

The New England Premiere of a Compelling True Story

OMAR

MAY 4 – 7 | Emerson Cutler Majestic Theatre

BOSTONLYRICOPERA



BOSTON LYRIC OPERA PRESENTS NEW ENGLAND PREMIERE OF OMAR BY RHIANNON GIDDENS AND MICHAEL ABELS

Co-commissioned by BLO, the celebrated new work runs May 4-7, 2023.

Jamez McCorkle, who created the title role, stars in BLO's production.

Free community events include co-composer/librettist Giddens discussing the opera's inspirations at GBH Fraser Performance Studio, and a scholar roundtable in Cambridge.

[Advance production and artist photos are here.](#)



(BOSTON) March 30, 2022 —Boston Lyric Opera (BLO) presents the New England premiere of [OMAR](#), a new opera by [Rhiannon Giddens](#) (composer, librettist) and [Michael Abels](#) (composer). **Performances are May 4-7, 2023 at the Emerson Cutler Majestic Theater.**

OMAR was co-commissioned by BLO with Spoleto Festival USA, Carolina Performing Arts, LA Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago and San Francisco Opera. The opera premiered to critical acclaim in May 2022 at the Spoleto Festival in South Carolina. Inspired by **Dr. Ala Alryyes's** translation of **Omar Ibn Said's** autobiography in his book [A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said](#), the opera is directed by **Kaneza Schaal**. The production will be sung in English and conducted by **Michael Ellis Ingram**.

ABOUT OMAR

In 1807, 37-year-old Fula Islamic scholar **Omar Ibn Said** was captured and forced to leave his West Africa home on a ship bound for Charleston, South Carolina, where he was sold into slavery. Said's life and Muslim faith are remembered and retold in this opera inspired by his 1831 autobiography, remarkable for its being written in Arabic while he was enslaved.

This collaboration between Giddens, a Grammy Award-winning musician and recipient of a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship and Abels, the acclaimed film, television and classical music



composer (dir. Jordan Peele's "Get Out," "Us" and "Nope," among others) – infuses the traditional Western orchestra with the sounds and melodies of Americana, Arabic and West African folk music to create a richly orchestrated, stirring, and authentic narrative of strength, resilience and conviction.

Said's 1831 autobiography is one of his 14 Arabic manuscripts and the only known surviving account of American slavery written in Arabic. Set in the shifting perspectives of memory and imagination, the opera traces Said's story from a peaceful life in his homeland to enslavement in a violent, foreign world.



Often lost in a wilderness of his thoughts and the circumstances of his stolen life, Said is haunted by memories of his family, and alternately inspired and betrayed by people he encounters along the way. Through it all, the title character remains true to himself and his faith, against all odds.

"BLO has been eager for New England audiences to encounter *Omar* since we became a partner in creating this extraordinary new opera," says **BLO General Director & CEO Bradley Vernatter**. "Commissioning works like *Omar* by composers like Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels underscores our commitment to the next generation of operatic masterpieces. The incredible artists who bring the work alive in Boston – including **Jamez McCorkle** in a startlingly beautiful portrayal of Omar Ibn Said – promises New England audiences an unforgettable experience."

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PERFORMERS

Boston Lyric Opera's cast is led by tenor **Jamez McCorkle** in his BLO debut as Omar, a role he created at the opera's world premiere and played in the Los Angeles Opera production. Mezzo-soprano **Cierra Byrd** makes her BLO debut as Fatima, Omar's mother. Bass-baritone **Daniel Okulitch**, who performed in the LA Opera production and makes his BLO debut, plays the double role of enslavers Johnson and Owen. Soprano **Lauren Michelle** (BLO's 2022 *La Bohème* and 2019 *Pagliacci*) performs the role of Julie. Tenor **Neal Ferreira**, a BLO Emerging Artist alumnus, performs the double role of the Auctioneer/Taylor. A full cast list is found [here](#).

ARTISTIC TEAM

Making their BLO debuts, stage director **Kaneza Schaal** and production designer **Christopher Myers** have created an evocative and unforgettable theatrical world inspired by Omar Ibn Said's handwritten manuscripts. The scenery is designed by **Amy Rubin**, with costumes designed by **April M. Hickman** and **Micheline Russell-Brown**, lighting designed by **Pablo Santiago** and projections designed by **Joshua Higgason**. The Boston Lyric Opera Orchestra will be conducted by **Michael Ellis Ingram**, making his BLO debut; the BLO Chorus will be led by Chorus Director Brett Hodgdon. Choreographer is **Kiara Benn**. A full list of OMAR artistic team members is available [here](#).

OMAR IN THE COMMUNITY

BLO is partnering with academic, cultural and religious organizations and experts for community programs that explore the historical and cultural significance of this opera.

- **FREE Live Stream Event: “Deconstructing Opera: Omar” – April 12 @ 7 PM**

GBH Music and Boston Lyric Opera collaborate on this special live stream edition of BLO’s “Deconstructing Opera” from GBH’s Fraser Performance Studio. Rhiannon Giddens will be in conversation with **Emmett G. Price III, Ph.D.**, renowned Black music and culture scholar, who is also Berklee College Dean of Africana Studies and co-host of the GBH News podcast “All Rev’d Up.” The pair will talk about *OMAR*’s creation, Giddens’ career, and more. The conversation will be combined with musical performances from members of Boston Lyric Opera’s cast, and will be live streamed for free. Details and livestream registration is available at wgbh.org/omar.

- **FREE Public Discussion – “OMAR: A Scholar Roundtable” – April 26 @ 6 PM**

This event at the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center (ISBCC) explores the experiences of Muslims in early America. Scholars from multiple academic fields reveal stories of the individuals like Omar Ibn Said whose faith and literacy sustained them through the injustices of American slavery. Participants include: **Mbaye Lo**, co-author of the forthcoming book about Omar Ibn Said, [I Cannot Write My Life: Islam, Arabic, and Slavery in Omar Ibn Said’s America](#); **Wendy Wilson-Fall**, Professor of Africana Studies and former director of the West African Research Center in Dakar, Senegal. ISBCC is located at 100 Malcolm X Blvd in Roxbury. Visitors of all backgrounds are welcome; modest dress is required. Details and RSVP coming soon at blo.org.

PERFORMANCES AND TICKETS

OMAR plays three performances: Thu. & Sat. May 4 & 6 @ 7:30pm; and Sun. May 7 @ 3pm at the Emerson Cutler Majestic Theater, 219 Tremont Street in Boston. Free post-show talks with cast and creative teams, moderated by community guests, happen after each performance. **Tickets from \$33**, available online at BLO.org, by phone at 617.542.6772, or via email at boxoffice@blo.org.

ABOUT BOSTON LYRIC OPERA

Now in its 46th Season, Boston Lyric Opera’s programming remains faithful to tradition while blazing new ground, building audiences and creating new ways to enhance the opera-going experience. Since its founding in 1976, Boston Lyric Opera has celebrated the art of the voice through innovative productions and public programming. BLO has produced world and U.S. premieres, commissions, and co-productions of note, ranging from live stage productions to films streamed worldwide on its platform operabox.tv.

BLO has partnered with San Francisco Opera, Opera Philadelphia, Detroit Opera and others, and continues to be a destination for leading artists, conductors, directors and designers worldwide. Alongside its main stage programming, BLO artists in the Jane & Steven Akin Emerging Artists initiative work to hone their craft and prepare for the next step in their careers. BLO’s wide-reaching community programming and education initiatives introduce opera to new audiences across generations.

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MEDIA CONTACTS: For advance interviews about *OMAR*, production photos and video assets, or press ticket reservations, contact John Michael Kennedy. jmk@jmkpr.com / 781-620-1761.