

# Operaphoria™

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METROPOLITAN OPERA SIMULCAST

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## *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X, by Anthony Davis*

By all accounts, Malcolm X was one of the most influential persons in 20<sup>th</sup> century America. His autobiography, as told to Alex Haley, has been described as one of the ten most important books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His life and his teachings had enormous, dramatic significance, also making him an ideal subject for an opera. His search for his own identity was parallel to emerging black consciousness. Truth is, the Civil War did not end discrimination in

America – regardless of what might be taught in Florida schools. Black migration to the northern cities evolved with new kinds of discriminations, and the family of young Malcolm Little was not immune.

Malcolm was 7 years old when his father, a Baptist minister, was killed in Lansing. His mother had 8 children at the time, and did not survive the trauma. When Malcolm was 15 his mother was committed to Kalamazoo State Hospital where she was confined for the following 26 years. The children were distributed to relatives and foster families. Malcolm was sent to Boston to live with a half-sister, where he attempted to survive by dropping out of school and doing crime. He was soon in trouble with the law, and was sent to juvenile detention. At age 21 he was convicted of grand larceny and sentenced to 10 years in prison, serving over six years of his sentence. In that time, he became a reader, and a student of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam (NOI), which was active in the prison

population. He converted to NOI, changed his name to Malcolm X, and set out to convert others. His intelligence and charisma were immediately apparent. Upon release he joined the NOI temple in Detroit and his missionary zeal transformed the congregation, which grew. Elijah Muhammad recognized his skills, and assigned Malcolm to Temple Number 7 in Harlem, which also grew. He began speaking around the country, founding many additional NOI temples.

In those years, the angry message of NOI appealed to Malcolm X. Black superiority, black nationalism, and anti-Semitism were core principles – unlike the basic principles of mainstream Islam. He was often quoted in the media with his comments

about hating whites. The cameras were trained on Malcolm X, not on Elijah Muhammad. When Fidel Castro came to New York to speak at the UN, he met with Malcolm X, not with Elijah Muhammad. When JFK was assassinated, the

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*El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz*

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media wanted to interview Malcolm X. However, Elijah Muhammad had sent out word to all NOI ministers, ordering them not to speak to the media about JFK. Malcolm disobeyed, and was quoted in the media as saying the assassination "...was a case of the chickens coming home to roost." The comment brought down a lot of negative publicity on NOI. The dictatorial Elijah Muhammad responded by giving Malcolm a direct order not to speak publicly in any official capacity for 90 days.

This was not the first problem in their relationship. Everyone, including Malcolm X, was aware that he was the energizing force behind the rapid growth of NOI. Also, he was troubled with reports of Elijah's infidelities, adultery, and embarrassingly public paternity suits. Malcolm X took these things seriously, and met with Elijah to talk about it. He was told these things were all prophesied, and that was the end of the discussion. Malcolm had been meeting with Elijah regularly, but that meeting was the last time he spoke with the mentor he had cherished.

Malcolm decided to do the Hajj – the pilgrimage to Mecca required of all male Muslims. In Jeddah he became aware of his limited information about mainstream Islam. In a meeting with a local prince he was told that his understanding of Islam was not accurate, and that the teachings of the NOI did not represent Islam. He was told that true Muslims do not hate people of other races. This was truly a transformative time for Malcolm X. He converted to Sunni Islam and rejected the separatist teachings of Elijah Muhammad. He changed his name again. Now he was El-Hajj Malik El Shabazz, advocating integration, not separatism. He returned to America after his speaking tour and arranged to meet Martin Luther King, whom he had previously vilified. That was in Selma, February 4, 1965, just a few weeks before Selma gained its own notoriety.

Malcolm advocated converting the NOI Temple Number 7 to a Sunni Islamic Temple. However,

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NOI still owned it. They also owned the house where Malcolm and his family were living, and he and his family were served eviction papers. Malcolm and his wife, Betty, were both receiving regular death threats from NOI followers. And, tragically, as we have learned in today's political climate, a lot of people are willing to act on the threats of leaders they are too willing to obey.

On February 21, 1965, the Audubon Ballroom was chosen by NOI followers as the place to assassinate Malcolm X. – GP

## The Plot of the Opera

The libretto for *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* was written by the composer's cousin, critic and playwright, Thulani Davis, and the back story by his brother, Christopher Davis: truly a family affair of a remarkable musical family. Generally, the plot follows the main events of Malcolm's short life, although the opera minimizes Malcolm's conflicts with his mentor, Elijah.

The opera is in three acts, opening at the Little home in Lansing, where we learn of white-supremacists terrorizing the Black community. Malcolm's father, a minister, has been murdered by them. His mother's subsequent mental breakdown results in the children being placed with family members. In the last scene of Act 1, Malcolm is living with a mature and caring half-sister in Boston, but his youthful misadventures have landed him in prison.

Act 2 opens with Malcolm brooding in prison. His brother has come to visit, and has told him about Elijah Muhammad. In an imaginary mystical meeting, he is embraced by Elijah, and the bars of his prison fade away. He is now Malcolm X. On release he becomes one of the most successful leaders of the Nation, working tirelessly to establish temples throughout the Northeast.

In Act 3 his anger about U.S racism grows, and he begins to explore traditional African culture.

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He has begun to have conflicts with Elijah, and decides to make a pilgrimage to Mecca, where he discovers true Islam and rejects Elijah Muhammad's message of racial separatism and religious hate. Back in the U.S., his criticisms of the corrupt Nation of Islam, especially its leader, leads to Malcolm's inevitable assassination, which takes place at Harlem's Audubon Ballroom, just after he greets his large audience.

One of the high points of this opera is a smoldering and poignant aria by Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's wife, who sings, "When a man is lost, does the sky bleed for him, or does the sunset ignore his tears." – GD&GP

## Composer Anthony Davis

Born in New Jersey in 1951, Anthony Davis is a celebrated jazz pianist, composer, and academic, with music degrees from both Yale and Harvard. Currently Distinguished Professor of Music at the University of California-San Diego, Davis is active in jazz circles, as well as writing for the concert stage. Opera audiences know him best for his *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, which New York City Opera premiered in 1986. It has seen a revival of interest in the past several years, most recently by Detroit Opera, which will be the basis of today's Met production.



Thulaini Davis and cousin Anthony

After *Malcolm* came *Under the Double Moon*, a science fiction opera set on planet Undine in the distant future, a story of telepathic twins who grow from mischief makers to serious adults.

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Opera Theater of St. Louis presented its world premiere in 1989. Three years later, the American Music Theater Festival premiered Davis' *Tania*, a one-act opera loosely based on the Symbionese Liberation Army's kidnapping of Patricia Hearst in 1974.

In 1997, the Chicago Lyric Opera premiered his *Amistad*, an operatic adaptation of the film original, which tells the story of the 1839 mutiny of the Spanish slave ship of that name. The Mende tribesmen mutineers were destined to be sold into slavery. They overpowered the captain and crew and were ultimately captured by a U.S. military ship. A series of court cases would determine if the captured tribesmen were free or still "property" of the Spanish Crown. Defended by former president John Quincy Adams, a fierce anti-slavery advocate, the men were declared free in 1841, and allowed to return to their homes in Africa. However, the Spanish queen continued to demand her "property" well beyond the end of slavery in this country!

In 2007, Opera Omaha premiered *Wakonda's Dream*, an exploration of Native American history, when a Nebraska Ponka family was involved in a court case in which American Indians were recognized as human beings for the first time.

Then in 2019, Long Beach Opera premiered Davis' long-awaited *The Central Park Five*, a chilling account of New York City's police department's racially-motivated framing of five Black teens for the vicious rape and almost murder of a Central Park jogger. The opera won Davis the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Music.

Davis' librettist for both *X* and *Amistad* was his cousin, the critic-playwright Thulaini Davis, whose works share her cousin's passion for setting the racial-political record straight. Upon receiving the Pulitzer, Davis reflected: "It's very exciting for me that you can create political work that has an impact and speak to issues in our society...and get a Pulitzer." – GD

# Everyman

The Met's promotional materials describe this as a new production in which director O'Hara imagines Malcolm as "...an Everyman whose story transcends time and space." The Everyman label is clearly a reference to the medieval morality play, in which Everyman is depicted as a flawed, but ordinary person. His life and struggles are typical of the rest of mankind. In *Everyman*, God sends Death to confront Everyman, requiring him to provide an accounting of his life. Though he had often yielded to temptation and sin, like the rest of us, he finally repented, just in time to go to Heaven.

This is an unusual way to conceptualize Malcolm who, right or wrong, became one of the most important voices in black consciousness-raising, and he died for his beliefs. – GP

## Production

*X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*,  
by Anthony Davis

Saturday, November 18, 2023 12:55 p.m.

When Anthony Davis signed the contract for this commission he stated in the contract, specifically, "...the word 'jazz' should not be used in any connection with this piece." Detroit honored that part of the contract. The Met promotion describes the newly revised score as "jazz-inflected."

Conductor: **Kazem Abdullah**

Director: **Robert O'Hara**

Malcolm X: **Will Liverman**

Louise/Betty: **Leah Hawkins**

Ella: **Raehann Bryce-Davis**

Reginald: **Michael Sumuel**

Elijah Muhammad: **Victor Ryan Robertson**

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**Next Simulcast:** December 9, 2023  
*Florencia en el Amazonas*

## 2023/2024 Metropolitan Opera Simulcast Schedule

SEE THEM AT  
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*Florencia en el Amazonas*,  
by Daniel Catán

December 9, 2023 12:55 pm

A long overdue production of Mexican composer Daniel Catán's Spanish language opera, inspired by the magical realism of Gabriel Garcia Márquez (*Love in the Time of Cholera* and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*). A diva, Florencia Grimaldi (Ailyn Perez) is travelling incognito on a river boat from Leticia, Columbia, to the Opera House in Manaus, Brazil. She is also searching for her lost love – a butterfly hunter with whom she had an affair twenty years earlier, but abandoned in favor of developing her career. Lush music, conducted by Yannick Nézet-Séguin.

*Nabucco*, by Verdi

January 6, 2024 12:55 pm

*Carmen*, by Bizet

January 27, 2024 12:55 pm

*La Forza del Destino*, by Verdi

March 9, 2024 Note: 12:00 noon.

*Romeo et Juliette*, by Gounod

March 23, 2024 12:55 pm

*La Rondine*, by Puccini

April 20, 2024 12:55 pm

*Madama Butterfly*, by Puccini

May 11, 2024 12:55 pm