



SAN FRANCISCO
OPERA

SAN FRANCISCO OPERA PRESENTS BAY AREA PREMIERE OF
RHIANNON GIDDENS AND MICHAEL ABELS' *OMAR*
War Memorial Opera House, November 5–21



Co-composer and librettist Rhiannon Giddens (photo: Francesco Turrisi/Ebru Yildiz);
Co-composer Michael Abels (photo: Eric Schwabel); Scene from *Omar* (photo: Cory Weaver/LA Opera)

2023 Pulitzer Prize-Winning Opera and San Francisco Opera Co-Commission
Conducted by John Kennedy and Directed by Kaneza Schaal

Reprising His Acclaimed Portrayal of Omar ibn Said,
Jamez McCorkle Heads an Ensemble Cast Featuring Brittany Renee,
Taylor Raven, Daniel Okulitch and Norman Garrett



John Kennedy (conductor), Kaneza Schaal (director), Jamez McCorkle (*Omar*), Brittany Renee (*Julie*),
Taylor Raven (*Fatima*), Daniel Okulitch (*Johnson/Owen*), Norman Garrett (*Abdul/Abe*)

Tickets available at (415) 864-3330 and [sfopera.com](https://www.sfopera.com)
November 11 Performance Will Be Livestreamed

SAN FRANCISCO, CA (October 12, 2023) — San Francisco Opera presents the Bay Area
premiere of *Omar*, the new Pulitzer Prize-winning opera by Rhiannon Giddens and

Michael Abels. Co-commissioned by San Francisco Opera, this American story comes to the War Memorial Opera House in the production by director Kaneza Schaal and under the baton of conductor John Kennedy who led the world premiere performances at Spoleto Festival USA in 2022. The ensemble cast is headed by tenor Jamez McCorkle, acclaimed creator of the title role, in his Company debut as Omar. San Francisco Opera Chorus Director John Keene prepares the artists of the San Francisco Opera Chorus.

Omar is inspired by the true story of the 19th-century Islamic scholar Omar ibn Said, who was taken from his home in West Africa in 1807, forcibly brought to America through the Middle Passage and sold into slavery in South Carolina. Despite the brutality he faced, Omar maintained his faith and identity, eventually writing his autobiography in Arabic. This 200-year-old text comes vividly to life in this first-ever opera by MacArthur Fellowship recipient Rhiannon Giddens and composer Michael Ables. The expansive sound world in *Omar*, set to Giddens' libretto, synthesizes the West African kora, bluegrass, spirituals, folk music and jazz into a uniquely American musical language.

Rhiannon Giddens has made a singular, iconic career out of stretching her brand of folk music, with its miles-deep historical roots and contemporary sensibilities, into just about every field imaginable. A two-time GRAMMY Award and Pulitzer Prize-winning singer, instrumentalist and composer, Giddens has centered her work around the mission of lifting up people whose contributions to American musical history have previously been overlooked or erased, and advocating for a more accurate understanding of the country's musical origins through art. She hosts the *Aria Code* podcast produced by NPR affiliate station WQXR, which is now in its fourth season, and released her third solo album, *You're the One* on Nonesuch Records last August. Giddens has appeared on the ABC hit drama *Nashville* and in Ken Burns' *Country Music* series on PBS. In addition to the San Francisco Opera premiere of her first opera, *Omar*, Giddens will perform around the Bay Area in November with the Silkroad Ensemble on their nationwide tour, *American Railroad: A Transcontinental Journey*.

Pulitzer Prize-winning and Emmy- and Grammy-nominated composer Michael Abels is best known for his genre-defying scores for the Jordan Peele films *Get Out*, *Us* and *Nope*. The score for *Us* won a World Soundtrack Award, the Jerry Goldsmith Award and was named "Score of the Decade" by *The Wrap*. Abels' creative output also includes concert works such as the choral song cycle *At War with Ourselves* for Kronos Quartet and *Isolation Variation* for violinist Hilary Hahn. He is co-founder of the Composers Diversity Collective,

an advocacy group to increase the visibility of composers of color in film, gaming and streaming media.

Omar, hailed as "a sweeping achievement" by *The New York Times*, comes to the War Memorial Opera House in the staging by Kaneza Schaal. The production design by Christopher Myers emphasizes the power of the written word with costume fabrics, settings and projections displaying multiple African languages, Omar's Arabic and English script and the newspaper ads and historic records from the slavery industry in America. The creative team, all in their Company debuts, also includes choreographer Kiara Benn, set designer Amy Rubin, costume designers April M. Hickman and Micheline Russell-Brown, lighting designer Pablo Santiago and projection designer Joshua Higgason.

Tenor Jamez McCorkle makes his Company debut as Omar. McCorkle, whose repertoire spans the music of Monteverdi, Mozart and Tchaikovsky, created the role of Omar at the opera's world premiere at Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, South Carolina and has performed in each subsequent presentation of *Omar* in Chapel Hill, Boston and Los Angeles. Of McCorkle's portrayal, the *Los Angeles Times* observed: "a role he brings to life in all its spiritual magnificence ... [he] has a tenor that vibrates with somber glory ... The meditative sincerity of the performance left me with my head bowed."

Soprano Brittany Renee makes her house debut as Julie, a friend to Omar amid the trials of their lives under enslavement. Mezzo-soprano Taylor Raven performs the role of Omar's mother, Fatima, who bestows wisdom on her son through dream sequences. Raven, a former Merola Opera Program participant, made her San Francisco Opera debut as Charmian in the 2022 world premiere of John Adams' *Antony and Cleopatra* and appeared with the Company in Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites* and Verdi's *La Traviata*. Baritone Daniel Okulitch portrays the dual roles of Johnson, an American southerner who acquires Omar at an auction, and Owen, the Christian master who tries to convert Omar.

The ensemble cast also features baritone Norman Garrett in the roles of Omar's brother, Abdul, and Abe; mezzo-soprano Laura Krumm as Eliza; mezzo-soprano Rehanna Thelwell as Katie Ellen and the Caller; tenor Barry Banks as the Auctioneer and Taylor; current San Francisco Opera Adler Fellow tenor Edward Graves as Amadou; bass-baritone Calvin Griffin as Olufemi and baritone Kenneth Overton as Suleiman.

San Francisco Opera's commitment to expanding the operatic repertoire has produced, to date, 30 commissions/co-commissions by many leading composers including John Adams, Gabriela Lena Frank, Philip Glass, Jake Heggie, André Previn and Bright Sheng. Giddens and Abels' *Omar* is the second of three San Francisco Opera co-commissions to be presented during the Company's 101st season along with Mason Bates and Mark Campbell's *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* this fall and the American premiere in June 2024 of *Innocence* by the late Kaija Saariaho.

San Francisco Opera presents *Omar* in connection with the *California Festival: A Celebration of New Music*, the inaugural, statewide celebration of the collaborative and innovative musical spirit that thrives in California. The Festival features 100 California-based organizations, including symphony orchestras, chamber music groups, jazz ensembles and choirs, who are performing compelling new works statewide from November 3–19. For information about California Festival participants and presentations, visit cafestival.org.

Sung in English and Arabic with English supertitles, the six performances of *Omar* are scheduled for November 5 (2 p.m.), 7 (7:30 p.m.), 11 (7:30 p.m.), 15 (7:30 p.m.) 17 (7:30 p.m.), 21 (7:30 p.m.), 2023.

LIVESTREAM: *OMAR*, Saturday, November 11 at 7:30 p.m.

San Francisco Opera offers livestreams for each of its productions during the 2023–24 Season. The Saturday, November 11 performance of *Omar* will be livestreamed at 7:30 p.m. PT. The performance will be available to watch on demand for 48 hours beginning on Sunday, November 12 at 10 a.m. PT. Tickets for the livestream and limited on-demand viewing are \$27.50. For tickets and more information about livestreams, visit sfopera.com/digital.

PANEL DISCUSSION: *Omar ibn Said: Remembering His Name, Retelling His Story*
Commonwealth Club, Wednesday, November 1 at 5:30 p.m.

As San Francisco Opera prepares to present the Pulitzer Prize-winning work *Omar*, the department of Diversity, Equity and Community invites you to gather for a powerful and thought-provoking panel discussion with the Commonwealth Club of California, the nation's oldest and largest public affairs forum. Mbaye Lo and Carl W. Ernst, authors of

the Omar ibn Said biography *I Cannot Write My Life*, will combine their knowledge and experiences with artists and scholars to explore and discuss the life and astonishing journey of enslaved Islamic scholar Omar ibn Said. For more information, visit commonwealthclub.org.

POST-PERFORMANCE CONVERSATIONS

Following select performances of *Omar* (November 7, 11, 15, 17 and 21), ticketholders are invited to stay for a post-show conversation that gives space for deeper exploration and processing of Omar ibn Said's life and legacy. Hear firsthand from the artists and creative minds behind the opera.

OPERA PREVIEWS AND PRE-OPERA TALKS

From October 31–November 3, Professor Laura Stanfeld Prichard will present 90-minute overviews of *Omar* for Bay Area chapters of San Francisco Opera Guild. For a full schedule and tickets, visit sfopera.com/operapreviews.

55 minutes before every performance of *Omar*, opera and theater artist and scholar Michael Mohammed will present a 20-minute overview of the opera inside the auditorium of the Opera House for ticketholders. A digital recording of Mohammed's pre-opera talk will also be made available at sfopera.com/omar.

TICKETS AND INFORMATION

Tickets for *Omar* range from \$26 to \$426 and are available at the San Francisco Opera Box Office, by phone at (415) 864-3330 and online at sfopera.com. A \$2 per-ticket facility fee is included in Balcony 1, 2 and 3 zone prices; all other zones include a \$3 per-ticket facility fee.

Tickets for the November 11 livestream of *Omar* are \$27.50. For more information, visit sfopera.com/digital.

The War Memorial Opera House is located at 301 Van Ness Avenue. Patrons are encouraged to use public transportation to attend San Francisco Opera performances. The War Memorial Opera House is within walking distance of the Civic Center BART/Muni Station and near numerous bus lines, including 5, 21, 47, 49 and F Market Street. For further public transportation information, visit bart.gov and sfmta.com.

Gifts of all sizes help create San Francisco Opera's programs and are much appreciated. To donate visit sfopera.com/donate.

All casting, programs, schedules and ticket prices are subject to change. For further information about San Francisco Opera's 2023–24 Season, visit sfopera.com.

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OMAR CASTING AND CALENDAR

*San Francisco Opera Debut †Role Debut ‡Current Adler Fellow
+Merola Opera Program Graduate ++Merola and Adler Fellowship Graduate

All performances take place at the War Memorial Opera House (301 Van Ness Avenue in San Francisco), unless noted.

OMAR music by Rhiannon Giddens and Michael Abels, libretto by Rhiannon Giddens

BAY AREA PREMIERE

San Francisco Opera Co-Commission

November 5 (2 p.m.), 7 (7:30 p.m.), 11 (7:30 p.m.), 15 (7:30 p.m.), 17 (7:30 p.m.), 21 (7:30 p.m.), 2023

Opera in two acts

Omar is co-commissioned by Spoleto Festival USA, Carolina Performing Arts, San Francisco Opera, LA Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, Boston Lyric Opera and Detroit Opera.

Co-production by San Francisco Opera, LA Opera and Lyric Opera of Chicago.

Originally co-produced by Spoleto Festival USA and Carolina Performing Arts at The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Sung in English and Arabic with English supertitles

Approximate running time: 2 hours and 50 minutes including one intermission

World Premiere: Spoleto Festival USA, May 27, 2022

Cast:

<i>Omar</i>	Jamez McCorkle *
<i>Fatima, Omar's Mother</i>	Taylor Raven †+
<i>Johnson/Owen</i>	Daniel Okulitch +
<i>Julie</i>	Brittany Renee *†
<i>Abdul, Omar's Brother/Abe</i>	Norman Garrett *
<i>Eliza, Owen's Daughter</i>	Laura Krumm †++
<i>Katie Ellen/Caller</i>	Rehanna Thelwell *
<i>Auctioneer/Taylor</i>	Barry Banks
<i>Amadou</i>	Edward Graves †+

Olufemi
Suleiman
Slaveship Crewman 1/Slaver
Slaveship Crewman 2
Women

Men

Man in Crowd

Mary #1

Renty #1

Tess #1

Mary #2

Tess #2

John

Renty #2

Mary #3

Chorus Soprano Solo

Billy

Sally

Ancestral Figure

Calvin Griffin *♪
Kenneth Overton ♪
William O'Neill ♪
Chester Pidduck ♪
Jessica-Elisabeth *, Thalia Moore *♪,
Aleta Braxton *♪, Sydnee Turrentine-Johnson *♪
Joanna Lynn-Jacobs *♪, Angela Arnold *♪
Earl Hazell ♪, Christopher Craig *,
John Fluker *♪, Alexander Taite ♪,
Wilford Kelly *♪
William Lee Bryan ♪
Jessica-Elisabeth *
Earl Hazell ♪
Joanna Lynn-Jacobs *♪
Melissa Dufort *♪
Sydnee Turrentine-Johnson *♪
John Fulton ♪
Ernest C. Jackson, Jr. *♪
Aleta Braxton *♪
Sydnee Turrentine-Johnson *♪
Jahla Love
Johanne Daniel ♪
Jermaine McGhee *

Creative Team:

Conductor

Director

Choreographer

Production Designer

Set Designer

Co-Costume Designer

Co-Costume Designer

Lighting Designer

Projection Designer

Chorus Director

Fight Director

John Kennedy *
Kaneza Schaal *
Kiara Benn *
Christopher Myers *
Amy Rubin *
April M. Hickman *
Micheline Russell-Brown *
Pablo Santiago *
Joshua Higgason *
John Keene
Dave Maier

San Francisco Opera Orchestra, San Francisco Opera Chorus and San Francisco Opera Dance Corps

COMMONWEALTH CLUB PRESENTS
OMAR IBN SAID: REMEMBERING HIS NAME, RETELLING HIS STORY
Wednesday, November 1 at 5:30 p.m.
Commonwealth Club

As San Francisco Opera prepares to present the Pulitzer Prize-winning work *Omar*, the department of Diversity, Equity and Community invites you to gather for a powerful and thought-provoking panel discussion with the Commonwealth Club of California, the nation's oldest and largest public affairs forum. Mbaye Lo and Carl W. Ernst, authors of the Omar ibn Said biography *I Cannot Write My Life*, will combine their knowledge and experiences with artists and scholars to explore and discuss the life and astonishing journey of enslaved Islamic scholar Omar ibn Said. The event will also be livestreamed. For more information, visit commonwealthclub.org/events/2023-11-01/omar-ibn-said-remembering-his-name-retelling-his-story.

San Francisco Opera is sponsored, in part, by Norby Anderson, Jerome L. and Thao N. Dodson, The Dolby Family, Carol and Dixon Doll, Bertie Bialek Elliott, Peter Fenton and Kate Greer, Keith and Priscilla Geeslin, Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation for the Arts, John A. and Cynthia Fry Gunn, Burgess and Elizabeth Jamieson, Franklin and Catherine Johnson, Edmund W. and Jeannik Méquet Littlefield Fund, Bernard and Barbro Osher, Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem, Dianne and Tad Taube, Phyllis C. Wattis Endowment Funds, Diane B. Wilsey, Barbara A. Wolfe.

Omar is made possible, in part, by Marcia Barinaga & Corey Goodman; Bob Ellis; Louise Gund; and Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem.

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San Francisco Opera is supported, in part, by a grant from Grants for the Arts.



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PRESS PHOTOS: High-resolution, downloadable artist headshots and production images for *Omar* are available at sfopera.com/press.

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