



Greetings from President Carmen Twillie Ambar

I am honored to welcome you to tonight's concert performance of *Omar*. The opera chronicles the life of Omar ibn Said, a 19th-century Islamic scholar from West Africa who was captured and brought to America, where he was enslaved for the final 57 years of his life. *Omar* is based on his autobiography, which he penned in Arabic.

Through this powerful work, we finally hear the words of a remarkable man whose voice went unheard during his lifetime and for the 160 years since his death. Through the story of Omar's life, we can more fully appreciate the value of our own.

This production has been willed into existence by a collection of remarkable artists, many of whom have indelible ties to Oberlin College and Conservatory. *Omar* was created by multifaceted musician Rhiannon Giddens, a 2000 graduate of the conservatory who, with collaborator Michael Abels, composed the opera's music and text. Together, they were honored for their work with the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for Music.

Tonight, we will enjoy a debut performance filled with Obies. Rhiannon will perform the full-length version of the opera for the first time, and 1982 Oberlin alumnus John Kennedy, who conducted *Omar*'s 2022 premiere, will join us as conductor. Over the past month, John has worked closely with our conservatory orchestra and outstanding vocal soloists, including Krysty Swann and Oberlin alumni Limmie Pulliam '98, Michael Preacely '99, Daniel Okulitch '99, and Daniel McGrew '15.

This evening provides a unique opportunity to witness firsthand the incomparable artistry of our Oberlin community and the incredible power of this newly revealed chapter of our shared history.

Carmen Twillie Ambar

President, Oberlin College and Conservatory



Greetings from Dean William Quillen

On behalf of the students, faculty, and staff of Oberlin Conservatory, I am pleased to welcome you to this evening's performance of Rhiannon Giddens' and Michael Abels' *Omar*.

In her Oberlin commencement address earlier this year, Rhiannon Giddens reminded us that our lives' work includes the duty to "celebrate the humanity in us all while holding it accountable and to be aware that each and every one of us can be harmed and can also do the harming.

"The most important thing we can do in our quest to re-center humanity in our culture," she continued, "is to work together, in transparency, in collaboration, in community, and in good faith."

It is in this spirit that we gather—both tonight and over the surrounding days—to experience Giddens' and Abels' masterpiece and explore the themes attendant in it. Both in this concert performance of *Omar* and in the extensive programming accompanying it, we seek to celebrate and reinforce our common humanity—all through a series of performances, panel discussions, exhibits, and more made possible through the rich artistic and intellectual community Oberlin uniquely affords.

In addition to being one of the conservatory's artistic highlights of recent years, these performances represent a homecoming of sorts: an opportunity to welcome back to the stage many distinguished alumni, including soloists Limmie Pulliam, Michael Preacely, Daniel McGrew, Daniel Okulitch, Dae Williams, and Ryan Dearon; conductor John Kennedy; and Rhiannon Giddens herself. It is a joy and honor to welcome these wonderful alumni back to the stage and for our students to have the opportunity to perform alongside them.

From all of us at the conservatory, we thank you for your interest in tonight's program and hope you enjoy the performance.

William Quillen

Dean, Oberlin Conservatory of Music

CONCERT PERFORMANCE

Rhiannon Giddens' and Michael Abels'

Omar

John Kennedy '82, conductor

Cast of Characters

Omar	Limmie Pulliam '98
Fatima (Omar's Mother)	Krysty Swann
Abdul (Omar's Brother)/Abe	Michael Preacely '99
Amadou	DaQuan Williams '20
Olufemi	Ryan Dearon '18
Suleiman	Travis Guillory
Julie	Rhiannon Giddens '00
Auctioneer/Taylor	Daniel McGrew '15
Johnson/Owen	Daniel Okulitch '99
Wailing Woman	Wooldjina Present
Eliza	Tracy Waagner
Katie Ellen	Ella Vaughan
The Caller	Inayah Raheem

CHORUS SOLOISTS

**Maverick Williams, Isaiah Gallegos, Alaina West,
Chemutai Ruto, Ryan Dearon '18, DaQuan Williams '20,
Ernest Bluford, LaRaya Hudson, Amelia Reines,
Finian Malarkey, Brandon Phillips, Inayah Raheem,
Ella Vaughan, Travis Guillory, William Sulkow**

Omar is an opera in two acts, separated into two parts, that will run approximately two hours and 50 minutes, including one intermission.

*For the December 8 performance of Omar at the
Maltz Performing Arts Center only:*

A pre-concert discussion on the narratives of enslaved individuals will be presented at 6 p.m. by Professors Meredith Gadsby, Charles Peterson, and Caroline Wood Newhall of Oberlin College.

Immediately following the December 8 performance, a post-concert talkback with the soloists and Maestro Kennedy will be led by Professor Caroline Jackson Smith of Oberlin College.

Orchestra

John Kennedy '82, conductor

VIOLIN I

Aria Messina, *concertmaster*

Samantha Kramer, *assistant
concertmaster*

Emily Xu

Sofia Castanho-Bollinger

Casey Reed

Samuel Garcia

Ellen Seok

Isabella Duque Moreno

Erin Koo

Nathaniel Lasaga-Ivey

Sophia-Louise DeLong

VIOLIN II

Matthildur Traustadóttir,
principal

Subi Seo, *assistant principal*

Seunne Khoo

Emily Beckner

Ben Roses

Emily Sonn

Elizabeth Martin

Lucy Hamilton

Maaiké Dam

Faith Meshida

VIOLA

William Mathangani, *principal*

Gracie McFalls, *assistant
principal*

Ian Grossman

Virginia Groce

Chloe Kitzmiller

Liam Young-Skeen

Hanna Manning

Rosie Mead

Leah Vey

Donald Smith

CELLO

Dylan Bachmann, *principal*

SHANE FOUNDATION CHAIR
ENDOWED IN PERPETUITY

Illarion Gershkovich,
assistant principal

Daniel Knapp

Hannah Stone

Ethan La Chapelle

Audrey Deck

Adan Caldera Quintero

Stine Adkins

Carol Liu

Wade Chang

BASS

Malcolm Laurier, *principal*

Caden Stone,
assistant principal

Emily Bergin

Noah Becker

Sophie Leah

Katie Russo

PICCOLO

Jarrod Ghatt

FLUTE

Parv Gosai, *principal*

Jarrod Ghatt

ALTO FLUTE

Parv Gosai

OBOE

MacKenzie Kim, *principal*

Zachary Allen

ENGLISH HORN

Zachary Allen

Orchestra

CLARINET

Diego Florez-Saavedra,
principal
Grant Karhu-Cummings

E-FLAT CLARINET

Diego Florez-Saavedra

BASS CLARINET

Grant Karhu-Cummings

BASSOON

Kody Harrington, *principal*
Nicolas Woodward

CONTRABASSOON

Nicolas Woodward

HORN

Kassi Wilson, *principal*
Abigail Getty

TRUMPET

Soren Edman, *principal*
Luca Ivagnes

TROMBONE

Abe Frato, *principal*
Maddie Schaefer

CONTRABASS TROMBONE

Demitri Resto

TIMPANI

Cendan Dillon, *principal*

PERCUSSION

Mateo Gregorio, *principal*
Kash Radocha
Nathaniel Valsania

PIANO

Kyung-Eun Na* '04

HARP

Elizabeth Johnson

* indicates faculty

OBERLIN COLLEGE CHOIR, OBERLIN GOSPEL CHOIR, AND OBERLIN MUSICAL UNION

Prepared by Brian Bailey, Visiting Conductor for Oberlin College Choir;
La Tanya Hall, Associate Professor of Jazz Voice and Director of the
Oberlin Gospel Choir; and Jami Lercher, Visiting Conductor for Oberlin
Musical Union; with Collaborative Pianists Elena Loskova, Javier Gonzalez,
and Kyung-Eun Na '04

SOPRANO

**Isabelle Balderrama
Rita Beckstrom
Ellen Benson Brehm
Mollie Broadnax
Maya Brown
Lily Clark
Triniti Cole
Nadya Cole
Gwendolyn Gemmell '23
Marta-Marie Giles
Saige Hoffman
Vaughn Holleran
Samantha Lewis
Dawn Liston
Selkie Liu
Natalia Locilento
Dottie Louis
Ayla Lutzeler
Anne V. Martin
Iris Maturen**

**Alice McCoy
Tonántzin Zulema Naegele
Ramírez
Abigail Nordan
Leanne O'Donnell
Linnea "North" Paul
Amelia Reines
Prue Richards '70
Ariel Roberts
Karla W. Sanderson
Linda Shreve
Anna Slade
Fuka Somatomo
Anne Sorisio
Tessa Sternal
Marisa Tayal
Marisell Texeira
Ashlyn Tsui
Ella Vaughn
Sumner Wallace '24
Aria Weiner**

**OBERLIN COLLEGE CHOIR, OBERLIN GOSPEL CHOIR,
AND OBERLIN MUSICAL UNION**

ALTO

**Betsy Rodgers Allen '67
Louise E. Anthony
Catharina Meints Caldwell
Bonnie Cheng
Danka Clara
Teaghan Duff
Eliana Duffy
Drucilla Dumas
Lucie Freeman
James Frothingham
Caroline Kozsey
Aurora Gibney-Krashen
Tali Goelman
Rebekah Grande
Lucy Hall
Erica Hennigs
Elizabeth Houston '06
Laraya Hudson
Margaret Jacquay
Fanxi Ji
Mia Jones
Bruna Junqueira
Lauren Kaskey
Ebunoluwa Lawore
Skylar Lehr-Bryant
PengYu Liu
Nina Love**

**Juliana Ludwig
Eve Martinez
Naima D. McRoberts
Maya Millsape
Logan Modan
Mayumi Naramura '21
Phoenix Ng
Jaylee Oeschger
Batya Postman
Wooldjina Present
Inayah Raheem
Shelly Rasmussen
Chemutai Ruto
Sophia Samra
Kate Seibert
Linda R. Slocum
Juno Rose Thompson
Johanna Vine
Luisa Wang
Zhiduo Wang
Alaina West
Elise Wettach
Eva Yang
Cherlyn Yuan
Kerun Zhang
Wenxuan Zhou**

**OBERLIN COLLEGE CHOIR, OBERLIN GOSPEL CHOIR,
AND OBERLIN MUSICAL UNION**

TENOR

**Ilan Balzac
Elizabeth Baumbach '67
Talia Eisner
Miriam Evans-Sachs
Zhencheng Fan
Jacob Fife
Isaiah Gallegos
Nathan Greeley
Travis Guillory
Jim Hutchinson
Sky Jin
Jacob Kesselman
Michael Lee
Lincoln Mendenhall
Venus Minaya
Anne Palmer '66
R. Peter Richards '65
Jeffrey Thomas Snow
Nimbi Spencer
Henry Stiles-Hall
Parker Teeven
Hovan Voskeridjian
DaQuan Williams '20
Atlas Wrobel**

BASS

**Jerry Achtermann
Silas Adkins-Hooke
Ernest Bluford
Matthew Brown
Wesley Brubaker
Craig Cecil
Ryan Dearon '18
Cal Frye
Robin Ginsberg
Evan Hamilton
Yujie Huang
Andy Junttonen
Naci Konar-Steenberg
David K. Laczko
Noah Lyford
Finian Malarkey
Cade McBride
Henry McCue
Grant North
Max Novik
Daniel Petry
Brandon Jeung Phillips
Thomas Riis '73
Issei Robinson
Owen Shirrell
William Sulkow
Charles Thomas '98
Tom Weston
Maverick Williams**

**CHORUS OF SENEGALESE VILLAGERS, FREE,
AND ENSLAVED PEOPLE**

Prepared by La Tanya Hall, Associate Professor of Jazz Voice
and Director of the Oberlin Gospel Choir

SOPRANO

Mollie Broadnax
Triniti Cole
Saige Hoffman
Amelia Reines
Chemutai Ruto
Ella Vaughan

ALTO

LaRaya Hudson
Naima McRoberts
Maya Millsape
Wooldjina Present
Inayah Raheem
Alaina West

TENOR

Ilan Balzac
Travis Guillory
Lincoln Mendenhall
Venus Minaya
JT Snow
DaQuan Williams '20

BASS

Ernest Bluford
Ryan Dearon '18
Henry McCue
Max Novik
Daniel Petry
Issei Robinson

Program Notes

“Or they will never know”

Omar ibn Said and the Power of the Word

by Mark Burford

This article originally published by San Francisco Opera

In the final scene of the opera *Omar*, Julie, an enslaved woman who met the title character at a slave auction in Charleston, South Carolina, confesses her fascination with his literacy: “You know, they told me you could write / Didn’t really believe it, I don’t think / But then they gave you pen and ink / and you wrote a word.” Earlier in the act, Julie shared that her father, sold away when she was 10 years old, wore the same traditional kufi cap and adhered to similar dietary restrictions as Omar—that he, too, had been a Muslim. Julia urges Omar to use his ability to write as a buttress against the erasure of their shared histories. “Tell your story, Omar—you must / Or they will never know, and we will fade into dust.” The flesh and blood Omar ibn Said, born in West Africa and enslaved in the American South, did write his story, and the opera that bears his name, by Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels, draws inspiration from those words and reveals their lasting power.

One might situate *The Life of Omar ibn Said* among the roughly 6,000 surviving slave narratives by African-descended people in the United States, including those contributed by Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Jacobs, and *Twelve Years a Slave* protagonist Solomon Northup. But, for many reasons, Omar’s 13-page manuscript—written in 1831 and rediscovered in a forgotten trunk in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1995—stands apart. Above all, it is the only known slave narrative written in Arabic. The overwhelming majority of slave narratives were dictated to white writers and were often mediated by their editorial intervention and predilections in shaping the story. Omar’s autobiography has received multiple translations into English, but the unfamiliarity of Arabic to his contemporaries means that we have a version of his story in his own hand. It is also a unique instance of a slave narrative produced while the subject was still enslaved and written by an author who was literate well before being sold into bondage.

From his autobiography, we learn that Omar was born around 1770 in the Futa Toro region in present-day Senegal as a member of the predominantly Muslim Fulbe ethnic group and a scion of a wealthy family. A devout scholar of the Qur'an, Omar was immersed in study of this sacred book of Islam for 25 years, with his mother, featured prominently in the opera, as one of his teachers. At the time of his capture by raiding ethnic rivals in 1807—just a year before the abolition of the U.S. slave trade—Omar was a teacher-scholar and a prosperous trader. His new life began when the conquering army “walked me to the big Sea, and sold me into the hand of a Christian man who bought me and walked me to the big Ship.” A month and a half later, he landed in Charleston and was sold to “a weak, small, evil man called Johnson,” from whom he escaped, walking over 200 miles to Fayetteville, North Carolina, where he lived in servitude to James Owen until his death in 1864.

The more humane and God-fearing Owen's purchase of Omar, who went from backbreaking field labor to life as a house servant and gardener, was precipitated by Omar's literacy and faith. Islam was introduced to the United States most significantly by enslaved Black Africans, and some scholars estimate that as many as 20 percent of African arrivals were Muslim. Not many, however, were literate like Omar, who before he was sold to Owen gained local celebrity when, while on the run, he was captured and jailed for 16 days in Fayetteville and wrote prayers beseeching deliverance on the walls of his cell in Arabic. In the opera, Owen's daughter Eliza is transfixed by the indecipherable beauty of Omar's right-to-left script—“words that fly”—telling her father: “Surely, if God wrote, he would write like that.”

What we know about Omar from his autobiography is supplemented by the newspaper stories, journal articles, and memoirs that chronicle the singular slave who could write words his captors could not understand. Another feature of Omar's biography underscored by white observers was his purported conversion to Christianity. Owen's character in the opera respects Omar's erudition, but dismisses the substance of his beliefs. “He knows a few things, I'll grant you,” Owen tells his friend Taylor, “but it's clear he gives allegiance to a false God.”

The conventional narrative of Omar's spiritual journey is typified by an 1863 *New York Observer* article by Presbyterian minister William Plumer. "Gradually he seemed to lose his interest in the Koran, and to show more interest in the Sacred Scriptures, until he finally gave up his faith in Mahomet [Muhammad], and became a believer in Jesus Christ," Plumer wrote. Islam "has been supplanted in his heart by the better faith in Christ Jesus."

Omar did claim that he converted to Christianity, and in his later years he regularly attended a Presbyterian church. But Plumer's certainty that he abdicated Islamic scripture is belied by the fact that of the 13 surviving documents in Omar's handwriting, the last, written in 1857 when he was in his 80s, is a transcription the *surah* (chapter from the Qur'an) *al-Nasr*, which celebrates the victory of Islam. Indeed, Omar's autobiography, which expresses his unequivocal gratitude for Master Owen's benevolence, begins with a prologue that we might read as slyly subversive anti-slavery protest: an extended quotation of *surah al-Mulk*, which proclaims Allah to be the Master of all. Religion scholar Kambiz GhaneaBassiri has argued that Omar negotiated the condition of being a Black African Muslim enslaved by white American Christians through Islam's "poly-religious" capacity. This is less a matter of one set of beliefs superseding another, or the emergence of a new syncretic blend of two religious practices, than a search for theological common ground. In his autobiography, Omar juxtaposed the Lord's Prayer and *surah al-Fatiha*, each being, GhaneaBassiri explains, "a scriptural prayer memorized for ritual recitation" by Christians and Muslims, respectively.

Thinking of *Omar* as an exploration of a poly-religious worldview brokered by the written word helps us make sense of how two themes—the talisman-like significance of Omar's Arabic literacy and the slippery historical question of his conversion from Islam to Christianity—drive the opera. Plumer remembered "once hearing [Omar] read and translate the twenty-third psalm, and shall never forget the earnestness and fervor which shone in the old man's countenance, as he read." This anecdote is rendered in one of the opera's most powerful scenes. After Owen gives Omar a copy of the Bible in Arabic,

Omar sings a mesmerizing aria that sets the 23rd Psalm interspersed with an interpretive gloss that transforms its meaning. In Omar's reading, "He leadeth me beside still waters" is a reminder of "the big Sea" that carried him away from his home to slavery, and the climactic verse "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever," blurring the distinction between Lord and master, is less an anticipation of eternal life than Omar's stark, existential confrontation with the reality of never again knowing freedom.

And yet the enslaved Muslim's autobiography and the opera's production both suggest how Omar's canny manipulation of Christian dogma to affirm his Muslim faith through the power of the word—as Arabic script and as Islamic scripture—perhaps represents another form of freedom and leads us toward a revised understanding of history. If the record left behind by Omar ibn Said's Christian contemporaries depicts an aberrant, if compelling, slave who finally saw the light, his own words, written in his autobiography and sung as the opera closes, register his self-determination and how he hoped to be remembered: "I am Omar. I love to read the book, the Great Qur'an."

Mark Burford is associate professor of music at Reed College and the author of Mahalia Jackson and the Black Gospel Field.

INSTRUMENTATION

2 flutes (1st dbl. alto flute, 2nd dbl. piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd dbl. English horn), 2 clarinets (1st dbl. E-flat clarinet, 2nd dbl. bass clarinet), 2 bassoons (2nd dbl. contrabassoon), 2 horns, 2 trumpets, 2 trombones, contrabass trombone, timpani, percussion (snare drum, bass drum, frame drum, djembe, crotales, triangle, finger cymbals, tambourine, suspended cymbal, tam-tam, xylophone, piatti, slapstick/whip), piano, harp, strings

Composer Notes

Omar is at once a story of one man and of many. He is himself trying to understand the shape his life has taken; he is the enslaved Muslim (of which there were so many more than we will ever know) seeking his community in any way he can; he is the eternal outsider. The fractured yet steadfast nature of the culture that formed around the members of the African diaspora struggling for survival in the Americas wraps around his journey, as I have envisioned it; the anonymous voices of the countless Black musical creators from my musical lineage are shot through a score that is nevertheless firmly situated at a crossroads of the folk and western classical traditions. Who was Omar? We will never really know. This Omar is merely one of a thousand different possible interpretations of his writings and what we know of his life. Nevertheless, I heard an echo of his voice reaching out to me over the centuries—I felt the spirits rise in me with every word written and every note composed. I felt a connection to a time that I cannot easily imagine; a time that tested the ancestors, gave no quarter, and took an unfathomable strength of spirit to survive. I hope this is merely the beginning of the artistic renderings of this remarkable man—let this be not the last operatic word on Omar, but merely the first. And I am honored it is so.

—Rhiannon Giddens, *Co-Composer/Librettist*

Omar is the story of one man's physical and spiritual journey, as told from veiled references in his own autobiography and interpreted through Rhiannon Giddens' moving libretto. Musically, the piece shows as many influences as the many cultures it flows through, from the music of Senegal and the broader Muslim diaspora to the earliest melody transcribed from enslaved people in North America, to spirituals, bluegrass, Protestant hymns, Gershwin, and even a touch of Wagner. The chorus plays a prominent, active role in the work, as a way to center it in a Black community that is multifaceted and real. These diverse elements are unified via the use of a traditional orchestral palette and immensely singable vocal lines.

—Michael Abels, *Co-Composer*

Synopsis

by Mark Lyons, courtesy of Los Angeles Opera

Act One

Scene One: 1806, Futa Toro (a region of West Africa now part of Senegal)

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

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

Scene Two: The Middle Passage

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

Scene Three: The Charleston Slave Market, South Carolina

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

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

Scene Four: Johnson's Plantation

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

Scene Five: Johnson's Plantation, five months later

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

Act Two

Scene One: Fayetteville County Jail, North Carolina

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

Scene Two: Owen's Plantation

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

Scene Three: Owen's Study

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

Scene Four: Owen's Plantation

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

Scene Five: Owen's Plantation (finale)

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

About the Co-Composer

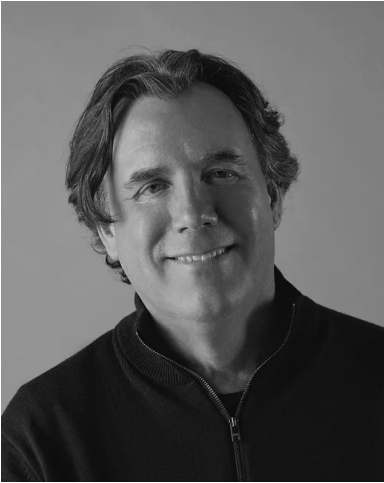
Michael Abels



Michael Abels, the Pulitzer Prize-winning co-composer of *Omar*, is best known for his genre-defying scores for the Jordan Peele films *Get Out*, *Us*, and *Nope*. The score for *Us* won a World Soundtrack Award, the Jerry Goldsmith Award, a Critics Choice nomination, and was named “Score of the Decade” by *The Wrap*. The score for *Nope* was also shortlisted for the Best Original Score Oscar. This year he scored the Disney Plus series *Star Wars: The Acolyte*, for which Abels co-wrote the original song “The Power of Two” with Grammy Award-winners Victoria Monet and D’Mile. Upcoming media projects include the score for the Netflix limited series *Sirens* starring Julianne Moore. Abels’ creative output also includes many concert works, including the choral song cycle *At War with Ourselves* for the Kronos Quartet, the Grammy-nominated *Isolations Variation* for Hilary Hahn, and *Frederick’s Fables* (Cedille). Abels’ concert music has been performed by the New York Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony, Los Angeles Master Chorale, and many others. Recent commissions include *Emerge* for the National Symphony, the guitar concerto *Borders* for Grammy-nominated artist Mak Grgic, and *Unbound*, a symphonic tribute to Olympic champion Jesse Owens. His upcoming projects include commissions for Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, Silkroad Ensemble, and the Detroit Symphony. Abels is a frequent guest lecturer at universities and was the commencement speaker for the USC Thornton School of Music for 2024. 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.

About the Conductor

John Kennedy '82



As a conductor, composer, and artistic leader, John Kennedy is a devoted agent of music as a living cultural force. With a legacy of artistic leadership fueled by creativity and experimentalism, Kennedy has led acclaimed performances worldwide of opera, orchestral, dance, and new music. A graduate of Oberlin and Northwestern University, Kennedy first forged his path in New York as a percussionist, founding the ensemble Essential Music, with which he resurrected the music of Johanna Beyer, toured with John Cage in 1991, and led a 112-musician orchestra at the first Lincoln Center Festival in 1996. He later founded and led Santa Fe New Music (2000-2012) and worked for many years with Spoleto Festival U.S.A., serving as director of the orchestra and opera programs from 2011-2023. At Spoleto, he built the orchestra into an ensemble hailed by international press and led 11 world and U.S. opera premieres, including the 2022 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Omar* by Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels, Huang Ruo's *Paradise Interrupted*, and operas by Dusapin, Francesconi, Glass, Hosokawa, Lachenmann, Lim, and Saariaho. He has conducted more than 300 premieres, and wide-ranging projects have brought him to the New York City Ballet, the San Francisco Opera, Singapore International Festival of the Arts, Kanagawa Festival, and many other organizations. Kennedy is a prolific composer whose music has been noted for its beauty and environmental consciousness, and he has been commissioned from organizations including Other Minds, Sarasota Opera, and Santa Fe Opera.

Performer Biographies

Rhiannon Giddens '00 (Julie) **Co-Composer/Librettist**



Rhiannon Giddens has made a singular, iconic career out of stretching her brand of folk music, with its miles-deep historical roots and contemporary sensibilities, into just about every field imaginable. A two-time Grammy Award-winning singer and instrumentalist, MacArthur “Genius” grant recipient, and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer of opera, ballet, and film, Giddens has centered her work around the mission of lifting up people whose contributions to American musical history have previously been overlooked or erased, and advocating for a more accurate understanding of the country’s musical origins through art.

Pitchfork once said of Giddens: “Few artists are so fearless and so ravenous in their exploration.” It’s a journey that led NPR to name her one of its 25 Most Influential Women Musicians of the 21st Century and *American Songwriter* to call her “one of the most important musical minds currently walking the planet.”

Limmie Pulliam '98 (Omar)



Rising dramatic tenor Limmie Pulliam has thrilled audiences with his captivating stage presence and his “stentorian, yet beautiful” sound. The 2024-2025 season will feature a combination of exciting debuts and returns for Pulliam, including his role debut as Calaf in *Turandot* for a special benefit concert for University of Houston’s Moore School of Music, followed by further performances of the role in his debut with the Minnesota Orchestra, conducted by Thomas Søndergård. Also on the symphonic stage, he returns to the Cleveland Orchestra under the baton of Franz Welser-Möst for Mahler’s *Das Lied von der Erde*, with additional performances at the Tonhalle Orchester Zürich. Following his successful 2022 Metropolitan Opera debut as Radamès in *Aida*, he joins Baltimore Symphony Orchestra in the same role led by Music Director Jonathan Heyward and collaborates again with Yannick Nézet-Seguin in his debut with the Orchestre Métropolitain for Bruckner’s *Te Deum*. Elsewhere, he makes his role and house debut as Samson in *Samson et Dalila* with New Orleans Opera, house debuts with Austin Opera for Verdi’s *Requiem* and Arizona Opera as Radamès in *Aida*, and returns to Oberlin Conservatory for special performances of Rhiannon Giddens’ *Omar*.

Krysty Swann (Fatima)



Acclaimed mezzo-soprano Krysty Swann has been hailed for her beautiful and rich voice, as well as her captivating presence on stage. *The Washington Post* declared, “Krysty Swann has a voice, and she knows how to use it...[She] displayed an instrument of immense power, natural beauty of tone and luscious legato line.” The Philadelphia-born, New York-based mezzo-soprano also had the pleasure of being featured on the cover of *Opera News* with the great Dolora Zajick.

Swann opened last season as Jade Boucher in *Dead Man Walking* with the Metropolitan Opera, which was followed by the Mother in New Orleans Opera’s production of *Blue*. She continued the season with Cousin Blanche in *Champion* with Lyric Opera of Chicago, Schönberg’s *Gurre-Lieder* with the American Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall, *Messiah* with the Evansville Philharmonic, and *Sanctuary Road* with Princeton Pro Musica. Swann also joined the Rochester Philharmonic for the finale of its centennial season, featuring Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 9* and the world premiere of Derrick Skye’s *To Seek is Jubilance*; she sang on concerts with Maryland Opera and On Site Opera; and she joined Opera Theatre of Saint Louis for a series of workshops as part of its New Works Collective.

This season, Swann returns to Lyric Opera of Chicago to sing Girlfriend 3 and cover the Mother in *Blue*. She also joins Oberlin Conservatory to sing Fatima in *Omar* and Indianapolis Symphonic Choir for Dett’s *The Ordering of Moses*. She’ll close the season with a return to Opera Theatre of Saint Louis as Beulah in the world premiere of Ricky Ian Gordon, Lynn Nottage, and Ruby Aiyo Gerber’s *This House*.

Michael Preacely, '99 (Abe/Abdul)



Michael Preacely, an American baritone based in Lexington, Kentucky, has emerged as a prominent figure on the operatic stage. His burgeoning career has seen him perform with leading opera houses and orchestras in the United States and internationally, earning widespread critical acclaim.

Preacely's international performances have taken him across Europe, Asia, Russia, and Canada. In the U.S., he has been featured by esteemed opera companies such as Cincinnati Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Opera Memphis, Kentucky Opera, and Cleveland Opera. He has collaborated with many of the nation's top orchestras, including the Cincinnati Symphony, Detroit Symphony, Hilton Head Symphony, Asheville Symphony, Oakland East Bay Symphony, Memphis Symphony, Hamilton-Fairfield Symphony, the Cleveland Orchestra, Cleveland Pops, Cincinnati Pops, the American Spiritual Ensemble, and most recently, the American Pops Orchestra.

In addition to his impressive stage credits and critical acclaim, Preacely has received numerous accolades, including awards from the Fritz and Jensen Vocal Competition and the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. He serves as a lecturer in voice at the University of Kentucky and is the founder and artistic director of the newly established Uniting Voices Lexington.

Daniel McGrew '15 (Auctioneer/Taylor)



Tenor Daniel McGrew won first prize in the 2021 YCA Susan Wadsworth International Auditions. He has appeared in song recitals with Brooklyn Art Song Society, New York Festival of Song, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, and the University Musical Society, where he joined Martin Katz and others for recitals comprising the complete Mörike Songs of Hugo Wolf.

McGrew's recital and chamber music appearances include Carnegie Hall, the Kennedy Center, Morgan Library & Museum, Merkin Hall, and others. He has appeared as soloist with the American Chamber Orchestra, Bach Collegium-Fort Wayne, and Parlando Chamber Orchestra.

McGrew appeared at Tanglewood in George Benjamin's *Lessons in Love and Violence*, Bernstein's *A Quiet Place*, and in a performance of Kurtág's *Three Ancient Inscriptions*, which *The Boston Globe* called "viciously beautiful."

In 2024-2025 McGrew will be soloist with ProMusica Chamber Orchestra, Worcester Chorus, and the Richmond Symphony. He will be presented at Brown University, Howard Community College, Cincinnati Song Initiative, New York Festival of Song, and elsewhere. He has performed Bach with conductors including Matthew Halls, John Harbison, David Hill, and Masaaki Suzuki, and toured with Juilliard415 and Yale University's Schola Cantorum. He has participated in concerts including the symphonic premiere of James Lapine's *Sondheim on Sondheim* with the Boston Pops Orchestra and David Loud's Sondheim revue *A Good Thing Going*.

McGrew earned degrees from Oberlin Conservatory, Yale University, and the University of Michigan.

Daniel Okulitch '99 (Johnson/Owen)



The renowned Canadian bass-baritone Daniel Okulitch is known for his commanding stage presence and impressive vocal versatility, performing with major opera companies and orchestras around the world. Okulitch is especially sought-after for contemporary repertoire; his world premieres include the role of Ennis del Mar in Charles Wuorinen's *Brokeback Mountain* at Teatro Real, he premiered Lyndon B. Johnson in David T. Little and Royce Vavrek's *JFK* at Fort Worth Opera, performed General Groves in John Adams' *Dr. Atomic* at Santa Fe Opera, and made his British debut as Mark Rutland in Nico Muhly's *Marnie* at English National Opera. Okulitch made a notable role debut as the Protector in George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* at Opéra de Montréal, followed by Katie Mitchell's production of *Lessons in Love and Violence* at Gran Teatre del Liceu. He recently returned to Opéra de Montréal to debut the role of Axel Oxenstierna in the world premiere of *La Reine-garçon*, which he reprises in the 2024-2025 season with his debut at the Canadian Opera Company. Elsewhere this season, he sings the role of Johan in the world premiere of Paola Prestini's *Silent Light* at National Sawdust in New York, in a production by Thaddeus Strassberger and led by Christopher Rountree, and returns to the Protector in George Benjamin's *Written on Skin*, making his debut with the Deutsche Oper, Berlin. In concert, Okulitch sings Brahms' *Ein deutsches Requiem* with Malmö Symphony Orchestra under Pierre Bleuse and reprises Handel's *Messiah* with Seattle Symphony Orchestra conducted by Aram Demirjian.

DaQuan Williams '20 (Amadou)



DaQuan (Dae) Williams is a multidisciplinary artist and social media specialist who sings with the Cleveland Chamber Choir and Oberlin's Musical Union. Growing up in Chicago, he was exposed to a wide variety of music and has experience singing in many different styles, from Baroque choral music to contemporary gospel to being a lead singer on PBS's first cooking show for kids. Williams earned a Bachelor of Arts in Musical Studies and Anthropology from Oberlin College and Conservatory in 2020, primarily focusing his studies in the fields of choral conducting, music education, and ethnomusicology. For his senior capstone, he wrote a media ethnography about the popularization of virtual choirs in the wake of COVID-19. When he's not signing, Williams is either raving about beets, in a Logic Pro X session, making a social post, or working on his next documentary.

Ryan Dearon '18 (Olufemi)



Bass-baritone Ryan Dearon is a Chicago native and an active singer-actor. In concert, he has performed with the Grant Park Festival Chorus and as a soloist with various choral ensembles in the Chicagoland area. On stage, he has been featured in a variety of operas; most recent productions include Handel's *Alcina* (Melisso), Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (Sarastro), and Puccini's *La Bohème* (Benoît/Alcindoro). This concert opera marks his third major performance with Oberlin Conservatory, following Nkeiru Okoye's *Harriet Tubman: When I Crossed that Line to Freedom* (Robert). Dearon's performances have taken him across the U.S. and abroad to many countries, including the U.K., Italy, Jordan, and Canada. He is an alum of Northwestern University's Bienen School of Music and Oberlin College and Conservatory.

Tracy Waagner (Eliza)



Tracy Waagner is a fourth-year mezzo-soprano pursuing a bachelor's degree in vocal performance at Oberlin Conservatory. She has been actively involved in projects that showcase underrepresented composers in Western classical and jazz music, driven by her belief in music's ability to tell universally resonant stories. Waagner's operatic credits with Oberlin Opera Theater include Le Prince Charmant in *Cendrillon*, Florence in *Albert Herring*, and Baroness/Alto Chorus in *Candide*. Onstage in opera scenes, she sang Dorabella from *Così fan tutte*, Sesto from *Giulio Cesare*, Ariodante from *Ariodante*, and Stephane from *Roméo et Juliette*. She has worked as a hair, wig, and makeup assistant for five Oberlin Opera Theater operas, as well as a wig and hair designer for theater. She would like to thank her professors and coaches for their guidance, and her family for their unwavering support.

Ella Vaughn (Katie Ellen)



Ella Vaughn is a second-year voice performance major at Oberlin who studies under Katherine Jolly. She recently sang the title role in Oberlin's fall opera *Cendrillon*. In summer 2024, she attended Chicago Summer Opera and performed in *Albert Herring*. In 2024, she was named a winner in the Schmidt Vocal Arts Undergraduate Competition. In 2023, she won first place in the Schmidt Vocal Arts National Competition in Sarasota, Florida, and was a YoungArts finalist. Before attending Oberlin, she received first-place awards from the George Shirley Competition, Matinée Musicale, the Overture Awards, and the Martha Marcks Mack Vocal Award. Vaughn was introduced to classical singing in her hometown of Cincinnati, Ohio.

Travis Guillory (Suleiman)



Travis Guillory is a student at Oberlin Conservatory pursuing a major in classical voice performance and minors in African American music and French. He has been active in Oberlin's opera productions, playing Guillot in Offenbach's *Le mariage aux lanternes*, Don Eusebio in Rossini's *L'occasione fa il ladro*, the Governor in Bernstein's *Candide*, and Apollo in Monteverdi's *L'orfeo*. He will sing the role of Don Anchise in Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* in the spring. Guillory is an active member of Oberlin College Black Musicians Guild and the Denyce Graves Foundation Shared Voices Initiative.

Wooldjina Present (Wailing Woman)



Haitian-American soprano Wooldjina Present is a fifth-year student of Katherine Jolly. In the fall of 2022, she performed as Denise in Offenbach's *Le mariage aux lanternes* with Oberlin Opera Theater. She sang in Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with the Oberlin Choral Ensembles at the 2022 United Nations Concert Gala at Carnegie Hall. In 2023, she performed Alice 3 in the premiere of Melissa Dunphy's *Alice Tierney* with Oberlin Opera Theater. She also sang in R. Nathaniel Dett's *The Ordering of Moses* with Oberlin Choral Ensembles at Carnegie Hall. She made her professional debut as Alice 3 in *Alice Tierney* at Opera Columbus. She has sung in master classes for Randall Scarlata, Denyce Graves, Sylvia McNair, and others. Present is honored to be a voice in the choral ensembles in Rhiannon Giddens' and Michael Abels' *Omar*.

Inayah Raheem (The Caller)



Inayah Raheem is a mezzo-soprano hailing from Columbia, South Carolina. She is a fifth-year vocal performance and Africana studies major at Oberlin College and Conservatory. This fall, Raheem performed the role of Le Prince Charmant in Massenet's *Cendrillon* with Oberlin Opera Theater. Previously, she performed the role of Mrs. deRocher in *Dead Man Walking* by Jake Heggie at the Miami Music Festival and Nancy in Benjamin Britten's *Albert Herring* with Oberlin Opera Theater. Raheem is a member of the Shared Voices Cohort with the Denyce Graves Foundation and a winner of the 2023-2024 Schmidt Vocal Arts Undergraduate Competition, Upper Division. She studies under Professor Timothy LeFebvre.

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Marjorie Gold

Production Manager/Technical
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Dwight “Monty” Monteith

Director of Ensemble Operations

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Please note that photography and the use of recording devices are not permitted.

Remember to turn off all cellular phones before the performance begins.

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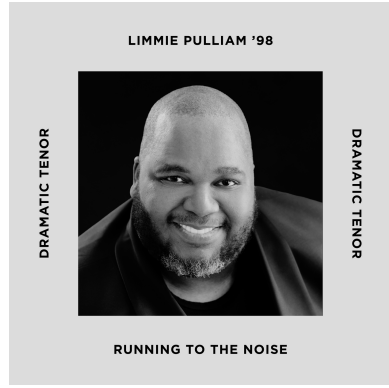
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And there's more!



Now that you've experienced Rhiannon Giddens and Limmie Pulliam on stage, learn more about what led them to their extraordinary careers.

In separate episodes of ***Running to the Noise***—the official podcast of Oberlin College and Conservatory—Giddens and Pulliam speak with Oberlin President Carmen Twillie Ambar about their experience with *Omar*, life as Oberlin students, and the moments that define the work they're doing today.

Scan the code to
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