

Lyric

Of Thee I Sing!

SONGS OF LOVE
AND JUSTICE

Karen Slack, soprano
Kamilla Arku, piano
Angela L. Owens, visual content creator





To learn more about and support the work of Lyric Unlimited, scan this QR Code!

Lyric Unlimited

Learning & Civic Engagement

Established in 2012, Lyric Unlimited - Learning & Civic Engagement is Lyric's department dedicated to education and community initiatives that connects the city through collaborative programming.

LEARNING PROGRAMS

FREE STUDENT DRESS REHEARSALS

Free Student Dress Rehearsals offer complimentary passes to the final dress rehearsal of select productions to groups of CPS and Big Shoulders Fund students in grades 6-12. Bus scholarships are available for qualified schools.

MERIT SCHOOL OF MUSIC PARTNERSHIP

Lyric Unlimited is devoted to finding and nurturing young, talented musicians in the Chicago area through partnership with the Merit School of Music. This partnership gives Merit students access to formative musical opportunities such as coaching sessions in technique, seminars, master classes, open rehearsals, and performances, all provided by Lyric's musical professionals.

OPERA IN THE NEIGHBORHOODS

Lyric's *Opera in the Neighborhoods* program brings live performances of youth-focused operas to neighborhood venues throughout the Chicago area. Programmed for grades 3-6, *Opera in the Neighborhoods* is free to school groups, and bus scholarships are available for qualifying Chicago Public Schools and Big Shoulders Fund schools. Operas presented during this program are written by living composers, are approximately 45 minutes long, and feature relevant topics to young people.

LYRIC OPERA RESIDENCIES

Opera Residencies pair classroom teachers with professional Lyric teaching artists to enrich students' learning through opera. Programs are available for grades 1-12 and each of our three unique programs are tailored to customized learning objectives and goals identified by teachers.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

AUDIENCE PROGRAMS

Lyric Unlimited provides opportunities for deep and thoughtful engagement with the subject matter of each production, via pre-opera talks given prior to every performance, as well as special post-show Q&A discussions with the artists.

OPERA INSIGHTS: NAVIGATING COMPLEX THEMES & WORKS

Opera Insights is a new series of moderated panel discussions that gives audiences access to an engaging conversation about season programming. Dive deep into the heart of opera's most challenging topics with *Opera Insights*.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT RESIDENCIES

Lyric Unlimited is committed to enhancing the city's cultural scene through initiatives like the Lyric Unlimited Artist-in-Residence and Scholar-in-Residence programs. Contracted for the full season, these artists develop and present a variety of performances, programs, recitals, community discussions, and moderate audience programs.

These resident artists and scholars serve as advocates and ambassadors for Lyric Unlimited, engaging in civic activities and participating in programming efforts, concerts, and community partnerships, thereby strengthening the connection between Lyric and the residents of Chicago.

Explore more at
lyricopera.org/lyricunlimited

Of Thee I Sing!

SONGS OF LOVE AND JUSTICE

DANIEL F. AND ADA L. RICE GRAND FOYER
LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO
NOVEMBER 12, 2024 7:00 PM

Karen Slack, soprano
Kamilla Arku, piano
Angela L. Owens, visual content creator

Over My Head

Traditional Spiritual
arr. Clayton White

Love Let The Wind Cry...How I Adore Thee

By Undine Smith Moore
Text by Sappho

I Want to Die While You Love Me

By Undine Smith Moore
Text by Georgia Douglas Johnson

Lovely, Dark, And Lonely One

By H.T. Burleigh
From the poem "Song" by Langston Hughes

My People

By Ricky Ian Gordon
Text by Langston Hughes

Kids Who Die

By Scott Gendel
Text by Langston Hughes

Prayer

By H. Leslie Adams
Text by Langston Hughes

Eleanor Roosevelt: Marian Anderson's Mink Coat

By Jake Heggie
From *Iconic Legacies: First Ladies at The Smithsonian* by Gene Scheer

Selections from Songs of Love and Justice

By Adolphus Hailstork
Texts by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

We invite you to join us for a Q&A session and light reception immediately following the concert.

POEMS AND TEXTS

Over My Head

Traditional Spiritual

Over my head I hear music in
the air.
There must be a God somewhere!
Over my head I see trouble in
the air.
There must be a God somewhere!
Over my head I feel glory in the air.
There must be a God somewhere!

Love Let the Wind Cry...How I Adore Thee

Sappho

Love let the wind cry
On the dark mountain,
Bending the ash trees
And the tall hemlocks
With the great voice of
Thunderous legions,
How I adore thee.

Let the hoarse torrent
In the blue canyon,
Murmuring mightily
Out of the gray mist
Of primal chaos
Cease not proclaiming
How I adore thee.

Let the long rhythm
Of crunching rollers,
Breaking and bursting
On the white seaboard
Titan and tireless,
Tell, while the world stands,
How I adore thee.

Love, let the clear call
Of the tree cricket,
Frailest of creatures,
Green as the young grass,
Mark with his trilling
Resonant bell-note,
How I adore thee.

Let the glad lark-song
Over the meadow,
That melting lyric
Of molten silver,

Be for a signal
To listening mortals,
How I adore thee.

But, more than all sounds,
Surer, serener,
Fuller of passion
And exultation,
Let the hushed whisper
In thine own heart say,
How I adore thee.

Lovely, Dark, and Lonely One

From "Song," Langston Hughes

Lovely, dark, and lonely one,
Bare your bosom to the sun,
Do not be afraid of light
You who are a child of night.
Open wide your arms to life,
Whirl in the wind of pain and
strife,
Face the wall with the dark
closed gate,
Beat with bare, brown fists
And wait.

My People

Langston Hughes

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.
The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.
Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls
of my people.

I Want to Die While You Love Me

Georgia Douglas Johnson

I want to die while you love me,
While yet you hold me fair,
While laughter lies upon my lips
And lights are in my hair.
I want to die while you love me,
And bear to that still bed,
Your kisses turbulent, unspent
To warm me when I'm dead.
I want to die while you love me

Oh, who would care to live
Till love has nothing more to ask
And nothing more to give?
I want to die while you love me
And never, never see
The glory of this perfect day
Grow dim or cease to be!

Kids Who Die

Langston Hughes

This is for the kids who die,
Black and white,
For kids will die certainly.
The old and rich will live on awhile,
As always,
Eating blood and gold,
Letting kids die.

Kids will die in the swamps of
Mississippi
Organizing sharecroppers
Kids will die in the streets of
Chicago
Organizing workers
Kids will die in the orange groves
of California
Telling others to get together
Whites and Filipinos,
Negroes and Mexicans,
All kinds of kids will die
Who don't believe in lies, and
bribes, and contentment
And a lousy peace.

Of course, the wise and the learned
Who pen editorials in the papers,
And the gentlemen with Dr. in
front of their names
White and black,
Who make surveys and write
books
Will live on weaving words to
smother the kids who die,
And the sleazy courts,
And the bribe-reaching police,
And the blood-loving generals,
And the money-loving preachers
Will all raise their hands against
the kids who die,
Beating them with laws and clubs
and bayonets and bullets

To frighten the people—
For the kids who die are like iron in
the blood of the people—
And the old and rich don't want the
people
To taste the iron of the kids who die,
Don't want the people to get wise to
their own power,
To believe an Angelo Herndon, or
even get together

Listen, kids who die—
Maybe, now, there will be no
monument for you
Except in our hearts
Maybe your bodies'll be lost in a
swamp
Or a prison grave, or the potter's
field,
Or the rivers where you're drowned
like Leibknecht
But the day will come—
You are sure yourselves that it is
coming—
When the marching feet of the
masses
Will raise for you a living monument
of love,
And joy, and laughter,
And black hands and white hands
clasped as one,
And a song that reaches the sky—
The song of the life triumphant
Through the kids who die.

Prayer

Langston Hughes

I ask you this:
Which way to go?
I ask you this:
Which sin to bear?
Which crown to put
Upon my hair?
I do not know,
Lord God,
I do not know.

Eleanor Roosevelt: Marian Anderson's Mink

Gene Scheer

Listen! Listen!
Marian Anderson is singing of thee.
Beyond compromise,
Beyond recrimination,
Beyond the anger of a divided nation
Marian Anderson is singing.

Wearing this elegant mink,
she stood on the steps beneath
Lincoln's stony stare,
intoned our nation's hymn
and let freedom ring and ring and
ring. Oh what a sound!
Of thee I sing.
There are some paths no map will
ever trace.
But, from Lincoln's steps
to Charleston's "Amazing Grace"
With every step on the way
I think about what she showed us
that day: No one can make you
feel
inferior without your consent. No
one.
Who are we?
Beyond compromise,
Beyond recrimination,
Beyond the anger of a divided nation
Marian Anderson is singing of
thee.

Songs from Love and Justice

Texts by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Decisions

Every man must decide whether
he will walk in the light of creative
altruism or the darkness of
destructive selfishness. This is the
judgment.

Life's most persistent and urgent
question is, "What are you doing
for others?"

Love

Love is the only force capable of
transforming an enemy into a friend



**What is the
relationship
between love and
justice? Does love
enable justice?
Does justice
enable love?
Or do love and
justice inflame
each other?**

- Dr. Antonio C. Cuyler



ARTIST BIOS



KAREN SLACK

Previously at Lyric: *Serena/Porgy and Bess* (2014/15)

The renowned soprano is the Lyric Unlimited Artist-in-Residence for the 2024/25 Season. Among highlights for this season is a nationwide tour of her new commissioning project, *African Queens*, an evening-length vocal recital of new art songs by acclaimed composers which received its world premiere at the Ravinia Festival, and which she will perform also at the Aspen Music Festival, Tanglewood Music Festival, 92NY, Washington Performing Arts, Denver Friends of Chamber Music, and Newport Classical Festival. Slack will perform in the world premiere of Damien Geter's *Loving V. Virginia* with the Virginia Opera and Richmond Symphony; reprise the role of Mama in Minnesota Opera's production of *The Snowy Day*; and appear as soloist with the Fresno Philharmonic. In July 2024, she released a new recording project, *Beyond the Years*, in collaboration with ONEComposer and pianist Michelle Cann on Azica Records.



KAMILLA ARKU

The Liberian-Norwegian pianist draws on her diverse background as inspiration for her work as a performer, educator, and scholar. She has recently performed for Chamber Music at Lincoln Center, the African Concert Series, and MoMA PS1, and her latest release is a collaboration with composer Dameun Strange

on the nonclassical label. Arku is the founder and Director of Music for Liberia, a nonprofit which supports education in Liberia, and also recently joined Madonna's *Celebration Tour* as a piano coach and teacher. She is currently a PhD student in musicology at New York University.



ANGELA L. OWENS

An internationally recognized performance artist, educator, and clinician, Owens has published photography and media design in *Classical Singer*, *Pantsuit Nation*, *Amerisource Bergen*, and *The American Opera Project*.

Performance highlights include concerts and productions with the Szeged Symphony

Orchestra, Deutsches Theater Munich, Koninklijk Theater Carré, and Opéra Comique, as well as The Dallas Opera, The Atlanta Opera, Opera Ebony, Encompass New Opera, and Brooklyn Academy of Music. A frequent collaborator on new works, Owens has premiered pieces at the Composers Now Festival with Tania León, Atlanta's Theatrical Outfit, and National Sawdust at Rockefeller Center, as well as Terrance McKnight's *Handel: Made in America*, a recent commission with the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



DR. ANTONIO C. CUYLER

Dr. Cuyler is the Lyric Unlimited Scholar-in-Residence. A Professor of Music in Entrepreneurship & Leadership and faculty associate in Voice & Opera in the School of Music, Theatre & Dance, and faculty associate in the African Studies Center at the University of Michigan, he previously held faculty positions

at Florida State University (where he became the first Black man to earn promotion and tenure in arts administration in the U.S.), Colorado State University, Purchase College, SUNY, American University, and the Savannah College of Art and Design. His new book, *Achieving Creative Justice in the U.S. Creative Sector*, is forthcoming from Routledge.

A NOTE ON THE PROGRAM

by Dr. Antonio C. Cuyler

Of Thee I Sing! Songs of Love and Justice is a critically acclaimed recital created by Karen Slack during the turmoil in the summer of 2020, when the country was forced into a long-overdue racial awakening. After witnessing the murder of George Floyd on national television — as many did while confined to their homes during the onset of the pandemic — Slack felt it necessary to create a program focusing on the healing powers of justice and love. The center of this moving program is the raw and powerful yet hopeful Langston Hughes poem, *Kids Who Die* (1938), and a commissioned setting of that riveting text by American composer Scott Gendel.

This is the backdrop, intentionally set, as Lyric Opera of Chicago premieres *Blue* on November 16th. *Blue* is the riveting story of a Black family, whose Father, an NYPD Officer, and Mother suffer the overwhelming grief and loss of their teenage son by a fellow “brother-in-blue” — who happens to be white. This scenario is all too common and familiar for Black Americans today. We programmed *Of Thee I Sing! Songs of Love and Justice* in the week leading to the opening of *Blue*, and after the 2024 Presidential election, as an act of bold activism. Using music, poetry, and the human voice, this program explores the themes of love and justice as a reminder to the audience that no matter your race, ethnicity, politics, or other forms of human difference, we are all human!

Gendel's stirring tour de force is presented alongside vocal masterworks by distinguished U.S. composers from H.T. Burleigh to Clayton White, Undine Smith Moore, H. Leslie Adams, Ricky Ian Gordon, Adolphus Hailstork, and Jake Heggie.

Many people consider 2020 a difficult year. In addition to anxiety and worrying about how to stay safe from the global pandemic, the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Tony McDade, and Rayshard Brooks, among far too many other Black people, proved that a reckoning informed by love and justice had not yet materialized. The scholars Wesley Lowery (2023) and Terry Smith (2020) rightly identified the phenomenon of cyclical and stunted racial progress in the U.S. as a Whitelash, or white peoples' hostile or violent reactions to the advancement or influx of other racial and/or ethnic groups. Fomented out of the fires of these times, Karen Slack, Angela L. Owens, and Kamilla Arku virtuosically actualized Nina Simone's directive, “an artist's duty is to reflect the times,” and bore *Of Thee I Sing! Songs of Love and Justice*.

Conjuring ancestors past who could not easily sing the words and ancestors forthcoming who will uncompromisingly insist on their right to do so, Karen begins the recital singing the phrase, “My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing” unaccompanied, and in the style of the first Negro spirituals follows unhurriedly with the opening art

song of the recital. Familiarity with *Over My Head* may prompt immediate comparisons to Kathleen Battle's (1991) performance, but as noted at the top of the score, Clayton White has arranged this setting for Slack's unique vocal brilliance and astute musicianship. Pivoting to love in its most romantic state, the artists programmed *Love Let the Wind Cry...How I Adore Thee and I want to die while you love me* together. You may feel a keen emotional resonance when she sings the line "grow dim or cease to be," because it inspires the thought that if love has the power to enlighten humanity's path out of the barbarity and darkness of othering, then it makes sense that all humans want to give and receive love before they die. You may also ask, What is the relationship between love and justice? Does love enable justice? Does justice enable love? Or do love and justice inflame each other? If a relationship exists between love and justice, does a relationship also exist between fear and injustice? Nevertheless, if harmonic, rhythmic, and tonal complexity are criteria for inclusion in the classical music canon, then Undine Smith Moore unequivocally deserves to occupy more of classical music audiences' attention.

Clearly a radical invocation of inclusion through its engagement of artists, collaborators, composers, images, lyricists, and poets, *Of Thee I Sing! Songs of Love and Justice* harnesses the actual artistic and cultural capital that one finds in abundance within a multi-racial and pluralistic society, demonstrating the beauty of what happens when people choose to work together as a collective across identities and positionalities.

Still, you may sense that Burleigh's *Lovely, Dark, and Lonely One* and Ricky Ian Gordon's *My People*, both settings of Langston Hughes' (1935, 1923) poetry, articulates a prescription designed especially for Black Americans, and people of African descent broadly, for how to cure the infectious disease of internalized inferiority. If only the world loved and saw Black people as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and the artists who co-curated this recital do. Among this set of songs to Hughes' poetry, you may find Gendel's *Kids Who Die* (1938) difficult to hear — not sonically, but emotionally. Hughes' text serves as a moral indictment, revealing righteous indignation at America's insatiable appetite for human carnage, an appetite that has not spared children from gun violence and iniquitous racism. Hughes references Angelo Herndon, who police arrested in 1932 for organizing a racially integrated march of the unemployed

and possessing Communist Party literature in his bedroom, according to his prison autobiography, *Let Me Live* (1937).

Though written in 1938, the poem prophetically foretells the 1955 murder of Chicago native, Emmett Till, with the phrase, "Kids will die in the swamps of Mississippi..." and "Kids will die in the streets of Chicago organizing workers." Though many Black people fled Mississippi for Chicago during the Great Migration, note that they experienced the same wretched fate in both places. View the film *We Grown Now* (2023), for a

story about growing up while Black and male in Chicago. At the top of the score, Grendel wrote, "for Tamir Rice, and too many others." The "too many others" include Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley in 1963, foreshadowing the heightened racial terror during Barack Obama's presidency that led to the Mother Emanuel AMEC church massacre in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. How could a nation that considers itself the world's greatest allow such suffering? As an aside, the fifth Black girl who survived the Birmingham bombing, now a woman, Sarah Collins Rudolph has yet to receive an apology from the state of Alabama for this crime against humanity. The last setting of Hughes' (1927) poetry in this recital, Adams' contemplative *Prayer*, from his *Nightsongs* cycle, asks you to search intently and sincerely for answers to the enduring problem of racial caste and the injustices and

racism that so insidiously bind and constrain humankind, especially in the United States.

Heggie's *Eleanor Roosevelt: Marian Anderson's Mink Coat*, takes listeners back to where the recital started. Like Marian Anderson, Slack is also from Philadelphia, an echo which offers a special acknowledgement of the struggle to make racial progress in classical music, too. Hailstork's *Decisions* suggests that in a true democracy one must repeatedly turn away from the "destructive selfishness" of individualism and choose Love even if it takes that democracy too long to reach this decision. Still, if love's profundity comes from humans' greatest sacrifices for it, what will you sacrifice for love? More specifically, what will you sacrifice for the love of humanity?

When our leaders, political and otherwise, betray the public's trust with untruths about how far the U.S. has not come relative to addressing racial injustice, artists have a social responsibility to tell the truth. The artists co-curated *Of Thee I Sing! Songs of Love and Justice* with care, courage, and intentionality. Listen carefully and closely. Where will YOU go from here? ■

Of Thee I Sing! Songs of Love and Justice harnesses the actual artistic and cultural capital that one finds in abundance within a multi-racial and pluralistic society

Lyric