

WILL LIVERMAN



Will Liverman's professional reputation is growing fast, as is his trophy cabinet. He was the recipient of the 2022 Beverly Sills Artist Award from The Metropolitan Opera, having opened its 2021–22 season in Terence Blanchard's acclaimed opera, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, with which he also won the 2023 GRAMMY Best Opera Recording Award. But, as he tells Caroline Leech, that was not his first visit to the Met.

My musical foundation goes back to the Black gospel church in Norfolk, Virginia where I grew up. Opera came into my life when I was about 13 when I joined the vocal program at the Governor's School for the Arts, and we took a field trip to New York. That's when I walked into the Met for the first time and was introduced to the world of opera. We sat way up in the nosebleed seats, and I was floored to hear unamplified human voices getting over the orchestra and hitting me at the back as if I were right in front of them.

Even after that amazing experience though, I never really thought it could be possible for me to sing at the Met, let alone sing the lead in a piece as important as *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* – the first ever opera written by a Black composer to be presented at the Met.

I was asked to audition for Charles in *Fire* by video during the pandemic, and within two weeks, I'd got the role. Two weeks after that it was announced as part of the Met's next season and it all felt very surreal. I was

still in a pandemic cocoon, sitting on the couch looking for other work because all the articles were saying that opera and the arts weren't going to come back live anytime soon. It didn't really hit me until I was in New York, and I saw pictures of my face on posters everywhere.

That shift felt so extreme. There we were, all bracing for the worst, and suddenly, we were back in the game. Not only that, we were making history because our opening night after two years of being shut down was with a show by the first ever Black composer to be presented at the Met. It all just felt like an out of body experience. I wanted to honor the ancestors and all the people who had come before by doing the best I could to tell the story, so I couldn't let myself think about the weight of it all. I just kind of had to stay in the zone to get through it.

It was such an important moment for me, because suddenly I was back telling a Black story written for Black singers. That was something I hadn't had a chance to do for five or six years since I had been in *Porgy and Bess* at the Lyric in Chicago as a young artist. It's been rare for a Black story to be told in opera, though I think that we're seeing the opera world change post-pandemic and post-George Floyd, and a lot more stories are coming through.

Such stories include *Factotum*, Will's own recent composition for Lyric Opera, in which he worked with producer/DJ/multi-instrumentalist DJ King Rico on an updated version of *The Barber of Seville* set in a Black barbershop on Chicago's South Side, and blending diverse musical styles like gospel, rap, hip-hop, and R&B. And this fall, Will plays the title role in a new production of Anthony Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, when it becomes the second opera in the Met's history to be written by a Black composer. Telling these stories feels essential both to him as an artist and to his audiences too.

Equity is so important, and I hope it continues to go in that direction because, in the opera world, we have to be mindful

of the stories that we bring to the stage because we're providing access points. Different people relate to different things as they try to find themselves in opera, and when you bridge the gap and tell stories that the audience can immediately see themselves in, you can feel from the stage that they're with you and they love it. That really showed up with *Fire*, because after every show the audiences just erupted.

Will has just finished singing *Pelléas et Mélisande* in Los Angeles, and of course is here in Austin for *The Pearl Fishers*, so do the more standard pieces of repertoire pull at his heartstrings too?

Absolutely! There is a thrill when you go back to operas that are considered standard rep. When I sing a very famous aria – or a very famous duet in the case of *Pearl Fishers* – it's exciting to know that it's already been performed by the best artists in the world singing with the best orchestras. Because it's so famous and has been around for so long, and because it's so beautifully written, I have the privilege to offer the audience my own perspective on how it should go and what I want to say with it. Both *Pelléas* and *Pearl Fishers* remind me why I love opera and why I came into it in the first place – the drama and the intensity, the delivery of the text and how you emote – that's what separates opera from all the other art forms, you know, its totality. I feel like it has its own sense of joy. It's always a wonderful opportunity to give my voice to it, and I'm looking forward to the Austin performances, with such an incredible cast too.

And what about winning the Grammy for *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*? Would "High School Will Liverman" ever have believed he'd win a Grammy one day?

Maybe he would, though probably for a gospel record, or a classical piano album. He would never have guessed it would be for opera in a million years.

Will Liverman sings *Zurga*, and you can find out more about him at www.willliverman.com