

SEATTLE OPERA.

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“The Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the slave songs so deeply into the world’s heart that it can never wholly forget them again.” —W. E. B. Du Bois

Seattle Opera presents a world premiere opera about the intrepid troupe of Black American singers who changed music history

**Tazewell Thompson’s *Jubilee*
McCaw Hall • October 12–26, 2024**

SEATTLE— In October, [Seattle Opera](#) audiences will experience a unique new work by visionary [writer and director Tazewell Thompson](#), whose opera *Blue* was hailed by *The New York Times* as “the most elegant libretto heard in a long time.” [Jubilee](#) tells the story of a group of Black American singers who brought African American spirituals to audiences around the world, forever changing the trajectory of music history.

With a score comprising over 40 spirituals, from “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “Wade in the Water” to “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” and “Balm in Gilead,” the opera follows the [Fisk Jubilee Singers](#) as they embark on their first tours, raising money for the fledgling Fisk University. Founded just after Emancipation and the American Civil War, the university offered education and empowerment to newly freed Black Americans. The ensemble served as ambassadors and fundraisers, performing for audiences and dignitaries across the United States and Europe, including Queen Victoria, Mark Twain, and President Ulysses S. Grant, establishing a legacy that continues to the present day.

“Spirituals formed the foundation of gospel, blues, jazz, R&B and even hip-hop—and the Jubilees introduced this music to the world,” said Thompson, who began studying and collecting spirituals over 30 years ago. “Their fundraising concerts were also directly responsible for the survival of one of America’s earliest Black universities. The Jubilees put their lives on the line quite literally, going without food, freezing in the winter, suffering from illness and violent hostility on a punishing tour schedule—because they knew that education was the path to real power and lasting freedom.”

Thanks to the resilience and dedication of these young musicians, Fisk University still exists today, having educated generations of Black Americans, including W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, John Lewis, Nikki Giovanni, and Roland Hayes. Such iconic names are known now, in part, because the Jubilees' success helped challenge prevailing racial stereotypes and shift perceptions about Black culture and talent. Their performances also showed the world that spirituals were a legitimate art form, deserving of the same level of artistic excellence as European classical music.

"Every student at Fisk University learns the history of their school—they are taught that each brick was sung into existence," said **Lisa Arrindell**, who plays the pivotal role of Ella Sheppard, the group's de facto leader. "But elsewhere in our America, the Jubilees' story has been left in the dark. I want African Americans to know, viscerally, that we come from a formidable history of stalwart creativity, fortitude, and excellence."

Tazewell Thompson first encountered the Jubilee Singers through a PBS documentary that aired in 2000. He became obsessed with the spirituals they sang, collecting hundreds of books, scores, CDs, and records as he sought to understand why these songs mattered, and why they endured. By 2016, he knew the Jubilees' story deserved an operatic telling. When a commission to write a theater piece arrived first, the story became an *a cappella* stage play, appearing at DC's Arena Stage in 2019. This fall, *Jubilee* will finally be premiered in its full operatic form on the mainstage of Seattle Opera—a particularly meaningful tribute to the troupe of dedicated singers who demonstrated the artistic value of spirituals in concert halls around the world.

"I'm proud that this important new work will be the final mainstage production of my tenure at Seattle Opera," said **General Director Christina Scheppelmann**, who begins her term as General and Artistic Director of Belgium's La Monnaie in January 2025. "And it is only fitting that this story about the Jubilees should find its fullest expression on the opera stage—their championing of spirituals has been carried forward by a long and distinguished line of Black opera singers, including Paul Robeson and Jessye Norman. Tazewell has written a remarkable tale of resilience that pulls together so many wonderful songs, and I'm eager for more people to learn the fascinating story of the Fisk Jubilee Singers through this beautiful opera."

Conceived and written by Thompson, *Jubilee* features vocal arrangements by Dianne Adams McDowell and orchestration by Michael Ellis Ingram. Under Thompson's stage direction, the world premiere production runs October 12–26 at McCaw Hall. Conductor Kellen Gray, in his Seattle Opera debut, will lead the 13-member ensemble cast along with a 48-piece orchestra. While much of the opera will have orchestral accompaniment, the diegetic choral numbers—those performed by the choir of characters within the narrative world of the opera—will be sung *a cappella*, just as they were on the real-life Jubilee tours.

"From the beginning of the opera to the end, you are saturated with glorious spirituals," said Thompson. "The inventive vocal arrangements, lush harmonies, and crisp rhythms are breathtaking. I hope audiences will come to understand that spirituals tell the story of who Black Americans are as a people: their faith, pain, anguish, hope, loss, work, success,

celebration, love, and joy. These songs are a living legacy—functioning beacons of hope and history.”

Spirituals in Jubilee

All Them Bones
Balm In Gilead
Deep River
Dere’s No Hidin’ Place Down Here
Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel
Do Lord Remember Me
Ezekiel Saw the Wheel
Go Down, Moses
Gonna Ride Up in the Chariot
Good News, Chariot’s A-Comin’
Great Day
I Am a Poor Pilgrim Of Sorrow
I Believe I’ll Go Back Home
I Got a Robe
I’m Trampin’
It’s Me
Jubilee
Let Us Break Bread Together

Lord, How Come Me Here?
Lord, I Got a Right
Lordy, Won't You Help Me?
My God Is So High
Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen
Oh, What A Beautiful City
On Ma Journey Now
Over My Head
Plenty Good Room
Set Down Servant
Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child
Standin’ In the Need Of Prayer
Steal Away
Sun Don't Set in The Morning
Swing Low, Sweet Chariot
There’s a Meetin’ Here Tonight
Wade in the Water
We Are Almost Home

Performances

- World Premiere
- Sung in English with English supertitles
- Run time approximately 2 hours and 40 minutes with one intermission
- Tickets start at \$35

McCaw Hall (321 Mercer St, Seattle, WA 98109)

Saturday, October 12, 2024 at 7:30pm
Sunday, October 13, 2024 at 2:00pm
Wednesday, October 16, 2024 at 7:30pm
Saturday, October 19, 2024 at 7:30pm
Sunday, October 20, 2024 at 2:00pm
Tuesday, October 22, 2024 at 10:30am (school day matinee)
Friday, October 25, 2024 at 7:30pm
Saturday, October 26, 2024 at 7:30pm

Created by Tazewell Thompson

Vocal arrangements by Dianne Adams McDowell

Orchestration by Michael Ellis Ingram

Conductor: Kellen Gray

Director: Tazewell Thompson

Set Designer: Donald Eastman

Costume Designer: Harry Nadal
Lighting Designer: Robert Wierzel
Sound Designer: Robertson Witmer
Wigs, Hair, and Makeup Designer: Ashlee Naegle

Thomas Rutling: Aubrey Allicock
Ella Sheppard: Lisa Arrindell
Greene Evans: Martin Bakari
Isaac Dickerson: Tyrone W. Chambers II
Frederick Loudin: Martin Luther Clark
Minnie Tate: Sarah Joyce Cooper
Edmund Watkins: Darren Drone
Jennie Jackson: Hannah Jones
Georgia Gordon: Natalie Lewis
Maggie Porter: Aundi Marie Moore
Mabel Lewis: Ibidunni Ojikutu
America Robinson: Tiffany Townsend
Benjamin Holmes: Greg Watkins

For more information, visit seattleopera.org/jubilee.

About Tazewell Thompson

Tazewell Thompson is the 2020 Music Critics Association of North America award recipient with Jeanine Tesori for Best New Opera in North America for *Blue*; *The New York Times* and *Washington Post*: Best in Classical Music in 2019 for *Blue*. *The Guardian*: Best in Classical Music 2023 for *Blue*. He has over 150 directing credits, including many world and American premieres, in opera houses and theaters in the US, France, Spain, Italy, Africa, Japan, The Netherlands and Canada. He received EMMY Award nominations for Best Direction and Best Classical Production for *Porgy and Bess* Live from Lincoln Center. *Blue* productions include Glimmerglass Festival (premiere), Washington National Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, Toledo Opera, Michigan Opera, New Orleans Opera, English National Opera, and Dutch National Opera.

About Seattle Opera

Established in 1963, Seattle Opera is committed to serving the people of the Pacific Northwest through music, storytelling, and programs for people of all ages. Each year, more than 50,000 people attend the company's performances, and more than 100,000 people are served through school performances, radio broadcasts, and more. The organization brings opera to life in a number of different ways, offering artistic excellence through national and international collaborations. Seattle Opera strives to create an environment where artists, staff, behind-the-scenes workers, and members of the community feel a strong connection to the company, and to the art of opera. Follow Seattle Opera on Facebook, Twitter, SoundCloud, and on Classical KING.