

Blue
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Classical music has enjoyed a unique place in American society, by turns vaunted and disparaged, analyzed and disregarded, embraced and disavowed. Despite how mixed our feelings have been about the medium, one thing has been crystalline about the artform in the United States: it seldom has been used as an instrument for social change. We do not typically think of *Il trovatore* as a commentary on the unforeseen consequences of capital punishment, *Tosca* as a mediation on police corruption, or *La bohème* as a musing on public health crises. This is why Tazewell Thompson and Jeanine Tesori's masterful opera, *Blue*, which directly grapples with the racialized police violence that has plagued this nation since Reconstruction, is such a revelation: it takes seriously that the medium can speak clearly to the most pressing social issues of the day.

Television, film, dance, and theatre have thrived in a way that opera has not in the United States. These media have taken as their mandate to present stories that are immediately relevant to the contemporary audiences, whereas opera has been content to leave modern-day issues unexplored. Many of the operatic plotlines that we love so much unfurl in mythological places, idealized exotic locales, or European courts of yore. Startlingly timely and uncomfortably timeless, *Blue* unfolds with immediacy, urgency, and familiarity as it probes one Harlem's family's efforts to overcome a devastating loss after an unprovoked act of police violence. Thompson's incisive, insightful narrative chronicles a Black police officer and his wife struggling to make sense of the senseless, having lost their own teenage son at the hands of a white patrolman.

In *The Washington Post*, Michael Andor Brodeur referred to *Blue* as "the opera on police violence we need to see, but can't." After eight stunning performances at the Glimmerglass Festival in the summer of 2019, the pandemic necessitated the cancellation or postponement of productions at Minnesota Opera, Washington National Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival. *Blue*'s ascent cannot be eclipsed fully by COVID-19, though. In fact, many of the central questions posited by *Blue*—What will it take to solve America's racialized violence problem? Is the church still capable of fortifying the Black community against systemic racism? Will another generation of Black boys be besieged by the very structures that

should shepherd them to manhood? Do we have a government set up to keep *any* of us safe?—only have become more salient in light of the events of the last two years.

As captured by an August 2020 documentary that aired on WQXR, the classical music arm of New York Public Radio, *Blue* places “race and police brutality at the forefront of modern opera” in a way that speaks compellingly to the current moment. To be sure, these issues have been brought to the concert hall in substantive fashion by gifted composers like Joel Bentley Thompson (*The Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, 2016), Courtney Bryan (*Yet Unheard*, 2016), and Nkeiru Okoye (*Invitation to a Die-in*, 2017). Yet the scale of fully-staged opera accords *Blue* opportunities to mine the emotional nuances of the fraught topic in myriad ways.

The expressive, evocative libretto by Mr. Thompson is, in turns, exhilarating and excruciating. *Blue* presents Mother and Father experiencing the apexes and nadirs of parenting in an era when society exaggerates both for Black families. Upon hearing that Mother is carrying a boy, the fretful reactions of her three girlfriends foreshadow the grievous path the child’s life would take: “We talked, argued, debated; ev’ry Black girl knows this. It’s stitched into the stars and stripes of the American flag, baked in the cake: Thou shalt bring forth no Black boys into this world.” Indeed the Son grows into a principled young man, intelligently apprehending the zeitgeist, parsing the societal messaging meant to define the Black male experience, and enunciating clearly his restiveness with the status quo. He embodies fully James Baldwin’s 1961 observation about the Black experience in America: “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all of the time.” And the way those potent passions career towards an ineluctable conclusion evokes the tragic trajectories of the families of the *Argonautica*, the *Orestia*, and the Theban plays. Thompson’s gift for rendering America’s shameful circadian cycle of state-sanctioned violence against Black bodies both universal and local makes *Blue* necessary viewing for us all.

Ms. Tesori’s musical theatre oeuvre—which includes sonic palettes that capture everything from the Roaring Twenties to the Civil Rights Movement to a post-Obama New World Order—highlights her gifts for drawing out the subtle gradations in multifaceted narratives about the American experiment. *Caroline*;

or Change disabuses us of the notion of monolithic Black thought in the midst of the struggle for equal rights; *Soft Power* turns a century of orientalist American theatre on its ear; *Violet* probes the limitations of religion in personal development; and *Fun Home* unpacks generational trauma wrought by homophobia. *Blue* is just as powerful in reframing how Black families survive amidst ubiquitous, deleterious, savage racism.

I have come to understand the future of classical music as tied completely to mastering a new set of demographic realities, and *Blue* provides a powerful point of entry for anyone curious (or skeptical) opera's capacity to speak to contemporary issues. Like the *verismo* operas of Puccini, Giordano, and Leoncavallo, *Blue* features an accessible plot with ordinary people thrown into extraordinary circumstances, scaffolded on muscular melodies and lush orchestration. For instance, while mourning, rather than offering a plaintive supplication, Father explodes against the racism that has fractured his family: "The God you describe is a white God, not for me. I cannot allow this white God, let this white man to go free. Don't you know they despise you? Don't you know, no matter what you do for them, it's never enough. It's never enough. The white cop will go free." In these moments, Thompson offers the audience no reprieve through moments of consolation or conciliation; instead he insists that we fulminate, grieve, and agonize with Father and Mother and so many other Black families that have been torn asunder by America's national curse. He doesn't have to say their names—Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Elijah McClain, Tamir Rice, Knox Fail, Eugene Burt, Aubrey Pollard—for us to grasp the families' anguish, helplessness, and fury. In more ways than not, Thompson and Tesori's celebrated work is much less a radical redefinition of the genre than a critical embracing of a contemporary condition that creates an avenue of understanding for those of us desperate to see an opera industry engaged with our experiences, remonstrances, triumphs, and yearnings.