

Oberlin Conservatory convincingly tells Omar's story (Dec. 8)

by Stephanie Manning



The Cleveland premiere of Rhiannon Giddens' and Michael Abels' Pulitzer Prize-winning opera *Omar* on December 8 at the Maltz Performing Arts Center proved that concert productions of opera can succeed without sets, elaborate costumes and extensive staging. Indeed, the Oberlin Conservatory presentation offered more than enough to keep the audience in the crowded house enthralled.

The Opera, which was also presented at Oberlin's Finney Chapel two days earlier, is based on the 1831 autobiography of Muslim scholar Omar ibn Said, the only such work written by an enslaved person during their enslavement, and the only such document written in Arabic.

Rhiannon Giddens' brilliant libretto chronicles the life of ibn Said, beginning in present-day Senegal and following him through his capture, journey via the Middle Passage, and enslavement in North and South Carolina. The Opera, co-commissioned by Spoleto Festival USA and Carolina Performing Arts, received its premiere at the Festival in 2022.

Since its premiere, *Omar* has been produced by LA Opera, San Francisco Opera, and Boston Lyric Opera. The Northeast Ohio performances marked the first times the complete work was presented in a concert version. Both were also a homecoming for the majority of the cast, almost all of whom are Oberlin alumni.

Under the direction of John Kennedy ('82) — who also conducted the premiere — the Orchestra led off with the driving, percussive Overture after which the Opera's run-time of two hours and 45 minutes positively flew by.

Tenor Limmie Pulliam ('98), brought his distinctive gravitas and emotional resonance to the role of Omar. The pre-show announcement informed us that he was pushing through an illness, but aside from a few coughs, it was barely noticeable.

His voice became particularly powerful in the second act — in his passionate aria after being pressured to convert to Christianity, his falsetto cries to his mother were so heartwrenching, you could have heard a pin drop in the hall.

Bass-baritone Daniel Okulitch ('99) pulled off an impressive Jekyll-and-Hyde performance as Omar's two slaveowners. His voice and mannerisms conjured the vicious and conniving Johnson in the first act before he transformed into the more affable Owen, who treats his slaves more humanely but is still insistent on Omar's religious conversion. The English libretto flowed so naturally, Okulitch could smoothly imbue his singing with a Southern drawl.

Rhiannon Giddens ('00) herself appeared in the role of Julie, a slave Omar helps escape from kidnappers and who advises him to flee to Owen's plantation. Omar feels a deep connection to Julie after sensing the appearance of his mother's spirit, eloquently portrayed by mezzo-soprano Krysty Swann.



The Maltz Center's high ceilings tend to swallow up certain vocals, but more delicate moments, like the second-act "Julie's Aria" came across flawlessly, as Giddens' clear-voiced soprano delivered a tender message about accepting one another despite our differences.

Although the narrative is focused on Omar, many other voices help tell the story, whether by describing their own harrowing deaths during the Middle Passage, recognizing the beauty of Omar's Arabic writing, or leading the chorus in a rousing contra dance.

Tenor Daniel McGrew ('15) made for a devilishly cheerful Auctioneer, while Michael Preacely's ('99) deep baritone captured the anguish of both Omar's brother Abdul and of the slave Abe, a man sold at the market separately from his son.

Forgoing a baton, John Kennedy drew a high-caliber performance from the student orchestra. The score embraces melodic moments more strongly than its contemporaries. Many big group numbers are immensely tuneful, which the Oberlin College and Gospel

Choirs and Oberlin Musical Union accentuated with consistently clear diction and tight ensemble.



Later, Omar puts pen to paper and begins to write his story — creating the autobiography that would become the basis for the Opera itself. Pulliam’s portrayal of the man’s spiritual conviction was immensely stirring.

But the moment that lingered the most with me came earlier, when Julie returns Omar’s traditional kufi cap. Visibly moved, Pulliam silently bowed his head and upturned his hands in prayer, while Giddens knelt and brought her palms together. The wordless moment echoed the words she had sung moments earlier:

“The way we look at the world isn’t the same, but the way our hearts can see each other, there is the flame.”

Photos by Mike Crupi and Angelo Merendino

Published on ClevelandClassical.com December 12, 2024.

Click here for a printable copy of this article

[Return to the Front Page.](#)