

TERENCE BLANCHARD /  
LIBRETTO BY KASI LEMMONS

# Fire Shut Up in My Bones

A Guide for Educators

The Met  
ropolitan  
Opera



# Fire Shut Up in My Bones

The coming-of-age story is a tried-and-true format for opera. The passion of first love, the search for belonging, and the process of finding oneself are ideal fodder for opera's heightened emotions. At first glance, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, which tells the story of a young boy growing up in rural Louisiana, seems to follow this tradition. Yet with this work, composer Terence Blanchard and librettist Kasi Lemmons have ventured into a fascinating and unusual genre: opera based on personal memoir.

When James Robinson, the artistic director of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and a co-director of this production at the Met, approached Blanchard and Lemmons about crafting an opera based on a memoir by *New York Times* columnist Charles M. Blow, they observed that the project presented both opportunities and challenges. "There are parts of the memoir that sing, [in that they] are beautiful poetry," Lemmons recently observed in an interview with the Met. Yet Blow's memoir is marked by a complex interplay between young Charles's external experiences and his rich interior life—a structure that does not easily translate to the conventions of grand opera. But Robinson's observation that, in opera, "anything can sing" offered the key: By casting Loneliness and Destiny—two powerful forces in Charles's childhood—as onstage characters, Lemmons and Blanchard gave the young boy's innermost experiences a riveting voice.

This guide presents *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* as a multimedia memoir, and it invites students to examine and celebrate their own memories and experiences through art, poetry, and music. The guide also asks students to think deeply about opera performance in a broader historical context. As the first opera by a Black composer ever to be performed by the Met, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* offers an opportunity for both celebration and reflection. The materials on the following pages include an introduction to Blanchard's musical language, an overview of operas by Black creators, historical context for Blow's story, and classroom activities that will bring the opera's music and story to life. It is important to recognize that *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* addresses difficult subjects: Over the course of the opera, Charles revisits a past troubled by both verbal and physical abuse. And yet the opera's willingness to look unflinchingly at these moments and to engage honestly with emotional growth may give students a much-needed space to talk about their own experiences. By delving into the story, music, and poetry of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, these materials aim to forge interdisciplinary classroom connections, inspire critical thinking, and allow students to express their own stories through the language of opera.



LIVERMAN



BLUE



MOORE



RUSSELL



GREEN

*HD Live in Schools* is supported through a partnership with the New York City Department of Education.

## THE WORK

An opera in **three acts, sung in English**  
Music by **Terence Blanchard**  
Based on the Book by **Charles M. Blow**  
Libretto by **Kasi Lemmons**  
First performed **June 15, 2019**  
at the **Opera Theatre of Saint Louis**

## PRODUCTION

**James Robinson and Camille A. Brown**  
Co-Directors  
**Allen Moyer**  
Set Designer  
**Paul Tazewell**  
Costume Designer  
**Christopher Akerlind**  
Lighting Designer  
**Greg Emetaz**  
Projection Designer  
**Camille A. Brown**  
Choreographer

## PERFORMANCE

*The Met: Live in HD*  
October 23, 2021  
**Will Liverman**  
Charles  
**Angel Blue**  
Destiny/Loneliness/Greta  
**Latonia Moore**  
Billie  
**Walter Russell III**  
Char'es-Baby  
**Ryan Speedo Green**  
Uncle Paul  
**Chauncey Packer**  
Spinner  
**Chris Kenney**  
Chester  
**Brittany Renee**  
Evelyn  
**Yannick Nézet-Séguin**  
Conductor

A co-production of the Metropolitan Opera, LA Opera, and Lyric Opera of Chicago

Commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera. Originally commissioned by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, co-commissioned by Jazz Saint Louis.

Production a gift of The Ford Foundation and the Francis Goelet Trusts

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# Opera in the Classroom

The Metropolitan Opera Educator Guides offer a creative, interdisciplinary introduction to opera. Designed to complement existing classroom curricula in music, the humanities, STEM fields, and the arts, these guides will help young viewers confidently engage with opera whether or not they have prior experience with the art form.

On the following pages, you'll find an array of materials designed to encourage critical thinking, deepen background knowledge, and empower students to engage with *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. These materials can be used in classrooms and/or via remote-learning platforms, and they can be mixed and matched to suit your students' individual academic needs.

Above all, this guide is intended to help students explore *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* through their own experiences and ideas. The diverse perspectives that your students bring to opera make the art form infinitely richer, and we hope that your students will experience opera as a space where their confidence can grow and their curiosity can flourish.

## WHAT'S IN THIS GUIDE:

**Philosophical Chairs:** A series of questions that introduce the opera's main themes while sparking creativity and encouraging debate

**Who's Who in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*:** An introduction to the opera's main characters

**Synopsis:** The opera's plot

**The Source:** Information about the literary source(s) and/or historical event(s) that inspired the opera

**Timelines:** Timelines connecting the opera to events in world history

**Deep Dives:** Interdisciplinary essays offering additional information and context

**Active Exploration:** Classroom-ready activities connecting the opera to topics in music, the humanities, STEM, and the arts

## THROUGHOUT THE GUIDE, YOU'LL ALSO FIND:

**Critical Inquiries:** Questions and thought experiments designed to foster careful thinking

**Fun Facts:** Entertaining tidbits about *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*

## CURRICULAR CONNECTIONS

This guide invites students to explore the opera through:

American History  
African American Studies  
Creative Writing  
Journalism  
Music  
Visual Arts  
Humanities  
Sociology  
Critical Thinking  
Social and Emotional Learning

## COMMON CORE STRANDS

This guide directly supports the following ELA-Literacy Common Core Strands:

### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.3

Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.W.11-12.11

Create interpretive and responsive texts to demonstrate knowledge and a sophisticated understanding of the connections between life and the literary work.

### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.11-12.1d

Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners. Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives; synthesize comments, claims, and evidence made on all sides of an issue; resolve contradictions when possible; and determine what additional information or research is required to deepen the investigation or complete the task.

# Philosophical Chairs

Philosophical Chairs is an activity designed to foster critical thinking, active inquiry, and respectful dialogue among students. To play, participants agree or disagree with a series of statements, but the game doesn't end there. The most crucial element is what happens next: Participants discuss their points of view and can switch sides if their opinions change during the discussion. (For more tips on using Philosophical Chairs in a classroom or via a remote-learning platform, see the activity description in your Google Drive.)

Each topic statement is deliberately open-ended yet ties into a number of the themes present in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*—including the pain of loneliness, the desire to belong, and the enduring impact of our past on our present. Set the stage for this conversation mindfully. Offer students a brief overview of the opera's plot, setting, and context, and remind them how to build a safe space for productive conversation. Some of the topics might be confusing or hard—that's okay! As you and your students explore and learn about *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, you can return to these statements: What do they have to do with the opera's story? How might these questions help us explore the opera's story, history, and themes?

- Race affects all of us.
- You are the same person you were yesterday, and you will be the same person tomorrow.
- Everyone longs for affection.
- Everyone deserves to be treated with respect.
- Education is the key to success.
- Growing up is easy.
- Life is fair.
- Revenge may be justified.
- You are who the world says you are.
- You control your destiny.
- I am enough.



Keep in mind that the *process* of this activity is just as important as the statements themselves. Philosophical Chairs is designed to nurture civil dialogue, and students should be encouraged to listen actively, honor one another's contributions, and show respect for a diversity of opinions and ideas.

# Who's Who in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*

CHARACTER	VOICE TYPE	THE LOWDOWN
<b>Charles</b> A young man, 20 years old	baritone	Charles is the central character of the opera, and we view all the action through his eyes.
<b>Char'es-Baby</b> The younger version of Charles, 7 years old	treble (a child with a soprano range)	Sweet, bookish, and small for his age, Char'es-Baby is adored by the adults of his town but picked on by his brothers and other kids.
<b>Billie</b> Charles's mother	soprano	Billie loves her son, but the day-to-day challenges of her life leave her with little energy to take care of his emotional needs.
<b>Nathan, William, James, and Robert</b> Charles's brothers, between two and six years older than him	tenor, baritone, and bass	Charles's brothers are his closest friends, but they also pick on him, taunting his feelings and questioning his "manliness."
<b>Spinner</b> Charles's father	tenor	Although he is officially a musician, Spinner's main pastime is flirting with women. He does almost nothing to help out around the house.
<b>Uncle Paul</b> Charles's uncle	bass-baritone	While his brothers are at school and his mother is at work, Char'es-Baby spends the day with his Uncle Paul. Paul can neither read nor write, but he possesses other kinds of knowledge—like how to garden—that Char'es-Baby admires.
<b>Destiny</b>	soprano, all performed by the same singer	Described by the libretto as "both friend and foe," Destiny pushes Charles toward actions that may help him feel better—or may make him more miserable in the long run.
<b>Loneliness</b>		Loneliness is one of the few constants in Charles's life, an embodiment of his feelings of not fitting in.
<b>Greta</b> Charles's girlfriend		When Charles falls in love with Greta, he thinks he has finally found someone with whom he can truly connect. Unfortunately, Greta already has a boyfriend whom she will choose over Charles.
<b>Chester</b> Charles's cousin	baritone	At first, Char'es-Baby looks up to his friendly older cousin. But Chester's horrible betrayal will leave Charles feeling confused and alone.



CHARLES



CHAR'ES BABY



BILLIE



CHARLES'S BROTHERS



SPINNER



UNCLE PAUL



GRETA



CHESTER

# Synopsis

CONTENT ADVISORY: *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* contains physical abuse (including graphic hazing), sexual abuse of a minor by a minor, bullying, and adult language.

**ACT I** *Charles Blow, age 20, drives down a Louisiana road. He is alone, but there is a gun in the seat beside him. Destiny urges him on, inviting him to take revenge for a crime committed many years ago. When he arrives at his childhood home, Charles sees his mother. He calls to her, but she exists in a different time, when Charles was seven ...*

*Gibbsland, a tiny town in Louisiana.* In front of the family’s house, we see Charles, age seven and affectionately called Char’es-Baby by those around him. Char’es-Baby is lonely and looks forward to starting school, but his mother, Billie, tells him he must wait a little while longer. Billie values education, which she views as the best way for her children (and herself) to get ahead in life, but Char’es-Baby is small for his age, and Billie worries that he will be bullied.

Billie adores her son, but she is often too frazzled to give him the affection he craves: The family is poor, Billie works in a factory processing chickens, and the money she does earn slips through the fingers of her womanizing husband, Spinner. The household drama comes to a head when Billie, humiliated and frustrated by Spinner’s constant womanizing, follows him to a local bar where his band is playing, sees him with another woman, and draws a gun on them. She doesn’t shoot, but she does decide to leave him.

Billie and her five sons move in with Uncle Paul. Char’es-Baby dreams of a different life as he collects “treasure” from the local junkyard. Somewhere, he thinks, there must be a place where he will feel like he belongs, but for now, Loneliness is his only friend. Even a visit from Spinner at Thanksgiving can’t soothe Charles’s overwhelming feeling of loneliness—especially when the visit ends with Billie once again drawing a gun on her errant husband.

One day, Char’es-Baby’s cousin Chester comes to visit. At first, Chester seems like he might be the friend Char’es-Baby has been waiting for, but it soon becomes clear that Chester is not all he seems to be. He steals candy from a local shop and then teases Char’es-Baby for being upset about it. One night, Chester sexually abuses Char’es-Baby. Char’es-Baby is too horrified and ashamed to say anything, and his brothers’ taunts in the following days leave him feeling more and more alone.

*Recalling these memories, adult Charles begins to weep. Destiny sings to him, urging him to take revenge on Chester.*



## FUN FACT

*Fire Shut Up in My Bones* received a Lambda Literary Award and was long-listed for the PEN Open Book Award. Blow is also the author of *The Devil You Know: A Black Power Manifesto*, which encourages African Americans to reverse the Great Migration of their ancestors to the North and instead return to the South in order to concentrate political power and effect social change.

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**ACT II** Charles is now a teenager, but memories of his past—Chester’s abuse, his mother’s exhaustion—haunt his dreams at night. One day, he and Billie attend a church service in which the pastor promises that God can wipe away all sins. Desperate to be freed from his memories, Charles decides to get baptized. To his disappointment, however, his trauma remains.

Compounding Charles’s sense of loneliness and despair is the fact that he has no one to talk to. He is grappling with feelings he doesn’t understand,



but when he tries to open up to his brothers, they laugh at him and tell him that “real men” don’t talk about their emotions.

Convinced that he doesn’t belong anywhere, Charles starts visiting the abandoned house of a family whose children drowned. Billie is confused by why he would want to spend time in such a dismal place, but Charles replies that it gives him space to think. Loneliness reappears, promising to be his lifelong companion.

Charles’s fortunes seem to be changing when he meets Evelyn, a beautiful young woman to whom Charles feels an instant connection. His relationship with Evelyn also gives him a chance to prove his heterosexuality to his brothers and neighbors, who have long wondered whether or not Charles might be gay.

Enjoying a new sense of confidence, Charles feels like he is finally ready to strike out on his own. He hopes to head north for college, but when Grambling State University, close to Gibsland, offers him a full scholarship, he accepts.

As Charles prepares to leave, Billie asks him to stay safe. She hands him the gun she once used to threaten Spinner. After Charles departs, Billie

reflects on all that she has sacrificed for her family. Alone in her house, she wonders what might lie ahead.

**ACT III** Charles has joined Kappa Alpha Psi fraternity, and he is being subjected to the frat's brutal hazing rituals, which include both physical beatings and verbal abuse. Charles accepts the abuse stoically, but he is amazed by how cruelly humans can treat one another.

One night, while partying at a local nightclub with his fraternity brothers, Charles meets a young woman named Greta. They begin a passionate love affair. Feeling incredibly close to Greta, Charles eventually shares with her the painful secret of his sexual abuse. He is heartbroken when he learns that she is still seeing someone else. Alone and lonely once again, Charles calls home, desperate to hear his mother's voice. To his shock, Billie passes the phone to Chester, who is paying her a visit.

The sound of his cousin's voice instantly triggers Charles's old hurt and fury. Blind with rage, Charles decides to confront Chester. He rushes out to his car, gun in hand.

In his car on the dark road, Charles contemplates the choice he is facing. Destiny sings to him again, promising to stand by him as he wreaks bloody revenge. But when Charles reaches his childhood home, Char'es-Baby appears and urges him to leave his bitterness behind. Charles embraces Billie, and he finally feels peace.



#### **A BRIEF GUIDE TO OPERATIC VOICE TYPES:**

**SOPRANO** the highest-pitched voice, normally used for female characters; some children can also sing in the soprano range

**MEZZO-SOPRANO** the voice lying between the soprano and the contralto (from the Italian word "mezzo," meaning "middle")

**CONTRALTO** the lowest voice range associated with female characters (also called alto)

**COUNTERTENOR** a voice type associated with male characters but with a range equivalent to that of a contralto, mezzo-soprano, or (less frequently) soprano; achieved through the use of falsetto

**TENOR** the highest common voice type for male characters

**BARITONE** the voice below the tenor and above the bass

**BASS** the lowest voice type



# Timeline

## TERENCE BLANCHARD AND *FIRE SHUT UP IN MY BONES*

### 1962

Terence Blanchard is born in New Orleans, Louisiana. He begins piano lessons at the age of five before switching to the trumpet at age eight.

### 1978

Blanchard enrolls at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, where he meets saxophonist Donald Harrison.

### 1980

Blanchard wins a music scholarship to Rutgers University and tours with Lionel Hampton's Orchestra, a legendary jazz ensemble. Two years later, Blanchard and Harrison replace Wynton and Branford Marsalis in Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers.

### 1988

Blanchard begins his long-term collaboration with filmmaker Spike Lee by playing on the soundtrack to the film *School Daze*. Kasi Lemmons (who will later write the libretto for *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*) appears in the film as Perry.

### 1992

Blanchard composes the music for Lee's film *Malcolm X*. The soundtrack is subsequently arranged into a suite for Blanchard's quintet.

### 2000

Blanchard is appointed artistic director of the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz (now the Herbie Hancock Institute). He will hold this position for 11 years.

### 2008

Blanchard's album *A Tale of God's Will (A Requiem for Katrina)*, based on music he composed for the 2006 documentary film *When the Levees Broke*, wins a Grammy Award for Best Large Jazz Ensemble Album.

### 2012

Blanchard writes the music for the multiracial Broadway revival of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He is named Artistic Director of the Henry Mancini Institute at the University of Miami, and he is awarded honorary doctorates from Skidmore College and Xavier University in New Orleans.

Kasi Lemmons and Terence Blanchard acknowledge the audience ovation at opening night.

ROSE CALLAHAN / MET OPERA

### 2015

Blanchard begins a four-year residency at the Berklee College of Music. The following year, he is named Artist in Residence at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

### 2013

Blanchard's first opera, *Champion*, is premiered by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, which co-commissioned the work with Jazz St. Louis. The opera tells the story of African American welterweight boxer Emile Griffith.

### 2019

Blanchard is nominated for an Oscar for Best Original Score for *BlacKkKlansman*, and the film's track "Blut und Boden (Blood and Soil)" wins a Grammy for Best Instrumental Composition.

Blanchard's second opera, *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, premieres at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.

Blanchard is named the first Kenny Burrell Chair in Jazz Studies at the UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music.

### 2020

Blanchard composes the score for *Da 5 Bloods*, a film directed and co-written by Spike Lee and released by Netflix. The score is nominated for an Oscar for Best Original Score.



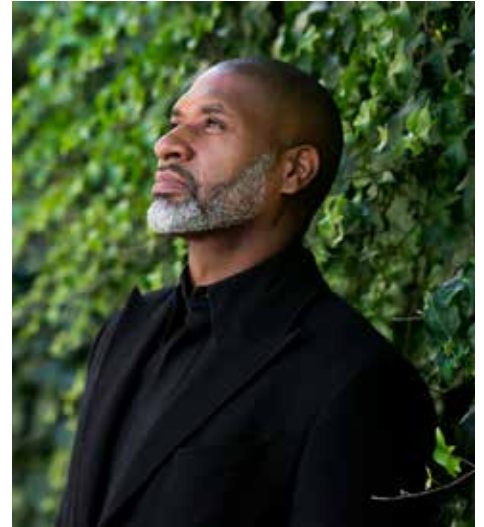
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# The Source

## THE MEMOIR *FIRE SHUT UP IN MY BONES* BY CHARLES M. BLOW

Charles Blow never set out to write a memoir. Instead, he set out to kill time: “I was commuting from Brooklyn to Washington, D.C., every morning, and back home every night,” he recalled in a recent interview with the Met. “And I thought: I have so many stories that I could tell about my life. I hate wasting time, so I started writing little short stories and vignettes from my life.” As these stories began to accumulate, Blow realized that his collection of memories was much more than simply the sum of its parts, and *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* was born. The result is a memoir that weaves unforgettable anecdotes into a searing narrative arc, illustrating both the destructive power of abuse and the redemptive possibilities of community and forgiveness.

Discussions of *Fire* tend to focus on the more difficult aspects of Blow’s story, and teachers and students embarking on a study of either the book or the opera should speak openly about this content before they begin. Young Charles faces bullying and verbal abuse, sexual assault by a fellow minor, and brutal hazing in his first year at college. Any of these topics might be triggering for readers, and teachers should be sure to create a safe space for questions and discussion. Yet it would be a mistake to think of this memoir as exclusively a story about struggle and trauma. Blow’s childhood, as described in *Fire*, was also filled with happiness, opportunity, and love. Stories such as treasure-hunting in the town dump, eating a particular strain of dirt found near Gibsland, and the sheer audacity that helped him land an internship at *The New York Times* reveal a young man of incredible energy, creativity, and insight. The result is a narrative that is complex, challenging, and uplifting all at once.



### CRITICAL INQUIRY

“A bird doesn’t sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song.” Charles Blow has referenced this quotation (often attributed to Maya Angelou but originally published by Joan Walsh Anglund) to explain why he wrote a memoir. How might this idea reflect the process of writing? What does this quotation mean to you?

# Timeline

## A SHORT HISTORY OF RACE RELATIONS IN LOUISIANA

Although the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* had already outlawed school segregation by the time Charles Blow was born, he has described the Louisiana of his childhood as existing in a state of "de facto" segregation. Here is a brief overview of Louisiana's racial laws, from the end of the Civil War through the early 1970s.

### 1865

The 13th Amendment is passed following the end of the American Civil War, outlawing slavery in the United States.

### 1868

After seceding in 1861, Louisiana is readmitted to the Union as part of the Reconstruction Acts.

### 1890

The Separate Car Act (Act 111) requires "separate but equal" train cars for Black and white passengers.

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

Spend some time researching race laws in your own state. Are you surprised by any of the laws you find? Did your state have laws supporting or opposing segregation? When did your state first integrate its schools? Present your findings to your classmates.



COURTESY LOUISIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

### 1894

Interracial marriage is prohibited in Louisiana.

### 1896

In *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Supreme Court declares that racial segregation laws do not violate the Constitution as long as public facilities (including schools) are "separate but equal." The "Plessy" of the decision's name is one Homer Plessy, a New Orleans resident whose violation of the Louisiana Separate Car Act sparked the litigation that would later bear his name.

### 1908

State law prohibits cohabitation ("miscegenation") between Blacks and whites.

### 1920

The Ku Klux Klan emerges in Louisiana.

### 1924

New Orleans passes racial zoning laws in direct violation of the 1917 Supreme Court decision *Buchanan v. Warley*, which deemed such laws unconstitutional.

### 1935

The first *Federal Housing Administration Underwriting Manual*, published by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, explicitly favors racially segregated communities and supports mortgages that are subject to enforceable racial ownership restrictions.

### 1940

The court case of *Joseph P. McKelvin v. Orleans Parish School Board* requires equal pay among all public-school teachers, regardless of race.

### 1950

Interracial adoption is forbidden.

## 1953

Following the abolition of segregation at Louisiana State University, the first Black undergraduate student enrolls at the university.

## 1954

In response to the ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which overturned the “separate but equal” statute of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Louisiana amends its Constitution to state that all schools will be operated separately for white and Black children.

## 1960

Despite six years of resisting, postponing, and defying *Brown v. Board of Education*, Louisiana is



Federal marshals escort 6-year-old Ruby Bridges home from school.

PHOTO: U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

finally forced to integrate its schools. Ruby Bridges becomes the first Black student to integrate an elementary school in the South, attending William Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans. She is escorted to school by four federal marshals every day for a year.

## 1962

An executive order is issued at the national level prohibiting the ongoing practice of racially restrictive housing covenants.

## 1967

The Supreme Court case *Loving v. Virginia* overturns anti-miscegenation laws in Louisiana and 15 other states.

## 1972

The *Compos v. McKeithen* case, brought to U.S. District Court in the Eastern District of Louisiana, overturns the prohibition of transracial adoption.

## FUN FACT

Grambling State University is one of the country’s Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), which also include Spelman and Morehouse Colleges in Atlanta, Wilberforce University in Ohio, and Howard University in Washington, DC. As of 2021, there were 107 HBCUs in the United States.

# Deep Dive

## TELLING BLACK STORIES ON THE OPERA STAGE

The 2021 performance of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* marks the first performance of an opera by a Black composer by the Metropolitan Opera in the organization’s 138-year history. Before Blanchard’s opera, the only story about Black life that regularly graced the Met’s stage was *Porgy and Bess*, written by composer George Gershwin, lyricist Ira Gershwin, and librettist DuBose Heyward (all of whom were white). Yet there are dozens of operas by Black composers that tell stories of Black life in the United States and beyond.

The earliest known opera by a Black composer is John Thomas Douglass’s 1868 work *Virginia’s Ball*; unfortunately, this work is now lost. H. Lawrence Freeman, one of the most prolific Black composers of opera, wrote his first opera, *Martyr*, in 1891. Freeman would go on to write 14 more operas between 1898 and 1947, including a four-opera cycle entitled *Zululand* (1941–44). Other Black composers who have written more than three operas include William Grant Still (1895–1978), Ulysses Kay (1917–95), Adolphus Hailstork (b. 1941), and Anthony Davis (b. 1951).

Operas written by Black composers offer an important perspective, and they frequently take as their subjects the lives, practices, and histories of diverse groups of people, many of whom have been marginalized or overlooked. Many operas in the early 20th century, for instance, included the practices of Haitian vodou (colloquially known as “voodoo”), including Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha* (1910), Freeman’s *Voodoo* (1914), Clarence Cameron White’s *Ouanga!* (1928), and Still’s *Blue Steel* (1934) and *Troubled Island* (1939). The treatment of these practices varied widely: Sometimes vodou was depicted as a superstition that prevented societal progress among its practitioners; at other times, it was depicted as a valuable connection to the past and a powerful force that, when ignored, could have weighty consequences. African history and folklore also appeared frequently in operas of

this era, in works like Shirley Graham Du Bois’s *Tom-Tom* (1932) and Freeman’s *An African Kraal* (1903), as well as his previously mentioned *Zululand* tetralogy.

Other common subjects for operas by Black composers are important figures and events in Black history. Operas that feature Black icons include Kay’s *Frederick Douglass* (1985), Davis’s *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* (1986), Hailstork’s *Paul Laurence Dunbar: Common Ground* (1995), and Nkeiru Okoye’s *I am Harriet*

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

What other kinds of stories should be told on opera stages? How do you think that expanding the kinds of stories that operas tell will affect the attendance of operas and the makeup of those who consider themselves opera-lovers?

*Tubman* (2014). More recently, Trevor Weston’s *4* (2010), Daniel Bernard Roumain’s *We Shall Not Be Moved* (2017), and Davis’s *The Central Park Five* (2019) have brought historical moments to the opera stage.

The increased presence of Black lives on the opera stage is a welcome change—and one that has extended beyond the works of Black composers themselves. For example, composer Jeanine Tesori worked with librettist Tazewell Thompson on the 2019 opera *Blue*, which explores a community’s response to the murder of a young Black man by police officers in Harlem. As Black stories gain prominence in opera, the art form is sure to become richer, and by getting to know operas by and about Black Americans, the operatic community can help ensure the art form’s vitality and relevance for years to come.

# Active Exploration

The following activities will help familiarize your students with the plot of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, forge connections between a variety of classroom subjects, and encourage creative responses to the opera. They are designed to be accessible to a wide array of ages and experience levels.

## DESTINY VS. AGENCY: CHOOSING TO LEAVE IT ON THE ROAD

Discuss trauma, healing, and the quest for forgiveness with your students in a safe, serious way. Then invite students to create and perform a poem for two voices exploring these themes.

## THE MAN IN THE MIRROR: FINDING, SEEING, AND LOVING YOURSELF

Students will deepen their understanding of the book and opera while exploring aspects of their own identities through a pair of “This I Believe” essays: One essay will be a personal essay about an aspect of the student’s identity; the second will be from the perspective of Charles from *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. Both essays will explore one key belief that the speaker holds dear as well as the event(s) that shaped that belief.

## PECULIAR GRACE IN A DANGEROUS PLACE: CONSIDERING RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

Students will create a memory collage. Using an approach similar to the opera’s layering effect, they can explore the moments in Charles’s life that shape his character and motivations.



### FUN FACT

The phrase “fire shut up in my bones” comes from the New Testament. In the King James Version of the bible, Jeremiah 20:9 reads, “Then I said, ‘I will not make mention of Him, nor speak any more in His name.’ But His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not hold back.” The term *jeremiad*, which Merriam Webster defines as “a prolonged lamentation or complaint,” is derived from a particular form of prose characteristic of the Book of Jeremiah that laments the state of society and is named after the biblical prophet who prophesied the downfall of the Kingdom of Judah.

# Deep Dive

## OPERA IN JAZZ

As with his first opera, *Champion*, Terence Blanchard characterizes *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* as an “opera in jazz.” The composer’s performing career as a trumpeter can be heard throughout the work, which draws heavily on jazz harmonies and instruments that fall outside traditional opera orchestration. But jazz is not the only “non-traditional” genre to appear in this opera. In addition to the evocative juxtaposition of classical music and jazz, the opera is filled with passages inspired by gospel, big-band music, and the blues. There’s even a scene scored entirely for on-stage snapping and the clapping of drumline-style sequences. What is more, all of these musical styles move between being part of the world audible to the characters—what is known as diegetic music—and music that is only audible to the audience. In this way, Blanchard brings different styles of music into the realm of operatic scoring, not only as audible depictions of the characters’ world but also as a means of expressing their inner lives.

The musical styles Blanchard uses in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* often have a concrete connection to the setting of a particular scene. In Act I, for instance, Spinner’s band is playing at The West End, a seedy bar on Boogie Woogie Road. The music being “performed” by the characters is appropriately jazzy, including the song “Lord Love the Sinner,” sung by Spinner. (This is an excellent example of diegetic music, since the music the audience hears is part of the onstage story.) By contrast, the later scene in which Billie and Spinner make up at Thanksgiving also has a distinctly jazzy character, but in this case, the jazz reflects not the scene’s setting but rather the personalities and actions of the characters.

The opera’s use of the chorus also reveals how the composer mixes various musical genres. The traditional role of the chorus as a commentator on the opera’s action is exemplified by the recurring “Char’es-Baby, Youngest of Five,” which periodically reminds the audience of Charles’s ongoing struggle to be seen. Yet the chorus also infuses the opera with elements of the gospel tradition. In the several scenes that take place in church, the chorus fulfills the role

of a gospel choir, singing diegetic music. The opera also utilizes gospel elements, such as call-and-response, outside of religious settings, such as at the chicken factory where Billie works and at the nightclub where Charles meets Greta.

The mixture of traditional opera composition and jazz elements can be found in many operas by Black composers, including James P. Johnson’s *De Organizer* (1940), the works of William Grant Still (whose *Afro-American Symphony* is often used as a textbook example of the combination of Black vernacular and symphonic music), and Duke Ellington’s *Queenie Pie* (1974). Critics reviewing these operas in the early 20th century even expected this kind of stylistic mixing and were disparaging in their reviews when not enough of the work was derived from

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

How does the opera’s use of different types of music contribute to the narrative of the story? Are there types of music beyond the classical tradition you would use if you were writing an opera?

“Black music,” as in the case of Scott Joplin’s *Treemonisha* (1910). Yet the innovative mixing of musical styles in the works of Black opera composers is not limited to combining operatic styles with popular genres. Works like Anthony Braxton’s *Trillium Opera Complex*, a series of operas he began in 1980, utilize their own variation of musical mixture, drawing less on vernacular music and more on a wide variety of experimental techniques including the use of electronics and music determined by chance.

# Deep Dive

## GREEK LIFE

A central feature of Act III of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* is Charles's fraternity. For Charles, Kappa Alpha Psi is a double-edged sword: On the one hand, it offers the impressionable young man friends, community, and the sense of belonging he has long sought. On the other hand, its hazing rituals subject Charles (and his fellow pledges) to horrific abuse. Today, "frat" life is often used as short-hand for a hard-partying college lifestyle, but where did these institutions come from?

The culture of fraternities and sororities at colleges in the United States dates back to the 18th century. The first Phi Beta Kappa Society was founded in 1776 at the College of William and Mary. The first secret, national Greek letter social fraternity is considered to be Kappa Alpha, established at Union College in Schenectady, New York in 1825.

### Members of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity at Wilberforce University, Ohio in 1922

PHOTO COURTESY NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY, SCHOMBURG CENTER FOR RESEARCH IN BLACK CULTURE, JEAN BLACKWELL HUTSON RESEARCH AND REFERENCE DIVISION

In 1827, the Sigma Phi Society was established on the same campus, and the establishment of other societies at universities on the East Coast, including Williams College, Wesleyan University, Emory University, and Yale, soon followed. Kappa Alpha Theta was the first women's fraternity (now usually known as sororities) and was established at Indiana Asbury (now DePauw University) in 1870, while the first fraternity for African Americans, Alpha Phi, was founded at Howard University in 1872.

The original purpose of these collegiate fraternal organizations was to promote scholarship, rhetoric, and ethical conduct among students. Many began as literary societies, which hosted debates that were open to the public. Today, fraternities and sororities typically consist of several chapters across the United States and are used both as sites for social networking and professional development and as honorary groups that encourage academic achievement and community service. Some fraternities and





sororities are distinguished by the particular fields of study of their members. At especially large colleges and universities, fraternities and sororities often serve as a manageable means for students find a group of like-minded classmates.

For young Black students, many of whom must grapple with structural racism in both educational and professional spheres, specifically Black fraternities and sororities have offered an important opportunity for community and networking, both in college and beyond. In addition, Black fraternities have often been key players in the fight for social justice, civil rights, and equality. In 1906, Alpha Phi Alpha, the first of a group of Black fraternities and sororities that would become known as the “Divine Nine,” was founded at Cornell University. Today, 115 years later, their stated objectives still include preparing members “for the greatest usefulness in the cause of humanity, freedom, and dignity of the individual” and aiding “downtrodden humanity in its efforts to achieve higher social, economic, and intellectual status.”

Controversy around the process of admittance to fraternities and sororities—known as “hazing”—has become increasingly visible. Every year, students seeking admittance into these organizations—“pledges”—are subjected to various levels of humiliation as part of the ritual entry into the society, ranging from performing chores and errands for senior members to excessive drinking and beatings. The logic of this tradition is that the pledges form lifelong bonds through the shared experience of humiliation, and the process builds camaraderie within the larger group.

However, this is not always the outcome. In recent decades, many fraternal societies have been sanctioned or disbanded for violations of university codes of conduct for hazing

### CRITICAL INQUIRY

The opera’s depiction of Greek life provides just one example of a community bound by ritual and tradition. What are some communities that you know of with specific rituals and traditions? How do these practices bind members together?

practices, which have resulted in psychological trauma, physical injury, and death.

In *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, Charles’s participation in fraternity life at Grambling State University is part of an effort to find a community, a leitmotif that resurfaces throughout the story. For Blow, his experience in a fraternity did result in lifelong friendships, as his book attests, and members of his fraternity are now godfathers to two of his three children. Yet he also looks back with concern on the hazing rituals to which he was subjected and which he later took part in inflicting. This tension—between the support of a scholastic community and the ongoing trauma inflicted by hazing—remain at the center of the fraternity controversy and likely will for some time to come.