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SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA

2019

PRESS RELEASE

A World Premiere in 2020: A New Opera by Grammy Award-Winner Rhiannon Giddens Taps into a Largely Untold Story of Charleston and the American South

The yet untitled “Omar Ibn Said opera” opens Spoleto’s 2020 season on May 22, based on the 1831 autobiography of Omar Ibn Said, an enslaved Muslim-African man who was brought to Charleston’s Gadsden’s Wharf in 1807.

Co-commissioned and co-produced by Spoleto Festival USA and Carolina Performing Arts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Composed by Rhiannon Giddens

Co-composed by Michael Abels

Libretto by Rhiannon Giddens

Conducted by John Kennedy

Directed by Charlotte Brathwaite

Featuring Jamez McCorkle as Omar Ibn Said

and Daniel Okulitch as the Master

June 10, 2019 (Charleston, South Carolina) – On the heels of a successful 2019 season, Spoleto Festival USA announces its commission of a new full-length opera by MacArthur Fellow and Grammy Award-winner **Rhiannon Giddens**, based on the life and autobiography of Omar Ibn Said. The opera will have its world premiere during the 2020 Festival (May 22 – June 7), where it will reopen the College of Charleston Sottile Theatre after its renovation. Subsequently, the production will travel to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where performances will take place at co-commissioner/co-producer Carolina Performing Arts during its 2020 – 2021 season.

The Festival's choice of tapping Rhiannon Giddens to mold this opera was an easy decision. A musical archaeologist known for exploring the legacy of African-American folk traditions, honoring marginalized artists, and drawing from historical documents to create original material, Giddens also studied opera and vocal performance at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. "My work as a whole is about excavating and shining a light on pieces of history that not only need to be seen and heard, but that can also add to the conversation about what's going on now," she says, "This is a story that hasn't been represented in the operatic world—or in any world."

Opening in Senegal, the opera's narrative traces Omar Ibn Said's spiritual journey from his life in West Africa to his capture and enslavement in the Carolinas. At age 37, he was transported to Charleston's Gadsden's Warf in 1807—the port where more than 100,000 West Africans were brought to America before the importation of slaves was banned in 1808. Today, as many as 60 percent of African-Americans are able to trace their roots to Charleston. "This opera gives us a way to look at Charleston in a more comprehensive way," says Festival General Director Nigel Redden. "And in exploring Charleston's history, we're exploring America's history."

"Ibn Said's autobiography is an extraordinary work, and his story is one that's absolutely crucial to tell," continues Redden. "According to some scholars, as many as 30 percent of the enslaved Africans who arrived in the colonies and subsequently in the United States were Muslim, which is a largely unexplored truth in the modern discussions of slavery in the South. But Ibn Said is not a number—he's a man who had feelings, a history, and a right to life that was taken from him." Exploring Ibn Said's story allows viewers to see the life of an enslaved man in the 19th century as an individual rather than one of an undifferentiated group of people.

Upon arrival in the United States, Ibn Said was sold to a Charlestonian, but escaped and fled to North Carolina, where he was recaptured, sent to jail, and then resold to James Owen, the brother of one of the state's governors. Ibn Said penned his autobiography in Arabic in 1831. It is considered the only surviving, unedited autobiography of a Muslim slave written in Arabic in the United States. In 2017, the work—which had spent decades unaccounted for and then years in private collections—was acquired by the Library of Congress and earlier this year was translated into English and digitized as part of a collection of 42 documents, letters, and newspaper clippings surrounding the original manuscript.

To create the opera's libretto, Giddens has carried out extensive research and studied with numerous religious leaders and scholars, including Ayla Amon of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. The opera will explore the themes of religion, spirituality, and redemption, following Ibn Said's experience as an enslaved Muslim in a foreign and often horrific

environment. Musically, the work incorporates West-African traditions with conventional Western opera instrumentation. It is composed for a cast of seven, small chorus, and orchestra, and the work will be conducted by **Festival Resident Conductor and Director of Orchestral Activities John Kennedy**. **Michael Abels**, an American composer who has written the music for such lauded films as *Get Out* (2017) and *Us* (2019), is working closely with Giddens to develop the score. “In telling Omar’s story with the orchestra, it’s crucial that there are elements that represent him culturally, with Arabic and African influences,” says Abels. “There will be some instrumentation and tonality that honor those cultures and bring them into the opera house. Opera can address stories and the human condition in a way virtually no other art form can. We’re in a particular place in history where religion is being used to blame, separate, and isolate people from one another. This story is a perfect chance to put that conflict onstage and allow people to see it in ways that can be healing and transcendent of personal differences.”

Award-winning director **Charlotte Brathwaite** has joined in the opera’s creation. “When we speak of ‘slaves,’ we often neglect to think of mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, scholars, doctors, teachers, healers—human beings with full lives,” she says. “But there were people who could read and write, people with deep connections to traditions and culture, and people who felt—despite their physical shackles—a deep sense of pride. I want to create a world which celebrates Ibn Said’s fight to hold on to his humanity at all costs and his enduring determination to throw off the chains of mental slavery. I want to create a production that acknowledges his pain and inspires with his strength.”

Playing the role of Omar Ibn Said is American tenor **Jamez McCorkle**, who will return to Spoleto Festival USA for the first time since his debut as Lensky in Spoleto’s 2017 production of *Eugene Onegin*. During the 2018 – 2019 season, McCorkle has performed with the Kentucky Opera, Michigan Opera Theatre, and Opernhaus Zürich as a member of the International Opera Studio in Zürich, Switzerland. Playing the roles of Omar Ibn Said’s two owners—both in Charleston, SC, and in Fayetteville, NC—will be baritone **Daniel Okulitch**, who will make his Spoleto Festival USA debut. Okulitch’s recent engagements include singing with the Santa Fe Opera, Metropolitan Opera, Calgary Opera, and with the San Diego Symphony and Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and Chorale. Additional casting will follow.

This opera was commissioned with support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art, the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation, the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust, and OPERA America’s Opera Grants for Female Composers program, supported by the Virginia B. Toulmin Foundation. A forthcoming opera development workshop is made possible through the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Co-commissioner/co-producer Carolina Performing Arts’ participation in this project is made possible through the support of the William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust.

The Thomas S. Kenan Institute for the Arts is partnering on far-reaching education and outreach endeavors in order to connect Spoleto and this opera with Charleston schools and community organizations. A role created within the Festival's full-time staff will ensure robust programming takes place in the region throughout the 2019 – 2020 school year. The material created by these education and outreach endeavors will subsequently be used by Carolina Performing Arts.

The full season of Spoleto Festival USA will be announced in January 2020, with tickets on sale to the public later that month.

Rhiannon Giddens, composer/librettist

Rhiannon Giddens is a musical story-teller—an archeologist of music—mining African-American folk traditions to uncover often-neglected historical accounts and personal records of enslaved people. She studied opera at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music before founding The Carolina Chocolate Drops, with which she recorded albums *Genuine Negro Jig* and *Leaving Eden*. Giddens has also released two solo albums, *Tomorrow is My Turn* (2015) and *Freedom Highway* (2017), the latter which features both original compositions that draw inspiration from slave narratives and others by 20th-century songwriters such as Mississippi John Hurt. In 2019, Giddens released *Songs of Our Native Daughters* with Leyla McCalla, Allison Russell, and Amythyst Kiah, and *there is no Other*, a collaborative album with Francesco Turrisi. She composed music for Nashville Ballet's premiere *Lucy Negro Redux* and was a regular cast member on the CMT television drama *Nashville*. She received a Grammy Award with the Carolina Chocolate Drops in 2010 and, in 2017, was named a MacArthur Fellow. Giddens has performed at national and international venues including Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, the White House, Spoleto Festival USA, Vancouver Folk Music Festival, and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival, among others.

Michael Abels, co-composer

Michael Abels is the award-winning composer of the score to Jordan Peele's Oscar-winning film *Get Out*; the score received a Black Reel Award, was nominated for a World Soundtrack Award, and made numerous film music critics' 10-Best Lists for 2017. Abels reunited with Peele for *Us*, and most recently scored the film *See You Yesterday* (Netflix). Abels' concert symphonic works have been performed by major orchestras in the US including Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Atlanta, St. Louis, and Baltimore. He has arranged or written music for such diverse artists as Doc Severinsen and James Earl Jones. In 2018, Abels conducted *Get Out* in concert for the National Symphony at the Kennedy Center in

Washington, DC. He has composed a children’s opera for LA Opera and arranged a gospel album for the Rev. James Cleveland. Abels’s concert music is published by Subito Music and recorded by the Chicago Sinfonietta on the Cedille label. Abels is co-founder and current Executive Director of the Composers Diversity Collective, an organization promoting diversity and inclusion in music for media.

John Kennedy, conductor

John Kennedy, Spoleto Festival USA’s Resident Conductor and Director of Orchestral Activities, has led acclaimed performances and premieres with leading organizations worldwide of opera, orchestral, ballet, and new music. In recent seasons at the Festival, Kennedy has conducted operas by leading composers of our time including Francesconi, Glass, Lachenmann, Lim, Huang Ruo, Saariaho, and others. Especially noted for his interpretations of contemporary music, Kennedy has worked with many of the leading composers of our time in over 300 premieres and numerous recordings. He has designed and led many orchestral concerts integrating classic works with the new, and recently led a multimedia production of Stravinsky’s *Pulcinella* directed by Seon Yim in South Korea. Kennedy has guest conducted at West Edge Opera, Daejeon Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestra 21, Singapore International Festival of the Arts, and the Crested Butte Music Festival, among other organizations. Kennedy is a prolific composer whose works have been featured at festivals worldwide; this year his chamber opera *One Body* was revived in Los Angeles. His book *The Musical Offering: Why the Musical Calling Matters* is forthcoming in 2019 from the University of California Press.

Charlotte Brathwaite, director

Stage director Charlotte Brathwaite is known for staging classical and unconventional texts, dance, visual/performance art, multimedia, plays, site-specific and music events. Her work has been seen in the Americas, Europe, the Caribbean and Asia and ranges in subject matter from the historical past to the distant future, illuminating issues of race, sex, power and the complexities of the human condition. Named one of the “up-and-coming women in theatre to watch” (*Playbill*), in 2019 she received a Creative Capital award, a United States Artist Doris Duke Charitable Foundation Fellowship, and a Rockefeller Bellagio residency. Other awards include the Princess Grace George C. Wolf Award, the Prelude Festival Franky Award, and the Julian Milton Kaufman Prize (Yale), among others. Brathwaite has ongoing artistic collaborations with Meshell Ndegeocello, Tamar Kali, Justin Hicks, and Sanford Biggers. She earned an MFA from Yale University and is an associate professor of music and theater arts at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. charlottebrathwaite.com

Jamez McCorkle, Omar Ibn Said

American tenor Jamez McCorkle is a recent graduate of the Curtis Institute of Music and a member of the prestigious International Opera Studio in Zürich. An innate musician and trained pianist, he is a winner of several awards and competitions including the George London Competition, Sullivan Foundation, Brava! Opera Competition, National Opera Association Vocal Competition and the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, Gulf Coast Region. Following his successful debut as Lensky at Spoleto Festival USA, he has made two exciting company debuts this season: with Kentucky Opera, he performed as Tamino in *The Magic Flute*, and with Michigan Opera Theatre, he portrayed Lensky in *Eugene Onegin*.

Daniel Okulitch, the Master

Canadian bass-baritone Daniel Okulitch is a leading interpreter of Mozart roles, most notably Don Giovanni, Almaviva, and Figaro, which he has performed at New York City Opera, Teatro Colón, Los Angeles Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Palm Beach Opera, Opera Warsaw, Vancouver Opera, and Dallas Opera. Okulitch also excels in debuting leading roles in contemporary opera, including Ennis del Mar in *Brokeback Mountain* at Teatro Real; Mark Rutland in Nico Muhly's *Marnie* at English National Opera; Seth Brundle in *The Fly* at Théâtre du Châtelet and Los Angeles Opera; Willy Wonka in *The Golden Ticket* at Opera Theatre of St. Louis and Atlanta Opera; LBJ in *JFK* at Fort Worth Opera; and Herman Broder in *Enemies, A Love Story* at Palm Beach Opera. His first solo recording, *The New American Art Song*, was released on GPR Records in 2011. danielokulitch.com

Spoletto Festival USA

Founded in 1977, Spoleto Festival USA is an annual 17-day performing arts festival in Charleston, SC, that presents leading artists in classical and popular music, opera, jazz, dance, and theater. The 2020 season takes place May 22 to June 7 in various locations on the downtown peninsula. Spoleto Festival USA is a 501 (c)(3) charitable organization. For more information, visit Spoleto's online [press room](#).

Carolina Performing Arts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The core of the mission at Carolina Performing Arts (CPA) is to curate and present exceptional arts experiences that inspire and provoke the community—from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to across the globe. Therefore, CPA nurtures artists and the development of new works; challenges and inspires audiences with experiences that foster opportunities for discovery, thought and important social discourse; and solidify the bonds between the arts and academics through work that integrates the arts into the life of the University and its students.