

Fire Shut Up in My Bones inaugurates new season at Metropolitan Opera in New York

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10 November 2021

The Metropolitan Opera and Carnegie Hall in New York are two of the many well-known concert venues that have reopened this fall across the United States. This is part of the continuing drive to reopen the economy, promoted with propaganda about “living with COVID-19.”

While musicians and soloists have welcomed the opportunity to perform before live audiences once again, and these venues require proof of vaccination and the use of masks indoors, the reality of the continuing pandemic looms in the background. By some accounts, audiences—with the high numbers of infected and the growing numbers of breakthrough infections among the vaccinated no doubt in mind—remain reluctant to fill auditoriums to capacity.

The opera that opened the Met’s fall season, however, has attracted a large audience. *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, with music by Terence Blanchard and libretto by Kasi Lemmons, has been heavily advertised as the first opera by a black composer in the Met’s 138-year history. First staged by the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 2019, it is based on the 2014 memoir of the same title by *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow. It tells the story of Blow’s life up to the age of 20, as he wrestles with the psychological trauma of childhood sexual abuse and with his own sexuality, reaching maturity with the help of his devoted mother.

The new opera is being promoted as the contribution of the classical music world, and the Met in particular, to atone for the racism that allegedly pervades culture and all of American life. This is part and parcel of the support for identity politics, fostered by major sections of the ruling class and so widespread in cultural and artistic circles today.

Blow himself is an unabashed proponent of this perspective, advanced by the *Times*’ “1619 Project,” which sees race as the overriding issue in US politics and history, and holds the “white working class” to blame for racism and racial inequality.

However, the opera must be considered on its own merits. Its theme has little to do with identity politics. It is, in fact, quite successful as a work of musical theater—much more successful than some of the other contemporary works presented by the Met, which are themselves relatively few in number over the past 50 years, and which have often disappeared after their initial productions.

The opera begins with a scene of Charles (baritone Will Liverman) at the age of 20, seething with rage, on his way back home from college in Louisiana and thinking of settling accounts with an older cousin who molested him as a child. The story of his childhood and teenage years is then told in flashback. We meet his hard-working mother, Billie (soprano Latonia Moore), throwing her unfaithful husband out of the home and struggling to raise five sons on a job in a chicken processing plant. The young Charles (called Char’es-Baby, and sung by a remarkable 12-year-old Walter Russell III), more sensitive and different from his older brothers, is often subjected to their innocent but cruel bullying (“Char’es-Baby, youngest of five”).

Later in Act 1, the sexual abuse is indicated in a scene that is suitably indirect, but still clear. Charles battles feelings of shame and uncertainty,

turning (in Acts 2 and 3) to the church at one point, and later to a fraternity at Grambling State, the historically black university to which he has been admitted.

After a number of other interludes, Charles speaks to his mother on the phone and finds out that the same cousin who abused him is visiting. The opera reprises its opening scene, with Charles heading home, gun in hand. Then, however, a vision of Char’es-Baby appears, urging him to “leave it in the road.” The opera concludes with a reunion between Charles and his mother. Several arias and themes are reprised, including Charles’ “I Was Once a Boy of Peculiar Grace” and Billie’s “Leave It in the Road.”

Composer Terence Blanchard, 58, began his long and estimable career in jazz as a trumpeter. He worked with such giants as Art Blakey and Lionel Hampton. Later, his work included composing most of the film scores for Spike Lee’s movies, including the recent *Da 5 Bloods*, for which he received an Academy Award nomination. *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* is his second opera, after *Champion*, from 2013, on the life of the boxer Emile Griffith.

Blanchard’s contribution to the new opera is impressive. Although music, libretto, set and costumes combine into a coherent whole, Blanchard’s music is understandably its most important element and is reason enough to see the opera again. He has fused elements of jazz, big band music, even gospel with classical composition technique and the forces of the Met Orchestra, led by its music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin. The result is unmistakably operatic. The use of other styles, especially jazz, only strengthens the opera as a whole. Blanchard himself has called the work “an opera in jazz.”

The composer, whose father was an amateur opera singer, grew up in New Orleans, where he absorbed various musical influences, but especially jazz and blues. He has called Duke Ellington, Billy Strayhorn and Jelly Roll Morton inspirations who have guided his musical career, and his jazz background is also reflected in his incorporation of a rhythm section into the Met Orchestra.

Among the musical excerpts that make the biggest impression in “Fire” are Billie’s above mentioned Act 1 aria, “Leave It in the Road”; Charles’s extended aria, accompanied by a chorus of his brothers, “I Once Was a Boy of Peculiar Grace,” in Act 2; and “Bend, Don’t Break,” Charles’s declaration at the climax of the story. These are by no means the sum total of the work, however.

This production of the opera is co-directed by James Robinson and the well-known choreographer Camille A. Brown, whose work is also prominently displayed in several big dance sequences. These include a dream ballet in Act 2, in which Charles has visions of alluring men; and a step-dance performed by the members of the Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity in Act 3. The step-dance is certainly unusual for the Met stage, but it works in the context of the story.

The cast includes some who have already made their mark at the Metropolitan and other leading opera houses around the US and internationally, and it was uniformly effective. Latonia Moore, as Billie,

and Angel Blue, in three separate roles (Greta, with whom Charles has a brief love affair, and the symbolic characters of Destiny and Loneliness, whom Charles confronts as he attempts to deal with difficult and painful memories), were particularly outstanding. Both of these sopranos have sung several roles in Giacomo Puccini operas, and Blanchard's work has been called "post-Puccini lyricism," a phrase that seemed particularly apt for the closing scene between Charles and Billie.

Latonia Moore originated the role of Serena and Angel Blue sang Bess in the outstanding new production at the Met in 2019 of George and Ira Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. They are singing the same roles in the revival of *Porgy* in the current season.

The college-age Charles is sung by baritone Will Liverman, a Juilliard Music School graduate who has also sung Papageno in *The Magic Flute*, among other roles. Other cast members, in addition to Walter Russell III playing Char'es-Baby, include tenor Chauncey Packer, as Charles' unfaithful father Spinner, and baritone Chris Kenney, as the cousin who molests Char'es-Baby.

More must be said about the music of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. A first listening by anyone familiar with American opera of the past century will immediately call to mind George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*. More than 90 years ago, the composer of such works as *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Concerto in F* conceived the idea of an opera based on DuBose Heyward's play, *Porgy*. After long preparation, the work was premiered on Broadway in 1935. Although presented to great acclaim on operatic stages in Europe, it was not presented by a US opera company until 1976, in Houston, and it did not appear at the Met until 1985—a half century after its premiere on Broadway.

It does no injustice to Blanchard to compare his serious and honorable effort to the much superior work by Gershwin, along with his librettist brother Ira and DuBose Heyward. *Porgy*, the only opera by the greatest of American composers, who died tragically and prematurely at the age of 38, sets an undeniably high bar for contemporary opera. Indeed, the composer of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* should take the comparison to *Porgy* as a compliment.

Both Gershwin and Blanchard set their work among the poor and exploited African American population in the US South. The spirit of suffering, self-sacrifice, determination and a certain stoicism that animates Bess and other characters in *Porgy* can be seen in Blanchard's and Lemmons' Billie, as well as in Charles himself. "Leave It in the Road" is somewhat reminiscent of the music of Bess and Serena in the earlier opera. Like Gershwin's *Porgy*, the music is tonal and directly accessible, and it fuses blues and jazz influences with the operatic form.

While *Porgy and Bess* was greeted by popular enthusiasm and praise from many sections of the music world, and has since been enjoyed by many millions all over the globe, it was also harshly criticized in some quarters when it first appeared. It was accused of trafficking in African American stereotypes. Another claim was that its creators, George and Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heyward, could not do justice to a story of African Americans because they were white. These same charges are leveled today by the partisans of identity politics.

The racist accusations are utterly false. *Porgy and Bess* has stood the test of time. The 2019 production of the opera at the Met was extended, the first time this had occurred in the modern history of that opera company. And, after the interruption caused by the pandemic, the production has been revived in the current season.

In addition, the libretto of *Porgy*—precisely because it deals with a community that is bound together in a common struggle—is more powerful than that of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, which is confined more to the struggle of individuals for survival. While Porgy is the central character of the opera, he is inseparable from his community in Catfish Row, and he has the support of his neighbors. This enables the opera to give a fuller and truer approximation of life.

Porgy and Bess finds its expression in its soaring and powerful music. Both words and music emerge from a period of mass struggle, the first third of the 20th century. These decades saw the Russian Revolution, worldwide struggles of the working class, the fight against Jim Crow racism and mass poverty.

It is not Terence Blanchard's fault, of course, that he has matured in a very different period. His work, for all of its strengths, also reflects the problems of contemporary classical music, and opera in particular, problems that have social and political roots.

Much has been made, as noted above, of Blanchard's role as the first black composer to have an opera performed at the Met. Blanchard, however, while acceding to the general racial interpretation, also has said, "I don't want to be a Black composer; I want to be a composer." It must be noted, however, that Blanchard, while crediting the influence of Ellington, Strayhorn and Morton, does not acknowledge the obvious debt he owes to Gershwin. This may reflect a certain nationalist outlook on his own part, a stance also suggested by his long association with filmmaker Lee.

Ignoring Gershwin fits in with the buildup the new opera is being given in media circles and by the Met and the broader musical establishment. *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* is being presented as an exclusively "black" story and black opera. While the opera and its production can and must be welcomed, it is necessary to criticize this aspect. The broader meaning of the story should not be subordinated to a narrow nationalism. Indeed, in one of the intermission interviews during the opera's HD presentation on October 23, Latonia Moore correctly noted that this was "a universal story." Her colleague Angel Blue pointed to a certain continuity between the work of Italian master Puccini and the musical language of the new opera.

This is precisely the issue that is explored in greater detail in David Walsh's essay on the WSWS several years ago, "Against racialism in film and art." As Walsh explains, discussing films such as *Fences* and *Moonlight*, which deal sympathetically with important themes that are not commonly seen on screen, the films are nevertheless seriously weakened by an approach that treats their stories in an insular way, ignoring broader social issues and depicting their subjects simply as representatives of black life or culture.

As far as the absence of black composers at the Met Opera, this cannot be understood if it is ripped out of the history of Western opera itself, originating as it did in Europe. It is not the consequence of "structural racism," as has been claimed—certainly not for the last half century. The problems of contemporary opera have social and historical roots. There have been few contemporary operas, and fewer still that deal with the lives and experiences of the working class, no matter what their skin color. The work of Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber and others has found very few successors. The absence of the working class from the world of opera is rarely discussed, and the focus on race is another way of diverting attention from the very nature of the opera world and the crisis of culture in the current period of protracted capitalist decay.

The modern operatic form, dating from the 17th century, began to flower in the 18th, in the work of Handel, Gluck and Mozart. The 19th century, the revolutionary period of the rise of modern capitalism, was also the period of the greatest flourishing of opera, in the work of Verdi, Wagner and many others.

While, of course, the history of opera has its national forms, it cannot be analyzed and understood within a racial prism. Indeed, the current work, with its mixture of blues, jazz and classical forms, demonstrates the interpenetration of various forms, an interpenetration that leads to new and deeper development.

In the 21st century, the classics of the past retain their immense appeal, while the future of the operatic form is something of an open question. Attempts to discard tonality, in opera and in classical music generally,

have only led to a dead end. Many new operatic productions, based on post-modernist re-imaginings of the original stories, have been similarly sterile, and in some cases quite retrograde. In this regard, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* is noteworthy because its creators, and its composer in particular, have found a language that is operatic, accessible and distinctive, contributing in this way to a possible operatic future.



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