

Detroit Opera production of *The Central Park Five* takes aim at Trump

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The final performance of composer Anthony Davis's opera *The Central Park Five* took place May 18 at the Detroit Opera House before a packed audience. The musical drama recounts the frame-up of five minority youth for the alleged rape of a jogger in New York City in 1989. It prominently features Donald Trump, then a real estate mogul in the city, who whips up a lynch-mob atmosphere against the youths.

While the opera was scheduled two years in advance, the decision of the Detroit Opera to move forward with the performances has a certain significance given the various attempts at intimidation initiated by Trump, including against the film *The Apprentice*. Patty Isacson Sabee, the Detroit Opera's president and CEO, told the *Detroit Free Press* she thought it was important to have "a healthy amount of fear," adding, "That will help drive me to make the best decisions about how to take care of everyone."

The fact that audience members had to pass through metal detectors and clear security to enter the theater was a reminder of the heightened social and political tensions

Davis, 74, a professor at the University of California, San Diego, has written eight operas, including *X*, *The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1986); *Tania* (1992), about Patricia Hearst; *Amistad* (1997, revised 2008), about the 1839 slave revolt; and *Lear on the 2nd Floor*, a re-interpretation of Shakespeare's *King Lear*.

Davis's music, an eclectic blend of jazz, blues, classical and hip hop, serves as a background to the story, reinforcing moods of anguish and tension as the young men and their families go through their ordeal and the capitalist media whips up a frenzied witchhunt. In 2020 Davis won the Pulitzer Prize for *Central Park Five*, one year after the production premiered at the Long Beach, California Opera.

The libretto was written by Richard Wesley and also includes a new and expanded orchestration by Davis. The Detroit Opera production was directed by Nataki Garrett and conducted by Anthony Parnther, who is known for his work conducting film scores. Parnther also conducts the San Bernardino [California] Symphony Orchestra and the Southeast Symphony in Los Angeles.

Garrett told the *Free Press*, "In any kind of authoritarian shift in a democratic government, one of the first things they do to signal what they're activating is to restrict the voice of the artist, and the possibility for the artist to be able to continue to speak truth to power." She continued:

I think there's danger to doing art like this in any time. I think that art that speaks truth to power has the distinctive possibility of igniting people's interest in understanding how the world really works, and wanting to activate themselves around supporting shift and justice. Any art worth its salt has the potential to be impactful in that way.

The opera's storyline closely follows the developments in the actual case. Five young black and Hispanic men, all juveniles in their mid- to early teens at the time, were convicted—based on coerced confessions—in the brutal beating and rape of Trisha Meili, a white woman, age 28, who had been jogging in Manhattan's Central Park on April 19, 1989.

The preceding decade had seen a massive growth in social inequality fueled by Reagan's tax cuts, mass layoffs, wage cutting and the evisceration of social programs, which fueled a rise in the stock markets and financial speculation of all kinds. The ethos of the period was epitomized by the rise of figures like Trump.

At the same time, the political establishment incited law and order hysteria, demonized the poor and escalated state repression against the working class and the poor.

The Five are played by Freddie Ballentine as Kevin Richardson, Chaz'men Williams-Ali as Raymond Santana, Nathan Granner as Korey Wise, Markel Reed as Yusef Salaam and Justin Hopkins as Antron McCray. Catherine Martin plays the assistant district attorney, Todd Strange the Trump character and Daniel Belcher the Masque.

Brianna Robinson, Kendra Faith Beasley, Elliott Page and Babatunde Akinboboye play parents of the boys.

The staging of the opera is effective. The set is divided into two levels, with the upper level representing official society—the police, the courts and the mainstream press—and the lower levels "the street," so to speak.

In a talk prior to the performance, conductor Parnther referred to the opera as a "deeply American work." By this, Parnther, who conducted the world premiere of *The Central Park Five* at the Long Beach [California] Opera in 2019, was presumably referring both to the themes of the piece and its composition in a number of musical styles originating in the US.

In regard to the latter, the most prominent of these styles is clearly 1950s jazz. The music often alternates between moments of high tension and calm passages punctured by a solo from one of several brass instruments. Those solos underscore the stress and uncertainty surely experienced by the Five, as their unfair arrest and prosecution unfold, due to manipulation by the powerful players involved.

While in opera traditionally the music takes center stage, the libretto in this composition seems to be the dominant element. The musical score, while not atonal, is often harsh, even grating and will not appeal to all tastes. The score presents challenges to both instrumentalists and vocalists due to its complex rhythms and difficult-to-predict pitches.

The mood evoked by Davis's score suggests American *film noir* from the 1940s and 1950s, the decades of this genre's heyday. One of Davis's musical inspirations may have been Duke Ellington's score for Otto Preminger's *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959), a brilliant and suspenseful courtroom drama. This influence could certainly be heard in *The Central Park Five*.

Parnther noted in his talk that excerpts from Ellington and John Coltrane were sampled in the score for the opera. He suggested the music was difficult to perform, comparing it to Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of*

Spring (1913). The rhythm section, he explained, “serves as glue to hold the various musical idioms together.” The music helps to create the setting of the drama, big and bustling New York, also with its loneliness and coldness, as experienced by the main characters. The music takes on more prominence in the second act, with the clarinet given the role of a kind of independent character.

While the opera may be based on American musical themes, the social content of the story is profoundly universal. Working class youth in any big city from Bangkok to Dakar, from Paris to Santiago, face unlawful police interrogation methods and retaliation for acts of protest.

If a criticism is to be made along these lines, it is that the opera fails to explore the broader class implications of the Central Park Five case. Wesley, who has described the rise of Trump as the product of “white backlash,” in various statements, indicated he views the persecution of the Five in largely racial terms.

Racism was unquestionably involved. A vile campaign was organized by the media and fanned by right-wing figures such as Trump, appealing to the basest instincts and all manner of social backwardness. Moreover, the case occurred in the context of a decade or more of reactionary, bipartisan propaganda about the poor, “welfare queens,” “welfare chiselers” and so forth, with all their racist subtexts. The youth in the case were essentially portrayed as wild animals.

In the end, however, as the present drive for dictatorship by Trump demonstrates, the buildup of the police and the forces of repression, although cynically and viciously making use of race and racism, is ultimately directed at the entire working class, black, white and immigrant, and its rights and social conditions.

As a reviewer in the *Detroit Jewish News* pointed out, the treatment of the Central park Five “is reminiscent of current news stories about immigrant students and families snatched from their schools and homes and detained with no explanation.”

The harrowing interrogation of the five boys in the Central Park jogger case is effectively portrayed in the opera. Over the course of seven hours, without the presence of parents or attorneys, the police use all their tested diabolical stratagems to extract false confessions. In exchange for telling the police what they want to hear, the youths are falsely told they will be able to go home.

The Trump character, wearing his trademark red tie and munching French fries, meanwhile addresses the press demanding the arrest and conviction of the alleged rapists intoning, “They are animals! Monsters!...Support our police!” On May 1, 1989, Trump took out full-page advertisements published in all four of the city’s major newspapers, headlined, “Bring Back the Death Penalty. Bring Back Our Police!”

In a typically lying and demagogic passage, Trump intoned:

At what point did we cross the line from the fine and noble pursuit of genuine civil liberties to the reckless and dangerously permissive atmosphere which allows criminals of every age to beat and rape a helpless woman and then laugh at her family’s anguish? And why do they laugh? They laugh because they know that soon, very soon, they will be returned to the streets to rape and maim and kill once again—and yet face no great personal risk to themselves.

In the Detroit production, a montage of screaming newspaper headlines flash by above the stage.

Todd Strange, the tenor who portrays Trump, told the *New York Times* reviewer that he felt some trepidation playing the role, given the threats that the fascist president regularly issues against his critics. The audience, however, appreciated the portrayal, giving the Trump character

a well-earned round of loud booing at curtain call.

The second act is preceded by a suspenseful overture with a faster tempo than the one we heard through most of the first act, foreshadowing the events soon to take place. The victim has awakened from her coma, but she remembers nothing of the attack. The farce of a trial concludes and the Five are found guilty and sentenced to long prison terms.

In 2002, a convicted serial rapist told New York officials that he had raped a woman in Central Park on the night of April 19, 1989. His DNA matched that found at the crime scene. Based on this new evidence the Central Park Five were exonerated by a judge, although the prosecutor and police continued to insist on their guilt. The Five went on to win a \$41 million settlement for their wrongful convictions, the largest in New York state history.

In 2024, the men sued Trump for remarks he made in a televised debate with Kamala Harris. He claimed the five had pleaded guilty to the crime and that someone had been killed. In April, a judge denied Trump’s motion to dismiss the lawsuit.

The opera concludes with the Central Park Five singing “Every Day is a Struggle,” signifying the fight for justice continues.

Anthony Davis is currently composing a bilingual chamber opera based on the children’s story *Pancho Rabbit and the Coyote*. It explores the challenges faced by migrant families crossing the US-Mexico border. It is due to premiere in January 2026 in San Diego and Tijuana.

The staging of an opera is a costly and complex undertaking. The Detroit Opera, formerly the Michigan Opera, has struggled financially over the years as have arts organizations at all levels nationwide. The opera suffered a near financial collapse with the withdrawal of corporate funding in the wake of the 2008 financial crash and also suffered during the pandemic. The generally abysmal level of public funding for the arts in the US and the coming to power of the new Trump administration, which plans to eliminate the National Endowment for the Arts, pose further challenges.

Detroit Opera officials told the *Free Press* the company had received a \$40,000 grant to support the production of *The Central Park Five*. It had used all those funds. The opera company, in an emailed statement, explained that

We received a notice on Friday, May 2 informing us that our National Endowment for the Arts award has been terminated, effective May 31, 2025. We have received all of the funds and will have completed our project by May 31, 2025, so this does not impact us in the same way it does many of our colleagues around the country.

The production of *The Central Park Five*, with its unflattering portrait of Trump and reactionary, law-and-order forces, reflects wider social processes. Numerous artists and musicians have spoken out recently against the drive to authoritarianism in the US, as well as the mass murder in Gaza. The opera is an expression of the growing resistance all over the world, including by such artistic layers, to the ruling class drive toward dictatorship and war.



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