

"I am thrilled to help create *X* as an opera for today that speaks to the future as well as the past."—Anthony Davis

## Detroit Opera premieres new Robert O'Hara-led production of *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* May 14, 19 & 22



[Detroit Opera's](#) new production of Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Anthony Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, directed by Robert O'Hara and conducted by Kazem Abdullah, will premiere at the Detroit Opera House on May 14, 2022 with additional performances on May 19 and 22. Described by *The New York Times* as "a riveting and uncompromising work," *X* pairs Anthony Davis's distinctly American score with a libretto by Thulani Davis and story by Christopher Davis, casting an unflinching look at one of the most influential men in American history in all of his complexity. Detroit Opera's current Artist-in-Residence, Davóne Tines, appears as Malcolm X, marking the culmination of Tines's residency in Detroit and his debut on the Detroit Opera House stage. Tines will be joined by

Whitney Morrison, who takes on the role of educator and activist Betty Shabazz and Malcolm's mother Louise Little, and by Victor Ryan Robertson as the characters Street and Elijah Mohammed. Ronnita Miller returns to Detroit Opera in the role of Ella following her debut as Mama Lucia in *Cavalleria rusticana* earlier this season. Making his production debut in the role of Young Malcolm is metro Detroiter Charles Dennis. Initiated by Detroit Opera under President & CEO Wayne S. Brown and Gary L. Wasserman Artistic Director Yuval Sharon, *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* is co-produced with Lyric Opera of Chicago; the Metropolitan Opera, where it will premiere in Fall 2023; Opera Omaha, where it will premiere November 4–6, 2022; and Seattle Opera, where it will premiere in 2024.

## ***X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X***

*X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* details the life, transformation, and ultimate assassination of Malcolm X in a series of fast-moving vignettes, spanning his boyhood in Lansing, Michigan; his early brushes with the law; his conversion to the teachings of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam; his own ministry and his breach with Elijah; his pilgrimage to Mecca, and his assassination.

Through the libretto's emulation of contemporaneous literary and oratory styles, *X* brings the world and words of Malcolm X to contemporary audiences. "As the creators of an opera that was ground-breaking nearly forty years ago, we are having the chance to see the work realized in a newly dynamic way with its strengths weighed before a new generation," says librettist Thulani Davis. "We are thrilled also to build this production in Michigan, a place central to Malcolm X, his family, and the communities in which he came into manhood and later honed his skills as an organizer."

The opera's score exhibits a poly-tonal palette and complex, shifting rhythmic patterns, and is influenced by classical, popular, and non-Western sources. Examples of historical African-American music, including swing, scat, and modal jazz, help recreate the sound of Malcolm X's era, while passages of improvisation punctuate an otherwise conventionally notated score. The opera is published by G. Schirmer, Inc./Wise Music Classical.

"It has been thirty-six years since the premiere of *X*, and I am eager to work with the extraordinary director Robert O'Hara on this new production that will feature a new generation of artists," said Anthony Davis. "Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik el Shabazz) is an even more relevant figure today. His vision is as prescient today as it was in 1986. He is an inspiration for Black Lives Matter and the movement for social justice. As a composer, I am thrilled to help create *X* as an opera for today that speaks to the future as well as the past."

## **Production History**

*X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* was developed by the American Music Theater Festival and had its first full-length production with orchestra at Philadelphia's Walnut Street Theater on October 9, 1985, with Avery Brooks—best known for his work in film and television

including *Roots: The Gift*, *American History X*, and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*—in the title role. The opera's official world premiere took place at New York City Opera on September 28, 1986. Other performances have included a concert performance in Chicago in 1992, a staged production with Oakland Opera Theater in 2006, and a concert performance presented by New York City Opera in 2010; Detroit Opera's production represents the first fully staged production in more than a decade.

"Anthony Davis's *X* has drawn attention from far beyond the constituencies of either the composer or the genre," wrote *The Village Voice* of the 1986 premiere. "Not since *Einstein on the Beach* has an opera by a composer new to the form been such an event...Without acquiescing in any great measure to melodrama or entertainment value, Davis's complicated, sometimes dry and knotty, sometimes raucous and vibrant opera insists on its place as serious, new, Black music."

*X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* features an ensemble cast of predominantly Black performers who transform into many characters throughout, displaying enormous range and talent, and presenting a breadth of the Black experience.

Yuval Sharon proposed the opera's revival for his first season as Artistic Director at Detroit Opera, leading the effort to engage director Robert O'Hara, who directs his first opera with this production. "Since its New York City Opera premiere in 1986, *X* looked and sounded like no other opera of its time, or any since," says Sharon. "The piece was so unconventional that it sat unproduced for decades; thirty-five years later, Detroit Opera is leading the charge on what will be the second professional production of the opera, in a way that will prove that Anthony Davis and Thulani Davis were ahead of their time when the piece was premiered."

## Robert O'Hara Production

*X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* appears in a new production by Robert O'Hara. O'Hara is known as both a playwright and a director. Recipient of the Oppenheimer Award, Helen Hayes Award, two Lambda Literary Awards for LGBT Drama, two Obie Awards, and two NAACP Awards. He received a Tony Award nomination for Direction of Jeremy O. Harris's *Slave Play*, the most nominated play in Tony Award history. He is joined by a creative team featuring Tony Award-winning set designer Clint Ramos, Tony-nominated costume designer Dede Ayite, lighting designer Alex Jainchill, projection designer Yee Eun Nam, and choreographer Rickey Tripp.

Taking direct inspiration from two quotes from *Malcolm X*—"The future belongs to those who prepare for it today," and "Armed with the knowledge of our past, we can with confidence charter a course for our future,"—O'Hara's staging reimagines *Malcolm X*'s life as a timeless creation myth, viewed through the prism of a fantastic future. Drawing on Afrofuturism, a science-fiction-infused liberatory aesthetic popularized by musicians such as Sun Ra and Parliament-Funkadelic, authors such as Octavia Butler, and the Detroit Techno scene, O'Hara presents *Malcolm X* as offering a bold vision for the future.

O'Hara's decision to frame Malcolm X's life with an Afrofuturist accent is more than a mere aesthetic decision. In parallel to Malcolm X's critique of the civil rights movement of his day, Afrofuturism proposes that liberation should take the form of a creative act of radical imagination, rather than assimilation into the oppressor's society. In describing his vision for the production, Robert O'Hara said, "We are working in collusion with the past, present, and Afro-futurism in imagining, with a child-like wonder, a prophet in search of a future for our people, where the final gunshot is not the end of a legend but the beginning of a liberation."

*X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* is co-produced with **Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Metropolitan Opera, Opera Omaha, and Seattle Opera**. Many of these companies represent locations significant in the life and death of Malcolm X. X was born in **Omaha**, before Ku Klux Klan activities forced his family's departure to Milwaukee, followed by Lansing, Michigan. **Chicago** represents the location where X first met Elijah Muhammad in person and became initiated into the Nation of Islam's leadership. In addition to an early stint in **New York** as a minor crime figure, Malcolm X returned to Harlem in his later years first as a Nation of Islam minister and civil rights leader, and—upon his renunciation of the teachings of the Nation of Islam, conversion to Sunni Islam, and return from his pilgrimage to Mecca—a preacher of peace and interracial cooperation.

"Detroit Opera is honored to lead the effort in partnering with a breadth of opera companies in communities throughout the nation about another seminal moment in American history created by Anthony, Thulani, and Christopher Davis that will be reimaged through the lens of a new creative team led by Robert O'Hara," says Detroit Opera President and CEO Wayne S. Brown. "The collaboration with Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Metropolitan Opera, Opera Omaha, and Seattle Opera serves as a tremendous nod to the subject, the artistic authors, and current-day audiences following thirty-five-plus years since its creation. *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* is a work that is timely to reintroduce to audiences nationwide."

## **X and the Detroit Community**

Detroit and Michigan figure largely in Malcolm X's life. Malcolm X (then Malcolm Little) lived in Lansing/East Lansing, Michigan during his early childhood years, from circa 1929 to 1941. After the loss of his parents, he went to live with his older sister in Boston, where he obtained the name "Detroit Red," derived from his red hair and his years lived in the greater Detroit area. While living with his brother Wilfred in Inkster, Michigan in 1952, Malcolm became deeply involved in the Nation of Islam, a religious organization founded in 1930 in Detroit by Wallace Fard Muhammad. In 1953, he served as the assistant minister of Temple No.1 in Detroit. In 1958, Malcolm X proposed to his future wife, native Detroiter Betty Dean Sanders, from a phone booth in Detroit. Three of his well-known speeches were recorded in Detroit: "Messages to the Grassroots" on November 10, 1963; "The Ballot or the Bullet" on April 12, 1964; and his final speech, "The Last Message" on February 14, 1965, which took place one week before his tragic assassination in Harlem.

Davóne Tines, who will portray Malcolm X, is Detroit Opera's Artist-in-Residence for the 2021-22 season. Heralded by *The New York Times* as an "immensely gifted American bass-

baritone who has advanced the field of classical music,” Tines blends opera, art song, contemporary classical, spirituals, gospel, and songs of protest and perseverance. On March 10, he mesmerized local audiences during his “Recital #1: MASS” at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. Select youth members of the Detroit School of Arts Concert Choir accompanied Tines on a stirring arrangement of the Black National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” Tines’s artist residency has focused on getting to know various Black creators and community leaders that are connected to Detroit Opera and forming relationships over time with the hope of organic collaboration. To date, the residency has led to artist commissions, ongoing school and community engagement, and raising awareness and engagement with a number of Black-led community organizations.

“This story, as Robert seeks to tell it, asks us ‘How are YOU Malcolm X?’,” said Tines. “In that frame, this residency with Detroit Opera has been a part of my own meta preparation for the role because I wanted to see how I could, in my own way, be useful to the Detroit community Malcolm X had been a part of.”

In advance of the *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* production, Detroit Opera has partnered with a number of area community, faith-based, educational, and arts organizations to host virtual and in-person symposiums and performances focused on Malcolm X’s life and legacy. Upcoming events are listed below.

*X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* performances will be held Saturday, May 14 at 7:30 p.m., Thursday, May 19 at 7:30 p.m., and Sunday May 22 at 2:30 p.m. Tickets for *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* are available online at [DetroitOpera.org](https://detroitopera.org) and start at \$29. Orders for groups of 10 or more may be placed by emailing [groupsales@detroitopera.org](mailto:groupsales@detroitopera.org). Subscriptions can be purchased by calling 313-237-7464.

The safety of all patrons is a priority for Detroit Opera and the Detroit Opera House. All patrons attending the production must wear masks properly over the nose and mouth while inside the Detroit Opera House – unless actively eating or drinking. The company will continue to monitor health and safety precautions and will regularly update its website to reflect those precautions when appropriate.

## ***X: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF MALCOLM X***

**May 14, 19 & 22, 2022**

**Detroit Opera House**

***New Production***

Music by Anthony Davis

Libretto by Thulani Davis

Story by Christopher Davis

Directed by Robert O’Hara

Conducted by Kazem Abdullah

Co-produced with Lyric Opera of Chicago, the Metropolitan Opera, Opera Omaha, and Seattle Opera

Davóne Tines, Malcolm  
Whitney Morrison, Betty/Louise  
Ronnita Miller, Ella  
Joshua Conyers, Reginald  
Victor Ryan Robertson, Elijah/Street  
Charles Dennis, Young Malcolm

## **Detroit Opera events surrounding *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X***

**Screening of Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*  
April 18, 2022, 6:30 PM ET  
Maple Theatre**

Detroit Opera and the Maple Theater present a special screening of Spike Lee's groundbreaking 1992 film, *Malcolm X*. Directed by Spike Lee and written by Alex Haley, this exhilarating film stars Academy Award nominee Denzel Washington, Angela Bassett, Delroy Lindo, and Lonneta McKee. Open to the public.

**Malcolm X: The Last Chapter and Beyond  
April 19, 2022, 7:00 PM ET  
Virtual Event**

Wayne State University Professor Howard Lupovitch will explore Malcolm X's relationship with the Jewish community, and the impact of his transformational experience at Mecca, in a Zoom discussion. Free and open to the public; RSVP to [awhite\(at\)detroitopera.org](mailto:awhite@detroitopera.org) for the Zoom link.

**Overture to Opera: *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*  
April 21, 2022, 6:30 PM ET  
Detroit Golf Club**

This presentation will highlight the life of Malcolm X and the opera which tells his story. RSVP to [awhite\(at\)detroitopera.org](mailto:awhite@detroitopera.org)

***Art and Understanding: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*  
Week of May 2nd, Date and Time TBD  
Beth-El Center**

A panel discussion and performance introduce the opera, and discuss the role of art in examining legacy, how opera and music help us explore nuance, and engage in bold, truthful, and sometimes difficult conversations. Free and open to the public.

**X: A Legacy for the 21st Century  
May 12, 2022, 7:00 PM ET  
Location Detroit Opera House**

This panel discussion featuring Pulitzer Prize-winning co-author of *The Dead are Rising: The Life of Malcolm X* Tamara Payne and City of Detroit Historian Jamon Jordan, moderated by City of Detroit Office of Arts, Culture and Entrepreneurship Rochelle Riley, will explore thought, scholarship, and activism related to Malcolm X's life. Free and open to the public.

**X Dress Rehearsal  
May 13, 2022, 11:00 AM ET  
Detroit Opera House**

Students from Detroit Public Schools Community District and beyond will be invited to attend a special student performance of the opera.

**Opening Night  
May 14, 2022, 7:30 PM ET  
Detroit Opera House**

A pre-opera presentation from Dr. Naomi Andre will be held one hour before the curtain rises. Free and open to all opening night ticket-holders.

**Malcolm X Day  
Saturday, May 21,  
Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History**

A variety of activities will be held to celebrate the life and legacy of Malcolm X. Free and open to the public; further details to be announced.

**Late April through mid May  
Various Locations**

Virtual and in-person discussions on Afrofuturism, Malcolm X's hometown connections, and the preservation of his legacy in Detroit will be held throughout the months of April and May. Free and available via Detroit Opera webpage and social media; further details to be announced.

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