these composers had in common: The stories they told through operatic form reflect their lived experience, issues being dealt with, and historic events especially related to freedom. They were all multi-talented; all were multi-instrumentalists; all made their living in popular forms of music and/or entertainment in vogue at their time; all were prepared for careers in classical music but faced racism and segregation; all were entrepreneurial and created their own opportunities where they could. After Still's rejection in New York, most opportunities for Black composers were found in college and university

¹⁷ Still, Judith Anne and Lisa M. Headlee, *Just Tell the Story – Troubled Island*, The Master-Player Library, 2006

¹⁸ Verna Arvey and Langston Hughes, "Troubled Island Libretto", p 5, William Grant Still Music, Flagstaff, Arizona

settings where both jazz and new classical music were being premiered. New York City Opera waited 37 years until 1986 when they staged Anthony Davis's "X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X", to premier another opera by a Black composer.

Clearly, the participation of Black musicians and composers have contributed to the creation of an "American" music in all genres. In opera, their use of folk material, both dance tunes and spirituals, was ground breaking. Many white composers profited by using music they learned from Black musicians. This was particularly common during the Harlem Renaissance when composers such as George Gershwin and Aaron Copland would visit Harlem jazz clubs and learn from Black musicians such as Eubie Blake.

29. – PICTURES OF FIVE LIVING COMPOSERS

REPARING HARMS DONE

Five living composers are now gaining international recognition for their work.

Their styles range widely – a confirmation of the many voices within the world of Black composers of opera.

Adolphus Hailstork, (born April 17, 1941) is an American composer and educator. He was born in Rochester, New York, and grew up in Albany, New York, where he studied violin, piano, organ, and voice. He currently resides in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Hailstork began his musical career in 1963, when he studied composition with Mark Fax at Howard University, Washington, DC (BMus 1963). In the summer of 1963, he attended the American Conservatory at Fontainebleau, France, where he studied with Nadia Boulanger. In 1965, Hailstork received a Bachelor of Music from the Manhattan School of Music, where he studied under Vittorio Giannini and David Diamond, and in 1966 received a Master of Music at the same institution. After studying under H. Owen Reed, Hailstork received his PhD in composition from Michigan State University in 1971. From 1969 to 1971, Hailstork taught at Michigan State University. He then served as professor at Youngstown State University in Ohio from 1971 to 1976, and in 1977 accepted a post as professor of music and Composer-in-Residence at Virginia's Norfolk State University. He also taught as professor of music and Composer-in-Residence at

Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. Hailstork is of African American, native American and European ancestry and his works blend musical ideas from the African, American and European traditions. In October 2022 his work was publicised in Britain when he was featured as "Composer of the Week" on BBC Radio 3.¹⁹ Links to music and conversations with Hailstork can be found in the Addendum.

Terence Blanchard, Terence Oliver Blanchard (born March 13, 1962) is an American trumpeter, pianist and composer. He started his career in 1982 as a member of the Lionel Hampton Orchestra, then The Jazz Messengers. He has composed more than forty film scores and performed on more than fifty. A frequent collaborator with director Spike Lee, he has been nominated for two Academy Awards for composing the scores for Lee's films *Black Klansman* (2018) and *Da 5 Bloods* (2020). He has won five Grammy Awards from fourteen nominations. From 2000 to 2011, Blanchard served as artistic director of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz. In 2011, he was named artistic director of the Henry Mancini Institute at the University of Miami, and in 2015, he became a visiting scholar in jazz composition at the Berklee College of Music. In 2019, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), named Blanchard to its Endowed Chair in Jazz Studies, where he remained until 2023. The Metropolitan Opera in New York staged Blanchard's opera "Fire Shut Up in My Bones" in its 2021–2022 season, the first opera by an African American composer in the organization's history.²⁰ His opera "Champion" was presented by the Met in their 2022-2023 season. Both opera were originally commissioned by OTSL.

Damien Sneed, Sneed is a pianist, vocalist, organist, composer, conductor, arranger, producer, and arts educator. He has worked with many leading artists from a wide variety of genre including Jessye Norman, Wynton Marsalis, and Stevie Wonder. Sneed is the founder and artistic director of Chorale Le Chateau, which has gained a global reputation for its vivid interpretations of vocal literature from Renaissance period pieces to art songs to jazz, spirituals, gospel and avant-garde contemporary music.

¹⁹ Wikipedia, accessed June, 2023.

²⁰ Ibid.

Sneed and librettist Karen Chilton were commissioned by Opera Theatre of St. Louis to create a re-imagined version of Scott Joplin’s opera “Treemonisha” for their 2023 season. For details of Sneed’s education and many creative projects visit: [Damien Sneed - Manhattan School of Music \(msmny.edu\)](https://msmny.edu)

Rhiannon Giddens, Rhiannon Giddens (born February 21, 1977) is an American musician known for her eclectic folk music. She is a founding member of the country, blues, and old-time music band the Carolina Chocolate Drops, where she was the lead singer, fiddle player, and banjo player. Giddens is a native of Greensboro, North Carolina. In addition to her work with the Grammy-winning Chocolate Drops, Giddens has released two solo albums: *Tomorrow Is My Turn* (2015) and *Freedom Highway* (2017). Her 2019 and 2021 albums, *There Is No Other* and *They're Calling Me Home* are collaborations with Italian multi-instrumentalist Francesco Turrisi. She appears in the Smithsonian Folkways collection documenting Mike Seeger's final trip through Appalachia in 2009, *Just Around the Bend: Survival and Revival in Southern Banjo Styles – Mike Seeger’s Last Documentary* (2019). In 2014, she participated in the T Bone Burnett-produced project titled *The New Basement Tapes* along with several other musicians, which set a series of recently discovered Bob Dylan lyrics to newly composed music. The resulting album, *Lost on the River: The New Basement Tapes*, was a top-40 Billboard album. In 2023, the opera *Omar*, co-written by Giddens and Michael Abels, won the Pulitzer Prize for Music.²¹

[An in-depth lesson on Rhiannon Giddens by Suzanne Palmer, Fine Arts Coordinator for the Normandy Schools Collaborative accompanies this study.](#)

Access here: [📄 SPAE final presentation.pdf](#)

Michael Abels Michael Abels (born October 8, 1962) is a Pulitzer Prize-winning American composer best known for the opera *Omar*, co-written with Rhiannon Giddens, and his genre-defying scores for the Jordan Peele films *Get Out* and *Us*. The hip-hop influenced score for *Us* was short-listed for the Oscars and was even named “Score of the Decade” by *TheWrap*. Other recent media projects include the films *Bad Education*, *Nightbooks*, *Fake Famous*, and the docuseries *Allen v. Farrow*. Current releases include *Beauty* which premiered at the Tribeca Film

²¹Wikipedia, accessed June 2023

Festival and is now streaming on Netflix, *Breaking* (formerly 892) which premiered at Sundance, and his third collaboration with Jordan Peele, *Nope*. Abels' projects also include many concert works, such as *At War With Ourselves* for the Kronos Quartet, *Isolation Variation* for Hilary Hahn, and the opera "Omar" cocomposed with Grammy-winning singer/songwriter Rhiannon Giddens. Some of these pieces are available on the Cedille Records, including *Delights & Dances* and *Winged Creatures*. Current commissions include a work for the National Symphony Orchestra and a guitar concerto for Mak Grgić. Abels is co-founder of the Composers Diversity Collective, an advocacy group to increase visibility of **composers of color in film, gaming and streaming media. In 2023, the opera "Omar", co-written by Abels and Rhiannon Giddens, won the Pulitzer Prize for Music.**²²

The Giddens/Abels opera "Omar" premiered at the Spoleto Festival in Savannah, GA in spring 2022, was given its second run at LAOpera in fall of 2022 and will play at San Francisco Opera in fall 2023.

Other composers of note are Francis Johnson (1792-1844), Margaret Bonds (1913-1972) – known for orchestral and choral works not opera, George Walker (1922-2018), T.J. Anderson (b. 1928), Tania Leon b. 1943, Robert A. Harris (b. 1938), Joseph Joubert (b. 1958), Rosephanye Powell (b. 1962), Anthony Davis (b. 1951), Leslie Adams (b. 1932), Shawn Okpebholo (B. 1981), Joshua Brian Campbell (b. 1994), Fred Onovwerosuake (b.1960, lives in St. Louis), Wynton Marsalis (b. 1961) and Nkeiru Okoye (b. 1972). Two Afro-European composers of note are George Bridgetower (1778-1860) and Samuel ColeridgeTaylor (1875-1912).

30. MARC SCORCA – OPERA AMERICA

What organizations are doing to create systemic change

Opera America, the umbrella organization for the American opera industry has made a deep commitment to supporting efforts to expand opportunities for creatives, artists and administrators that represent BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, and women's communities. Their website (listed in the Addendum) provides access to extensive resources for further study.

31. OPERA THEATRE OF ST. LOUIS COMMISSIONS AND REVIVALS

²² Wikipedia accessed June 2023

Opera Theatre of St. Louis has an impressive record of staging operas by Black composers – five new commissions and two revivals. They are:

- “Under the Double Moon” – Anthony Davis – 1989
- “Joshua’s Boots” – Adolphus Hailstork – 1999 – an opera for youth
- “Champion” – Terence Blanchard – 2013
- “Fire Shut Up In My Bones” – Terence Blanchard – 2019
- “Treemonisha” – Scott Joplin – 2000
- “Highway 1, U.S.A.” – William Grant Still – 2021
- “Treemonisha” – Scott Joplin re-imagined by Damien Sneed, composer and Karen Chilton, librettist – 2023

32. PICTURES FROM 2011 OTSL “JOSHUA’S BOOTS”

“Joshua’s Boots” by Adolphus Hailstork was commissioned by OTSL for the 1999 season and was restaged in St. Louis in 2011. This is a piece that, like Menotti’s “Amahl and the Night Visitors,” could be performed by a high school group. The story is based in the history of Black cowboys, the Buffalo Soldiers, and the movement west to escape racist violence and find opportunity. The music makes use of spirituals, folk fiddle tunes and classical opera styles. A full production by the Amarillo Opera Company is available on You Tube at: [Amarillo Opera presents Adolphus Hailstork's Joshua's Boots - YouTube](#) Amarillo Opera used the OTSL costumes and sets from their 2011 production of the opera. Jorell Williams sang the part of Joshua in both productions.

33. EXCERPT FROM JB – SPIRITUALS – STEAL AWAY AND I GOT SHOES

34. EXCERPT FROM JB – COWBOY SONG – GOODBYE OLE PAINT

35. EXCERPT FROM JB – COWBOY DANCE OPERA FINALE

36. “FIRE SHUT UP IN MY BONES” TERENCE BLANCHARD

Terence Blanchard quoted the great Wayne Shorter, one of his mentors, as saying “Luck equals preparation plus opportunity”. For preparation, he advised Blanchard to “go down to the basement and find every note.” In other words – dig deep. The composers mentioned here clearly were prepared and a couple of them had opportunities while still living. Blanchard commented that for every black musician that rises to the surface, there are at least 10 just as good who have been prepared but did not have opportunity.

In Blanchard’s case, Opera Theatre of St. Louis’s Jim Robinson and Tim O’Leary, General Director at the time, asked for a second opera after opening night of “Champion” in 2013. It took a year to find the right material and the rest is history. OTSL premiered “Fire Shut Up in My Bones” in 2019 and The Met opened their 2021 season with it. This was the first time that The Met has presented an opera by a Black composer. They scheduled “Champion” for the 2022/23 season. Terence Blanchard, Damien Sneed, Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels continue a line of African American musicians who, yes, compose opera, and also are jazz composers and work in popular mediums whether it be dance, folk music, musicals or film and TV.

Just as jazz is America’s classical music, it is to these musicians that we need to look for a dynamic/synchronatic future for American opera.

37. CLAYCO FUTURE LEADERS

Under General Director Andrew Jorgenson, OTSL continues its commitment to Black opera composers and, further, into diversifying the administration and back-stage aspects of OTSL.

In its third year, the Clayco Future Leaders Fellowship runs from September 30, 2022, through July 21, 2023. Over the course of the program, participants serve in a full-time position specializing in one department while gaining hand-on experience in a range of essential functions across the organization. All Fellows receive a full-time salary, benefits, transportation and relocation stipends, professional development, and networking opportunities. Each Fellow also is mentored by another leader in the field, providing connection to the broader arts community. The Clayco Future Leaders Fellowship is possible thanks to a generous three-year commitment from Bob and Jane Clark and Clayco, the 2021 recipient of the Missouri Arts Award for Philanthropy.

The two previous classes of Clayco Fellows have progressed into roles at prominent organizations including the Glimmerglass Festival, Santa Fe Opera, Houston Grand Opera, LA Opera, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Austin Opera, The New Harmony Project, and IMG Artists. The positions they’ve attained span a wide variety of fields within arts administration, from artist management to education and community engagement to grant writing and fundraising.

38. 1ST YEAR TEAMS FOR NEW WORKS COLLECTIVE

Opera Theatre announced three creative teams for the second year of the New Works Collective. This new initiative pioneers a ground-breaking commissioning model that inverts the traditional power dynamics of the classical arts world by allowing a panel of community leaders – rather than the organization itself – to

choose where to award financial compensation for the creation of new operas. Five artists and one stage director have been identified to create, workshop, and premiere three new chamber operas in March 2024. With backgrounds that span a range of lived experiences and artistic genres, this exciting group of artists will help push the boundaries of the operatic form and explore new models for storytelling.

39. AIT MASTER CLASS

These new programs continue a long history of OTSL reaching out to underserved communities in the St. Louis region. Their AIT (Artists in Training) program for high school singers celebrated its 29th year this Spring.

40. SPAE, MAAE, OPERA AMERICA, OTSL LOGOS

These programs all reflect OTSL's commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion. Opera Theatre is leading the way. Will we as audience members, arts supporters and producers provide the opportunity for all those who are prepared? OTSL believes it is a priority.

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Wikipedia articles on Hailstork, Blanchard, Giddens and Abels

ADDENDUM:

Additional resources:

<https://www.seattleoperablog.com/2022/02/black-opera.html#:~:text=The%20opera%20world%20is%20currently,Five%2C%20to%20name%20a%20few>

[Damien Sneed - Manhattan School of Music \(msmny.edu\)](#)

[Jake Blount - Music](#) – This site includes valuable resources on Black fiddlers. Opera America – highly recommend exploring this site.

<https://operaamerica.org/content/about/EDI/index.aspx> Click on their “Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity Resources”. Scroll down for multiple topics.

[Newport Gardner: From Slave to Musical Composer - Online Review of Rhode Island History \(smallstatebighistory.com\)](#)

[The Life and Travels of Newport Gardner - Footnoting History](#)

www.williamgrantstillmusic.com at this site you can find scores, books, videos and CDs. Highly recommended.

Additional links of interest:

[Crooked Shanks by Newport Gardner 10-18-13 - YouTube](#) played by a young African American fiddler

[J’Nai Bridges performs Adolphus Hailstork’s Tulsa 1921 \(Pity These Ashes, Pity This Dust\) - YouTube](#)

[MOTHERLESS CHILD, Adolphus Hailstork - MISSOURI STATE UNIVERSITY CHORALE - YouTube](#)

[A Conversation with Adolphus Hailstork, composer - YouTube](#) – great way of getting to know A.H. and about how he sees his music.

[Composers Michael Abels and Adolphus Hailstork meet after world premiere STILL HOLDING ON - YouTube](#) – more fun with A.H. great sense of humor

[Adolphus Hailstork, Composer Conversation w/Bill Doggett - YouTube](#) – first comments in this one are important. They talk about being an African American composer as well as telling African American stories

[An Interview with World Renowned Composer Adolphus Hailstork at Washington National Cathedral. - YouTube](#) – didn’t watch this yet but it was just done May 26, 2023.

[Crispus Attucks by Adolphus Hailstork - YouTube](#) – is like an opera – opens with a gorgeous flute solo

[Interview 4: Adolphus Hailstork - YouTube](#) – talking about a specific piece in 2020 and about his compositional technique/style/process.

[Who's Next? Hailstork Commission to Grace Black History Month | San Francisco Classical Voice \(sfcv.org\)](#)

[Rise for Freedom - YouTube](#) The story of John Parker – Black abolitionist in Ohio. This is an interview with composer and librettist with segments from the opera and comments by audience members.

[Amarillo Opera presents Adolphus Hailstork's Joshua's Boots - YouTube](#) Complete opera performance.

[Mezzo-Soprano J'Nai Bridges Collaborates On 2 Powerful Commemorations To The 1921 Tulsa Massacre - CBS San Francisco \(cbsnews.com\)](#) Interview

[Contact - Harry Lawrence Freeman Foundation](#) 845-641-9883

[Damien Sneed - Manhattan School of Music \(msmny.edu\)](#)

<https://rhiannongiddens.com/about>

[Uncovering the History of the Banjo with Rhiannon Giddens: From African Roots to American Music - YouTube](#)

[America's First Published Black Composer? » Early Music America](#)

[Crooked Shanks oldtime JIG by Newport Gardner 1803 - YouTube](#)

[Bassekou Kouyaté + Seckou Keita - Al Ajahleh \(feat. The Orchestra of Syrian Musicians\) - YouTube](#)

[Catrin Finch a Seckou Keita – Eisteddfod Gudd - YouTube](#)

Also On YouTube: Highly recommended if you wish to explore these West African traditions.

1. Adama Yalombo “Mbora” – Music of Mali – 15 minutes long
2. “Damandiy”- by Mussa Diabate, Traditional Mali Music – performed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York city – 2 minutes long – features the n’goni bowed string instrument
3. Mamadou Diabate (2014) – Griot Classique – with beautiful pictures – this is a full concert with a variety of tunes on the kora – full-length 1 hour, 15 minutes – filmed 2 years ago.
4. Musical Traditions in Mali – “Now Money Is More Important than Humanity” – features the n’goni – English subtitles – 4:30 minutes long – 4 years ago.

5. Fatoumata Diawara – “Timbuktu Fasso” – uses modern instruments – drum kit and guitars – 8:19 minutes long – 3 years ago – This is a protest song about the events at the time that didn’t allow music in Mali. Diawara is in the diaspora and introduces her song in English.
6. Mamou Sidibe Mary – this is a beautiful film – traditional flute, harp and percussion with choreographed dancers – all recorded outside – uses the traditional music and dance as a performance piece. 8 years ago – 5 minutes long.
7. Malian Musical Traditions – this is a documentary film in French – 4 years ago – 1 hour 27 minutes. This film explores all of the traditional instruments and takes the viewer around the country to visit various ethnic groups and their traditions. It also shows how some of the instruments are made, especially at the beginning of the film and particularly the balafon and the kora. I do not speak French but have some words and could follow a lot of it.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Diane McCullough

Diane McCullough taught music at the Laboratory Schools University of Chicago for eleven years and in the St. Louis Public Schools for twenty years at Marquette and Carr Lane Visual and Performing Arts Middle Schools, retiring in June, 2007. Since earning her Masters in Voice from Washington University in 1963, her musical career has combined teaching with singing opera and playing ethnic music. She combined professional singing (art song, opera and 20th century chamber music) with teaching for 13 years in the Chicago area then spent 7 years in Germany (6 at the Nationaltheatre Mannheim) singing opera. She returned to teaching in St. Louis in 1987 and continued her relationship with opera as a cooperating teacher with the Opera Theatre of St. Louis Education Department. She guided her sixth and seventh grade students in writing their own operas for 7 years at Carr Lane. In 2000, Opera Theatre of St. Louis produced one of these operas, *Sukey and the Mermaid*, on their main stage. Diane has been a national trainer for the “MUSIC! WORDS! OPERA!” curriculum since 1996. She continues M!W!O! work for Opera Theatre of St. Louis as a music consultant, writing listening guides for the operas they present in schools. Missouri Music Educators Association St. Louis Metro District Eight awarded her the 2006 Merit Award and the 2008 Hall of Fame Award for Outstanding Service to Music Education and to Metro District Eight.

She has been a founding director for three nonprofit organizations – 1) Karumanta, an Andean flute band, 2) The St. Louis Scottish Games, and 3) Scottish Partnership for Arts and Education (SPAЕ). SPAЕ was her brainchild and she is their artistic director and grants administrator. SPAЕ, founded in 2006, provides free Artist in Residence workshops in Scottish traditional fiddle, Scots and Gaelic song, poetry and their connections to American music and poetry, and professional development workshops for teachers, including a STEAM lesson on felting.

She received an “Ageless Remarkable St. Louisan” award from the St. Andrew Charitable Foundation in 2022.

Besides doing work for SPAЕ and leading the band “Peat Fire Flame”, Ms. McCullough volunteers as:

- Co-chair of the Docents Committee for Opera Theatre of St. Louis’s Guild. 2008-2020
- Chair of the Entertainment and Sound Committee for the St. Louis Scottish Games. 2007-2017
- Chair of the Advocacy Committee for Opera Theatre of St. Louis’s Guild 2020-present
- Serves as an Elder at Webster Groves Presbyterian Church and is active on the Presbytery of Giddings-Lovejoy Dismantling Racism and White Privilege Committee (DRAWP). The DRAWP Committee successfully submitted “An Overture of Apology to African Americans for the Sin of Slavery and its Legacy” to the Presbyterian Church USA General Assembly in 2022. It is now an official statement of apology from the PCUSA.



Suzanne Palmer

As a music educator for over thirty-five years, Mrs. Palmer is the Fine Arts Director in the Normandy Schools Collaborative. She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Music Education from the University of Missouri-Columbia and a Master of Education Administration from the University of Missouri-St. Louis. Maestra Suzanne Palmer is the artistic director and conductor of the Community Gospel Choir of St. Louis and is the founder of The Fellowship of Souls Gospel Ensemble.

Mrs. Palmer has blazed a trail not only as a prolific music educator but also as a professional singer and music director.

Mrs. Palmer has put her talent to work to teach many people in her words- the transformative, life affirming, spiritual power of music to bind, cleanse and heal the soul.

She has received many awards and is the recipient of The St. Louis Arts and Education Council-Arts Educator of the Year-Legacy Award 2023.

Suzanne is a member of Tau Beta Sigma Music Sorority, The Missouri Music Educators Association, The Music Choral Directors Association and has been called to serve as an educational consultant focused on diversity, equity and inclusion for both The Bach Society of St. Louis, and Opera Theater of St. Louis. Suzanne Palmer is also a proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.