

KAREN SLACK, SOPRANO
KEVIN MILLER, PIANO
AFRICAN QUEENS

DAVE RAGLAND
(b. 1978)

*Precatio**

CARLOS SIMON
(b. 1986)

*Behold, the Queen**

DAVE RAGLAND

*The Queen of Sheba**

**JESSIE NZINGA
MONTGOMERY**
(b. 1981)

*The Song of Nzingah**

FRED ONOVWERSUOKE
(b. 1960)

Luwah (Bitter Tears)

SHAWN OKPEBHOLO
(b. 1981)

*A Letter From Queen Ufua**

INTERMISSION

FRED ONOVWERSUOKE

Duniya (Mystic Universe)

JASMINE ARIELLE BARNES
(b. 1991)

*I Am Not Your God**

WILL LIVERMAN
(b. 1988)

A Prayer

JOEL THOMPSON
(b. 1988)

*Queen Nanny's Lullabye**

DAMIEN GETER
(b. 1980)

*Amanirenas**

**Commissioned for Karen Slack by Denver Friends of Chamber Music along with the Ravinia Music Festival, Aspen Music Festival and School, Boston Symphony Orchestra for the Tanglewood Learning Institute, Washington Performing Arts, The 92nd Street Y, New York, and the Newport Classical Music Festival*



**KAREN
SLACK**, *soprano*

KAREN SLACK, SOPRANO

Known for performances that “ripped the audience’s hearts out” (*Opera News*), Karen Slack is “not only one of the nation’s most celebrated sopranos, but a leading voice in changing and making spaces in classical music” (*Trilloquy*). A recipient of the 2022 Sphinx Medal of Excellence, Slack is an Artistic Advisor for Portland Opera, serves on the board of the American Composers Orchestra and Astral Artists, and holds a faculty position at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity.

Highlights of Slack’s 2023–2024 season included her solo debut with the New York Philharmonic at David Geffen Hall, and her debut as a guest artist with Chamber Music Detroit, where she gave masterclasses and performed two programs: her acclaimed solo recital *Of Thee I Sing* and a program alongside the Pacifica Quartet. She performed in two productions of Shawn Okpebholo’s *Songs in Flight*, appeared with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, as well as the Festival Internacional de Música Sacra Bogotá, and continued her collaboration with the Pacifica Quartet at the Denver Friends of Chamber Music.

Slack’s ambitious new recording project in collaboration with ONEComposer and pianist Michelle Cann was released in July on Azica Records, and in August she debuted her new commissioning project, *African Queens*, an evening-length vocal recital of new art songs by acclaimed composers Jasmine Barnes, Damien Geter, Jessie Montgomery, Shawn Okpebholo, Dave Ragland, Carlos Simon, and Joel Thompson.

Slack has amassed a body of work reflecting her dedication to premiering works by living composers, with particular focus on using her platform to elevate works by Black artists. In recent seasons, she premiered *Songs in Flight* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, appeared in two separate world premieres by Hannibal Lokumbe with the Nashville Symphony and Oklahoma City Philharmonic; debuted Jasmine Barnes’s *Songs of Paul* with Orpheus Chamber Orchestra at Carnegie Hall; premiered Damien Geter’s *Justice Symphony* with the Fresno Symphony and

The Washington Chorus; and made her Houston Grand Opera debut in the premiere of Joel Thompson and Andrea Davis Pinkney's *A Snowy Day*.

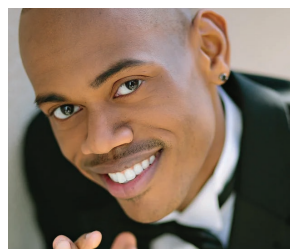
When the pandemic limited live performances, Slack was featured in digital performances with the Houston Grand Opera, Madison Opera, and Minnesota Opera; starred in a new production of *Driving While Black*, presented by UrbanArias; and launched a digital talk show, #kikikonversations. She co-created and performed in *#saytheirnames – Women of the Movement*, a film recital and production in partnership with Philadelphia's Lyric Fest, performed in recital for Opera Philadelphia. Appearing alongside actor/narrator Liev Schreiber, she was the featured vocalist in the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra's *Speaking Truth to Power*, hosted on Idagio.

A native Philadelphian, Slack is a graduate of the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music, as well as the Adler Fellowship and the Merola Opera Program at the San Francisco Opera.

For more information, please visit www.sopranokarenslack.com

KEVIN MILLER, PIANO

American pianist and collaborator Kevin J. Miller is acclaimed for his dynamically artful performances. Recent collaborations include recitals with internationally renowned tenor Lawrence Brownlee at Carnegie Hall and Houston Grand Opera, countertenor John Holiday at the Kennedy Center and The Barbican in London, Joseph Calleja and Nadine Sierra at the Supreme Court of the United States, as well as an appearance with Mr. Calleja on NPR's Tiny Desk Concert series. Mr. Miller prepared soprano Jessye Norman for performances of Laura Karpman's production of *Ask Your Mama*, which was performed at Carnegie Hall. He also collaborated with the acclaimed countertenor David Daniels in a recital at the Glimmerglass Festival. He played accompaniment on the recording *Been in da Storm So Long*, which features baritone Kenneth Overton.



**KEVIN
MILLER,** *piano*

This New York native has been on the fast track to success since his days as a student at the Boys Choir of Harlem. Beginning his musical studies at the age of 8, Mr. Miller was a featured soprano soloist - most notably in Vivaldi's *Gloria* and Lake George Opera Association's production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While a student at the Boys Choir of Harlem, he studied piano with the late conductor and pianist Warren Wilson. It was also during these years that Mr. Miller began his work as an accompanist, having accompanied the choir on its tours of Europe, Israel, and Japan.

Mr. Miller studied at the Mannes College of Music, where he received a Bachelor of Music degree in Piano. He continued his studies at the University of Michigan School of Music where he received both a Master of Music degree and the Artist Diploma in Collaborative Piano under the tutelage of Martin Katz.

In addition to his formal studies, Mr. Miller has been a participant in some of the country's most prestigious festivals and young artist apprenticeships, including the Tanglewood Institute of Music, Aspen Music Festival, The Cleveland Art Song Festival, San Francisco Opera's Merola Opera Program, Washington National Opera's Domingo-Cafritz Young Artist Program and the Glimmerglass Festival, where he was invited to serve as a vocal coach.

DAVE RAGLAND

Dave Ragland is a four-time Emmy-nominated composer, conductor, vocalist, and educator based in Nashville. Most recently, Ragland was named the First Place Winner of The Atlanta Opera's 96-Hour Opera Composition Competition. He also received the 2022 Adams-Owens Composition Award by the African-American Art Song Alliance. Ragland has received the 2021 American Prize in Composition, two Telly Awards, and two Midsouth Regional Emmy nominations for his work as composer and audio engineer of Nashville Opera's *One Vote Won*. Ragland is currently collaborating with Damon Davis, Ted Hearne, Alarm Will Sound, and Inversion Vocal Ensemble on Davis's concept opera *Ligeia Mare*.

Ragland collaborated with librettist Mary McCallum to create the children's opera *Charlie and the Wolf* for the Cedar Rapids Opera, and the educational opera *Beatrice* for Oregon's Portland Opera. Additional composition credits include LA Opera, Washington National Opera, Nashville Symphony Orchestra, Nashville Ballet, Memphis Symphony Orchestra, Intersection Contemporary Ensemble, chatterbird, and the Alias Chamber Ensemble. Ragland was the 2020 Grady-Rayam Negro Spirituals Foundation Composer-in-Residence and a member of the inaugural cohort of composers for the National Teachers of Singing (NATS) Mentoring Program. Ragland is a proud member of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.

CARLOS SIMON

Carlos Simon is a multi-faceted and highly sought-after Grammy-nominated composer and curator. The current Composer-in-Residence for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Simon's work spans genres, taking great inspiration from liturgical texts, prose, poetry, and art.

The 2023/24 season sees premiere performances of Simon's work with San Diego Symphony Orchestra, National Symphony Orchestra, The Washington Chorus, and LA Master Chorale, following recent other commissions from the likes of the Minnesota Orchestra, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Washington National Opera, and New York Philharmonic.

In September 2023, Simon released two albums on Decca. *Together* is a compilation of solo and chamber compositions and arrangements featuring Simon and guests such as J'Nai Bridges, Randall Goosby, Seth Parker Woods, and Will Liverman. *brea(d)th* is a landmark work commissioned by the Minnesota Orchestra and written in collaboration with Marc Bamuthi Joseph, which was written following George Floyd's murder as a direct response to America's unfulfilled promises and history of systemic oppression against Black Americans. His 2022 album, *Requiem for the Enslaved*, was nominated for a 2023 Grammy Award.

"If Simon has inherited anything from his lineage, it appears to be a desire to build bridges between worlds, and use music to illuminate them." - *Washington Post*

JESSIE NZINGA MONTGOMERY

Jessie Montgomery, Musical America's 2023 Composer of the Year, is a Grammy-nominated, acclaimed composer, violinist, and educator whose works are performed around the world by leading musicians and ensembles. Described as "turbulent, wildly colorful and exploding with life" (*The Washington Post*), her music interweaves classical music with elements of vernacular music, improvisation, poetry, and social consciousness, making her an acute interpreter of twenty-first century American sound and experience. In July 2021, she began a three-year appointment as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Mead Composer-in-Residence.

Highlights of her 2022-2023 season include the world premieres of orchestral works for violinist Joshua Bell, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, a consortium led by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra for New Music USA Amplifying Voices, a violin duo for CSO MusicNOW and the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and new settings of various works by choreographer Donald Byrd for the Nashville Ballet.

Montgomery has been recognized with many prestigious awards and fellowships, including the Civitella Ranieri Fellowship, the Sphinx Medal of Excellence, and the

Leonard Bernstein Award from the ASCAP Foundation. She is currently visiting faculty at the Vanderbilt University Blair School of Music, Bard College, and The New School, and has been affiliated with the Sphinx Organization since 1999. Montgomery holds degrees from the Juilliard School and New York University and is currently a doctoral candidate in music composition at Princeton University.

For more information visit www.jessiemontgomery.com

SHAWN OKPEBHOLO

Storytelling is at the core of composer Shawn E. Okpebholo's music, be it chamber, symphonic, or operatic works. A Grammy nominee, Okpebholo's compositions are regularly performed around the globe to widespread acclaim from both critics and audiences alike. *The Washington Post* has described his compositions as “fresh and new and fearless,” as well as “devastatingly beautiful,” while *The Guardian* has praised his music as “lyrical, complex, and singular.” Okpebholo's artistry has earned him numerous accolades, including awards from The Academy of Arts and Letters, the American Prize in Composition, Chamber Music America, and the Barlow Endowment for the Arts. Collaborations with today's leading artists and ensembles, including Rhiannon Giddens, Lawrence Brownlee, J’Nai Bridges, Will Liverman, eighth blackbird, Copland House Ensemble, and the Chicago, Cincinnati, and Houston Symphony Orchestras, have led to performances in prestigious venues such as Carnegie and Wigmore Halls, the Lincoln, Kennedy, and Kimmel Centers, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as prominent music festivals, including Aspen, Ojai, Bowdoin, and the Oxford International Song Festival. Recently, Okpebholo completed a residency with the Chicago Opera Theater. Currently, he is Jonathan Blanchard Distinguished Professor of Composition at Wheaton College Conservatory of Music and also serves as the Saykaly Garbulinska Composer-in-Residence with the Lexington Philharmonic. To experience more of Okpebholo's story, please visit shawnokpebholo.com.

JASMINE ARIELLE BARNES

Emmy award-winning composer Jasmine Arielle Barnes is a Baltimore native, Dallas-based composer. Her music has been described as “refreshing...engaging...exciting” by *San Francisco Classical Voice*, “beautifully lyrical” by *The Telegraph* (UK), and “the best possible blend of Billie Holiday and Claude Debussy” by the *Boston Globe*. Barnes is managed by UIA talent. She is a resident artist for Opera Theater of Saint Louis (2023/24), American Lyric Theater (2021-23), Chautauqua Opera (2021), and All Classical Portland (2021). She has been commissioned by numerous organizations such as the New York Philharmonic, Juilliard Pre College, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Opera Theater of Saint Louis, The Washington National Opera and The Kennedy Center, Aspen Music Festival and School, Apollo Chamber Players, Baltimore Choral Arts, CityMusic Cleveland, and LyricFest Philadelphia, among others.

A rising composer, Barnes has written music for Lawrence Brownlee on an album titled *Rising*, and her art song “Peace” has been named a BMI favorite. Among other artists, she’s written for Will Liverman, Russell Thomas, Karen Slack, Leah Hawkins, and a host of other world-class artists. A PBS documentary titled “Dreamer,” about her choral/orchestral song cycle titled “Portraits: Douglass and Tubman,” her career, and her relationship with Baltimore Choral Arts earned her an Emmy in the 2023 Capital Emmy Awards. Barnes has had a busy year with premieres at Carnegie Hall, LA Opera, and the Chicago Symphony among others. She will premiere her opera *On My Mind* with the Opera Theatre of St. Louis and has an orchestral workshop of her opera *She Who Dared* with the New York Philharmonic (partnered with Juilliard) and American Composers Forum.

JOEL THOMPSON

Joel Thompson is an Atlanta-based composer, conductor, pianist, and educator, best known for the choral work, *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, which was premiered in November 2015 by the University of Michigan Men’s Glee Club and Dr. Eugene Rogers, and won the 2018 American Prize for Choral Composition. In August 2021 he premiered another new work in Boulder at the Colorado Music Festival; the piece sets the writings of James Baldwin to music.

Thompson’s works have been performed by esteemed ensembles such as the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Tallahassee Symphony Orchestra, Atlanta Master Chorale, Los Angeles Master Chorale, EXIGENCE, and the San Francisco Gay Men’s Chorus. Currently a doctoral student at the Yale School of Music, Thompson was also a 2017 post-graduate fellow in Arizona State University’s Ensemble Lab/Projecting All Voices Initiative and a composition fellow at the 2017 Aspen Music Festival and School, where he studied with composers Stephen Hartke and Christopher Theofanidis and won the 2017 Hermitage Prize.

Thompson taught at Holy Innocents’ Episcopal School in Atlanta from 2015 to 2017, and also served as Director of Choral Studies and Assistant Professor of Music at Andrew College from 2013 to 2015. Thompson has a B.A. in Music and an M.M. in Choral Conducting, both from Emory University.

DAMIEN GETER

Damien Geter is an acclaimed composer who infuses classical music with styles from the Black diaspora to create music that furthers the cause for social justice. His growing body of work includes chamber, vocal, orchestral, and full operatic works, with his compositions being praised for their “skillful vocal writing” (*Wall Street Journal*). He is Richmond Symphony’s Composer-in-Residence, Portland Opera’s Interim Music Director and Artistic Advisor, and Resonance Ensemble’s Artistic Advisor.

This season, Des Moines Metro Opera presents the full-length world premiere of *American Apollo*; Virginia Opera holds a workshop of *Loving v. Virginia*, co-commissioned by the Virginia Opera and Richmond Symphony; Chicago Symphony Orchestra programs *Annunciation*; Richmond Symphony premieres a brand-new work; and The Recording Inclusivity Initiative records String Quartet No. 1 “Neo-Soul.”

Last season, *Cotton* had its Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. premieres; Emmanuel Music performed his motet; Geter conducted his own piece, *An African American Requiem* (Fort Worth Opera); and led *Absence*, by Terence Blanchard (Portland Opera). In 2022 alone, he had six premieres: *An African American Requiem* (in partnership with Resonance Ensemble and Oregon Symphony); *I Said What I Said* for Imani Winds (Anima Mundi Productions, Chamber Music Northwest, and The Oregon Bach Festival co-commission); *Holy Ground* (Glimmerglass Opera); *Elegy* (American Guild of Organists); *The Bronze Legacy* (Chicago Symphony Orchestra); and *American Apollo* (chamber version for Des Moines Metro Opera). Geter is an alumnus of Austrian American Mozart Festival and Aspen Opera Center, was an Irma Cooper Vocal Competition finalist, and toured with American Spiritual Ensemble. He owns DG Music, Sans Fear Publishing. www.damiengetermusic.com.

NOTES

Soprano Karen Slack’s *African Queens* project was born out of exasperation; it was, she recounts, created “out of the frustration of not being able to tell the stories I wanted to tell.” Slack wanted to sing the unsung: the stories of African queens, ferocious warriors, and leaders of nations, who had been undervalued, misunderstood, or forgotten. She realized that if she wanted to sing in programs centered around the stories of these women, she would have to do it herself. “You don’t wait for someone to give you the opportunity,” Slack underlines: “You create it.”

Africa has always occupied an important space in the imagination of African diasporic composers. Twentieth-century Black American composer Margaret Bonds, a protégé of Florence Price, is quoted as having “never suffered any feelings of inferiority because I am a Negro” and always having a “strong identification with Africa.” She drew courage and inspiration from her connection to the continent and wrote this connection into some vocal works like *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* and *Ballad of the Brown King*. Other diasporic composers have followed suit: Cuban American composer Tania Leon plaintively depicts Yoruba motherhood in her aria *O Yemanjá*, while Egyptian composer Nahla Mattar marries extended piano techniques and Egyptian culture in her *Songs on Colloquial Arabic*. Nigerian American composer Nkeiru Okoye’s epic anti-slavery aria *I Am Moses* connects her opera heroine Harriet Tubman with her ancestral roots, while New York-based South African composer Marieke de Koker’s song cycle *Blessed Be Our Martyrs* contemplates global climate change from an African perspective.

But although a small community of musicians has delved into African culture and history, the larger world of classical music has missed out on a continent's worth of rich histories and diverse, exhilarating artistic traditions. Classical song and opera have exposed audiences to Cleopatra, Aida, and the Queen of Sheba, but always within the confines of what music theorist Phillip Ewell describes as “the white racial frame,” with perspectives that simplify African women, rather than bringing them to life with contradiction and nuance. Similarly, although classical music institutions have cycled through revivals of Black American composers such as Price and Coleridge Taylor, these composers fall victim to what musicologist Kira Thurman describes as “cultural amnesia.” These artists are depicted as perpetual novelties and are continually “rediscovered” by classical music’s gatekeepers.

African Queens is part of a larger movement to combat erasure, thoughtfully engage with African history, and celebrate the voices of artists in the diaspora. As musicologist and theorist Kofi Agawu writes, the voice is central to African expression: “No other instrument—certainly not the sensationalized drum—occupies as central and critical a place in African traditions of music-making.” *African Queens* uses song to spark new conversation around some of history’s most powerful and intriguing women. New commissions interwoven with established works draw attention to an alternate musical ancestry, one that acknowledges the vital place that Black composers have always played in classical music.

While Slack and her collaborator Jay St. Flono were developing *African Queens*, Slack thought of the composers who had participated in her pandemic-era talk show, #KikiKonversations. After their panel, the six composers, Dave Ragland, Will Liverman, Damen Geter, Jasmine Barnes, Jessie Montgomery, Joel Thompson, and Shawn Okpebolo, invited Carlos Simon to join their ranks to become the composers’ collective, the Blacknificent 7. Slack was thrilled to bring the collective into the project, asking them to each pick an African queen from a list she and Flono had compiled.

The program opens with a trio of Blacknificent 7 commissions. Dave Ragland’s *Precatio* sets Latin text by Flono. For Ragland, the arts are a vital tool to uplift communities of color. He encourages young composers “to keep your ear to the street... [young musicians] should understand and respect the techniques and traditions of the musicians and composers that have come before us, but also understand the world around us.” His cantata-like *Precatio* celebrates the beauty, power, and wisdom of the African woman.

Carlos Simon’s *Behold, The Queen* also sets text by Flono, this time to celebrate Queen Aminatu, a 16th-century warrior from what is now Nigeria. Simon has previously celebrated African American womanhood in his poignant work for string orchestra and narrator, *Portrait of a Queen*. He writes: “Women have always played vital roles in African American communities. I have known women to have strong but warm, caring

Program Notes

Continued

temperaments. She is elegant and prideful. She carries herself with distinction and class... She is the backbone and cornerstone of her community.” His commission, set with his signature blend of jazz, gospel, and neo-romantic influences, conveys the same admiration.

Ragland’s *The Queen of Sheba* sets text by the composer’s long-time collaborator, Alicia Haymer. In the song’s timeless atmosphere, Ragland and Haymer focus on the moment where the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon meet—a story recounted in Ethiopia’s founding epic, the *Kebra Nagast* (Glory of King). The setting centers Sheba’s experiences, imagining her feelings, desires, and questions during this historic encounter.

It was unsurprising that composer Jessie Montgomery chose Queen Nzinga from Slack and Flono’s list: Nzinga is the composer’s middle name. The queen ruled in southwest Africa during the 17th century in what is now Angola. She was celebrated for both her diplomacy and military tactics in response to Portuguese colonialism. Combining spoken and sung text by Flono, Montgomery’s piece traces her subject’s journey through difficult personal and political decisions, which took place at the intersection of African and European worlds. Montgomery was inspired by the action *kujinga* (to twist), which as Flono writes, references “how the umbilical cord was wrapped around Njinga’s neck at birth.” The song draws parallels to “the wisdom of serpents in Kongo religion and their connection to zumbi (ancestors) and ilundu (deities), which counteracts Christian ideas about the innate ‘evilness’ of serpents.”

Nigerian Ghanaian American composer Fred Onovwerosuoke’s compositional mission makes him a perfect fit for the *African Queens* project. The composer traveled in over 30 African countries, studying the diverse musical traditions that span the continent. With his songs for voice and piano, the composer shares the harmonies, melodies, and rhythms he collected. *Luwah* (Bitter Tears) draws from the music of Cameroon. The composer describes it as “more of a dirge,” and reflects on the music’s universality: “Everyone has a lingering memory of losing a loved one.”

Like his Blacknificent 7 colleague Montgomery, Shawn Okpebholo also had a personal connection to one of the queens on the list: Queen Ufua of Esanland (now a part of Nigeria’s Edo State) was Okpebholo’s great-great-grandmother. *A Letter from Queen Ufua*, with text by poet Tsitsi Ella Jaji, imagines the letter Ufua might write to the composer’s daughters, her descendants. Okpebholo describes how this letter “serves as a “gift to my daughters: my desire to embolden them to cherish our rich ancestry, to never allow anyone to diminish their confidence and strength, to embrace resilience and grow in the face of adversity, to foster humility and discern true value, and to never forget the many mothers who have, and will, mold them into strong and flourishing women.” Okpebholo conjures a West African atmosphere through polyrhythms and narrative drive, emulating the same *griot* storytelling tradition that has preserved Esan proverbs and stories for centuries.

Onovwerosuoke's *Duniya* (Mystic Universe) also calls on *griot* vocal traditions, this time from the Mali/SeneGambia sub-region of West Africa. The song also evokes the region's instruments—the four-string *kontingo* and the drone of the multi-string *kamelangoni*. *Duniya* draws “from ancient Mandinka poetry about the unsurpassed wisdom of an Almighty, Supreme God, who must be the true and only architect of the universe.”

The program concludes with a quartet of commissions. Jasmine Barnes's *I Am Not Your God* sets text by Deborah D.E.E.P. Moteun and celebrates Queen Nandi Bhebhe. The Queen was born in 1760, and would later birth and raise Shaka, the future king of the Zulu Kingdom in what is now South Africa. Barnes's dramatic, lush score imagines the spirit of Nandi speaking to her son, imploring him “to stop the senseless violence, and to stop forcing people to worship her beyond the grave.” Barnes's work humanizes the Queen, rather than presenting her as a clichéd savior figure. The music's jazz, South African, and abstract music influences “carry the strength of Nandi in its sound and ethereal music to convey a voice beyond the grave.” Will Liverman's *A Prayer* then leads us back to the opening of the program; his song translates the Latin text of *Precatio* into English. The music here is majestic and mysterious, as Liverman's evocative harmonies create an atmosphere of solemn devotion.

In *Queen Nanny's Lullabye*, Joel Thompson sets Mary Ground's Jamaican Patois text to evoke the fearless leader of the Winward Maroons, Queen Nanny (c. 1686-1760). Nanny led the community of Jamaican formerly enslaved Africans in a guerilla war against British colonial forces. Thompson offers a lilting lullaby, imagining Nanny singing to the British colonizer she has just poisoned. In setting the song as a lullaby, Thompson subverts the image of the Black mammy; she does not comfort the colonizer, she inflicts her righteous revenge upon him.

Damien Geter's *Amanirenas*, with text by Lorene Carey, is the final work of the program. Geter's music celebrates the sounds of the African diaspora and reflects the composer's commitment to social justice. Geter explores the life of Queen Amanirenas, who ruled the Kingdom of Kush from around the end of the first century BCE until the beginning of the first century CE, and played a crucial role in halting the spread of the Roman Empire into Africa. Geter draws on the dramatic and percussive nature of African diasporic music to depict the program's final warrior queen.

Kofi Agawu writes that “[a]ll spaces are potentially African.” In bringing history's neglected queens to life, and by putting them in conversation with some of this century's brightest artistic voices, *African Queens* creates a much-needed African diasporic space within classical music, and contributes to a wider conversation about decolonization and representation in society and the arts.

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TEXT AND TRANSLATIONS

PRECATIO

Dave Ragland

Text by Jay St. Flono

Nigra sum, et formosa, filia Jerusalem.
Sicut gloria Bilquis.
Sicut potentia Amina
Sicut sapientia Candacis.
Sicut feminae spirituales Sybilla.
Considerare quod fusca sim, quia
coloravit me sol.
Considerare quod fusca sim, quia
benedicta me sol.
Aquae Divina Matres,
Nos invocum dos hoc in templum.

BEHOLD, THE QUEEN

Carlos Simon

Text by Jay St. Flono

PRAISE-SONG FOR THE BLACK
VENUS IN TIME

II. Scriptura

behold, the queen
in all her negrified glory,

behold, the queen
in all her negrified glory,

sudden alchemies,
twist, bend, make her hands to rule
by blood and by spirit

behold, the queen
in all her cataclysmic wisdom,
sudden humanities,
turn, burn, make her heart to love
till juices run golden

*I am black and beautiful, a daughter of
Jerusalem.
Like the glory of Bilquis.
Like the power of Amina
Like the wisdom of Candace.
Like the spiritual women of Sybil.
Consider that I am brown because the sun
has colored me.
Consider that I am brown because the sun
has blessed me.
Divine Mothers of Water
We invite you to this temple.*

behold, the queen
behold, the queen
in all her jealous adoration,
sudden enemies,
tear, bruise, make her name to die
but the earth remembers
her crown is makumba, behold
her state the unclean world, behold
her throne a rocking chair, behold
her wisdom, behold
all the colors in a song
call on us to behold
behold
the woman who was once a god-loved
child,
and let out a soft, sweet-smelling cry,
“behold.”

THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

Dave Ragland

Text by Alicia Haymer

On a courageous journey to meet a
king so wise
As mystery surrounds me,
People wonder who I really am.
Bilquis, Makeda, Valiant.
Queen of Sheba.

Emerging from the land of Sheba
With all of my power, strength, and
might.
To meet with King Solomon the
wisest of leaders
With gold and stones as offerings
I marvel at his sight.

As I enter, I witness his power
I wonder how much he can teach me?
The opulence of his kingdom
Astounding!
I begin to riddle him with queries.
What are the secrets of this life?
What are the answers to the vastness
above?
Can his wit and knowledge
Withstand that of my own?

A woman who has fought and earned
her respect.

No man will make me cower. We
soon come to an understanding
A balance of humility and power.
Debating is nothing new for the
Queen

For I am aware of the power I hold.
I've triumphed in battle all while
being doubted.
An ultimate woman.
Powerfully bold.

I set out on this passage in search of
understandings
Assessing a leader and his great
command.
I come away assured of my own
worthiness
The power to move a nation inside of
my hand.

THE SONG OF NZINGAH

Jessie Nzinga Montgomery

Text by Jay St. Flono

Spoken:

Eme ngala Njinga, Rainha Njinga, Dona
Anna de Sousa, Njinga Mbande, Ngola
Njinga Born of mysteries, Kujinga, Serene
as a Serpent, Nzingah.

Sung:

Sia yimbila kwa Nzambici, yandi olungidi.
Nzambici yandi wune zingolo zame, ye
lumbu luami!
Nzambi Mpungu wavanga dizulu ye ntoto,
Nsi ina kavite vanga, yayonsono
yakalakunsinlangu.

I have kept my fear a secret
I have seldom known defeat
I have come through tremblin' waters
Drowned, below, my enemies
Yearn to kiss my warring feet
I twist and bend Nzambi's knife
In the vellum-skin of history
Make jealousy leak from Europa's
fascinated eye
As her children burst their lips to taste me

At the old Kalunga cross where I first saw
the light
And the terror of the Christ fell away
There the priests were sold
'Cross the salt-bleeding sea
And now I am blessed to sing His praise!
I have kept my faith a secret
I have come to sing defeat
I depart through tremblin' waters
O Kalunga, carry me

Translation of text in spoken section:

I am Njinga, Queen Njinga

Kujinga - to twist (referencing how the
umbilical cord was wrapped around
Njinga's neck at birth) and drawing
parallels between that birth and the
wisdom of serpents in Kongo religion and
their connection to zumbi (ancestors)
and ilundu (deities), which counteracts
Christian ideas about the innate "evilness"
of serpents.

Translation of Congo text:

I will sing of Goddess, (s)he conquered.
Goddess (s)he is my strength and my song.

God Almighty created Heaven and Earth,
The earth first made, all was underwater.

LUWAH (BITTER TEARS)

Fred Onovwerosuoke

Text based on Mokpe-Bakweri (Cameroon)

Traditional folktale collected by Lyombe Eko

Lu wahe'e	Hear my lament
Wu la aszre na zhi	I've never cried
whiye lu we	Like this before
Lu wah'e	Hear my lament
E kweli yenga na	This great loss
Na lute ya	Saddens me
Nanga na ka ma	And startles me

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A LETTER FROM QUEEN UFUA

Shawn Okpebholo

Text by Tsitsi Ella Jaji

O daughters of my granddaughter's
Grandson, I am Queen Ufua,
Light wed to Responsibility,
Hear my blessing:

Love the ones who look up
And see you in the stars.
Anywhere you go is good
If you make it so.

My darlings, beauty burns,
Yet tears will not blind you.
If hunters chase your feathers
Make your beak like a spear.

*I leave you your light
I leave you your beauty
I give you your life, as
Mothers always have.*

She wears bright gold jewelry,
She knows she does not need it.
Only God gives firewood
when there is no axe.

My darlings, no amount of trouble,
Has ever killed the sun.
Nothing can stop a River flowing
So grow, grow like the reeds.
I see your light

*I see your beauty
I see your life,
Hope in deadly times.*

Mother-love does not
Begin in the Womb
The Child on my back
Gives birth to delight.

My darlings, they said we should not
sing
Our children's praises to them
But I am Queen Ufua and
I call you all my light.

This is all I wanted you to know
When I asked your father
To give you this note,

*You are beauty
Your are life and
We are light*

Love,
Queen Ufua,
Your daddy's nana's nana

DUNIYA (MYSTIC UNIVERSE)

Fred Onovwerosuoke

Text based on Mandinka/Bambara (Gambia/Mali) poem co-edited with Sankung Susso

Alisalam aleka
Fa, duniy'Allah
Allah sum i'llahi
Fa, duniya, lon man di
Allah sum ilahi
Allah, akubar!
E, Kuba jama le
Tambita walasum

Peace be upon you
Behold, God's universe
Of God, the Merciful
God's universe is beyond
Understanding, Merciful God
Great God
Grand designs, perpetual,
And forever

I AM NOT YOUR GOD

Jasmine Arielle Barnes

Text by Deborah D.E.E.P. Mouton

Queen Nandi, Mother of Shaka; Zulu Tribe

I am not your God!
I am Nandi. Queen Nandi.

Threat by threat I build a new home.
Don't call me blessed.
Curse by curse by my own tribe
Left on my own

I knew I held Zulu future in my womb
I knew you were a fighter.
Felt you kick and spear your own war
But Son...

I am your Mother.
I can't bend the sands of time
I am Nandi, just trying not to fall
You named me Queen
Like the world sees me divine
I am your Mother. I am not your God.
I am not your God!

Throne by throne you took by force
Your Father's throne, once again,

Our Zulu home.
War by war we took revenge.
Those who opposed, oppose no more.

Thousands of soldiers and female
regimes.
Knew you were a leader, and I, your
Queen.

I know you will make Zulu rise.
You rule with power through my advice.
But Shaka...

I am your Mother.
I can't bend the sands of time
I am Nandi, just trying not to fall
You named me Queen
like the world sees me divine
I am your Mother. I am not your God.
I am not...

Forever. I don't know how to be forever.
No reason for Zulu to suffer.
Cease all bloodshed.

Let the earth yield its harvest.
No sacrifice will bring me back to life.

I am your Mother.
I can't bend the sands of time
I am Nandi, just trying not to fall

A PRAYER

Will Liverman
Text by Jay St. Flono

I am black and beautiful, a daughter
of Jerusalem.
Like the glory of Bilquis.
Like the power of Amina
Like the wisdom of Candace.
Like the spiritual women of Sybil.
Consider that I am brown because the

You named me Queen
like the world sees me divine
I am your Mother. I am not your God.
I am not your God!

sun has colored me.
Consider that I am brown because the
sun has blessed me.
Divine Mothers of Water
We invite you to this temple.

QUEEN NANNY'S LULLABYE

Joel Thompson
Text by Mary Ground

Jamaican Patois

Come here, likkle one
Come an res your head
"It won't be long now,"
So di baaba said.

You look a likkle lost, baby
But you will find your way.
No worry if yu yeye dem a droop so,
Jus lissin what you Nanny seh:

Come here likkle one
Come an res your head
"It won't be long now,"
So di baaba said.

So, tarry a while pon di big rock stone
if you legdem a cramp an strain.
Mi know yu chess a go toogatoomtoom
but you Nanny soon tek weh di pain.

Come here likkle one
Come an res your head
"It won't be long now,"
So di baaba said.

Here you are
Time to sleep now,
Close those wide and fearful eyes.
As yu troat close up
and yu lips grow numb,
I'll wipe away the blood and you'll realize:
The end is drawing nigh, enslaver,
You stole my sister from my arms, colonizer,
And stole the land from my people, abuser,
And beat my brother black and red, fertilizer,
And you will reap what you've sown, likkle
one.

Good night, likkle one.
It won't be long now...

Standard American English

Come here, little one.
Come and rest your head.
"It won't be long now,"
So the barber said.

You look a little lost, baby,
But you will find your way.
Don't worry if your eyes are drooping.
Just listen to what your Nanny says:

So, rest a while on that boulder
if your legs are cramped and strained.
I know your heart is palpitating
But your Nanny will soon take away the pain.

As your throat closes up,
And your lips grow numb.

AMANIRENAS

Damien Geter

Text by Lorene Cary

No, Daughter! No!
Do not take up my sword.
Do not strap on my shield.

Patience...

Rome marched into Kush,
Bringing death:

To your father,
Your brother,
Our soldiers,
Our women,
Our children,
Our cattle and grain.

And I cut off the head
Of their statue,
Caesar's head,
And buried it
Under the door
To my temple.

Go step on it
When you pray.

But do not take up
My sword.

Patience...

This is not Egypt
And I am not Cleopatra.
I am Amanirenas.
I will not hold
Death to my breast
And give my people
Over to Rome.

No!

We steal into their stinking camps.
Night after night
And as they
Dream of our blood,
We slit their throats -
And choke on their own.

Patience -

I have sent
Golden arrows to
Caesar and said:
*"If you want peace, take these with my blessing;
If you want war, you will need them."*

Rome has scooped out my eye.
But the eye that is left
Can see the future:
We will live!
Queen-mother and queen,
Qora and kandake,
Ruling Kush,
Free of Rome!

And your daughter
And hers
And hers,
And hers!

Do not take up my sword.
Do not strap on my shield.

Patience!

I will give you a crown!

FCM LAUNCHES COMMISSIONING INITIATIVE

We are thrilled to announce the launch of the Friends of Chamber Music Commissioning Initiative, a focused expansion of our long-standing commitment to supporting the creation of new works for chamber ensembles.

In the 2024-25 season, three concerts will spotlight works commissioned by Friends of Chamber Music in collaboration with prestigious arts organizations nationwide, including the 92nd Street Y, Detroit Chamber Music, the Tanglewood Learning Institute, and Washington Performing Arts, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. New commissions are:

African Queens, with acclaimed American soprano Karen Slack, presenting works by seven emerging composers from underrepresented communities, premiering on our series tonight.

Jerod Impichchaachaaha' Tate, celebrated composer and citizen of the Chickasaw Nation, whose new string quartet will be performed by the renowned Dover String Quartet on November 17.

Stephen Banks, an award-winning classical saxophonist, who has composed a piece for string quartet and saxophone to be performed with the Miró Quartet on May 14.

As we plan for future seasons, we are seeking additional founding donors and supporters to help grow the Commissioning Initiative fund. Your support will allow us to:

- Present the talents of both established and up-and-coming composers.
- Contribute important new works that will shape the future of chamber music.
- Continue showcasing world-class artists who champion commissioned pieces.

We invite you to support the Commissioning Initiative by becoming a founding member. Visit friendsofchambermusic.com/commissioning-initiative for funding levels, benefits, and more details, or scan the QR Code below.



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UPCOMING CONCERTS

CHAMBER SERIES

**Academy of St. Martin in the Fields
Chamber Ensemble**
Fri, Oct 18, 2024 | 7:30 pm

Awadagin Pratt, piano
Wed, Dec 4, 2024 | 7:30 pm

Danish String Quartet
Thu, Feb 6, 2025 | 7:30 pm

**Benjamin Beilman, violin
Steven Osborne, piano**
Thu, Mar 6, 2025 | 7:30 pm

**Quartetto di Cremona
Basil Vendryes, viola**
Wed, Apr 9, 2025 | 7:30 pm

**Miró Quartet
Steven Banks, saxophone**
Wed, May 14, 2025 | 7:30 pm

SUNDAY SERIES

Dover Quartet
Sun, Nov 17, 2024 | 4:00 pm

Tony Siqi Yun, piano
Sun, Jan 5, 2025 | 4:00 pm

COMMUNITY EVENTS

MUSIC IN THE GALLERIES
Sun, Oct 13, 2024 | 12:00 & 1:00 pm
(identical concerts)
Colorado Cello Quartet
Clyfford Still Museum
1250 Bannock Street, Denver

FREE FAMILY EVENT
Sat, Nov 9, 2024 | 11:30 am
Color, Shape, Sound with the
Playground Ensemble
Stanley Marketplace
2501 N. Dallas, St., Aurora

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