

## Seattle Opera may have the country's only opera scholar in residence, helping make the art form more diverse and relevant

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A week before [Naomi André's](#) panel this month on Black representation in the arts, Seattle Opera closed registration for attendance. The number of online reservations had hit the 300-person capacity of the Opera Center auditorium for the first time since the building opened in late 2018. At least in local opera circles, André's name had buzz.

André is [Seattle Opera's inaugural scholar in residence](#). It is a role the company created specifically for her and may be the only job of its kind in American opera. As scholar in residence, André acts as an adviser to help Seattle Opera become more inclusive, both for audiences and behind the scenes. Hiring André is the latest in a series of efforts that has put Seattle Opera at the forefront of American opera companies in making the centuries-old art form welcoming and relevant to diverse and contemporary audiences.

"There's a kind of joy in going to the opera and seeing it live. Unfortunately, opera has an elitist reputation," said André, a professor at the University of Michigan, where she has taught courses on 19<sup>th</sup>-century Italian opera as well as classes on race and gender. She is a musicologist with special expertise in the works of composer Giuseppe Verdi. Her personal experience as a Black woman in the opera field led to her most recent book, "[Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement](#)," which examined African American and Black South African participation in opera.

"I feel that everybody can find something to relate to in opera. This is not a genre that should go away," André said.

Seattle Opera's scholar in residence, Professor Naomi André, hopes to spark new interest in the art form. (Ramon Dompör / The Seattle Times)

To help Seattle Opera become a place where everyone can find their something, André advises on issues of race and equity both in their internal operations and in contextualizing the works they produce for audiences. One of her first acts as resident scholar was a response to the death of pioneering African American soprano Jessye Norman.

"There were a lot of pieces being written, but they were all so white! No one wrote about what she meant to Black fans. So I suggested that and they said, 'Great! When can you have it ready?'" André said with a laugh. "I was so impressed that this isn't contentious." The piece she wrote is [posted on the Seattle Opera blog](#).

André first came to the attention of Seattle Opera when she participated in a forum on race and gender sponsored by the Glimmerglass Festival, a summer-season opera company in central New York state known for producing rare and new works. Called Breaking Glass, [the panel visited Seattle in tandem with the 2018 production of "Porgy and Bess."](#) Impressed by André, Seattle Opera brought her back for 2019's "[Carmen](#)." In a forum called Deconstructing Allure, André and a panel of academics and artists — all women of color — explored representations of women and ethnic minorities in art. They considered the responsibility of contemporary arts organizations toward both classic works of art and the people who may be misrepresented by those art works.



For Seattle Opera's "[Carmen](#)," Naomi André and a panel of academics and artists — all women of color — explored representations of women and ethnic minorities in art. (Sunny Martini)

“Some people would view that as a pretty radical conversation in the opera space,” said Alejandra Valarino Boyer, Seattle Opera’s director of programs and partnerships. The event was so successful that Seattle Opera designed the new position of scholar in residence to formalize an ongoing relationship with André.

So far in her residency, André has recorded [an episode of Seattle Opera’s podcast](#) and contributed essays for program booklets. But her most visible role involves a series of free, public community conversations that invite audiences to question problematic social themes and portrayals of marginalized communities in opera while appreciating the artistic elements that continue to hold up.

On Feb. 13, she will moderate the Black Representation in the Arts community conversation at the Seattle Opera Center with speakers Theresa Ruth Howard, curator of the Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet symposium, and Bridgette Wimberly, librettist of “[Charlie Parker’s Yardbird](#),” which Seattle Opera is performing Feb. 22–March 7. “Charlie Parker’s Yardbird,” in which the ghost of the great jazz saxophonist revisits his past, is one of a handful of performed American operas featuring African American protagonists and written by an African American librettist. André will moderate another community conversation for the opera’s production of “La bohème” in May, which will consider the role of artists and the effects of gentrification in cities like 19<sup>th</sup>-century Paris and 21<sup>st</sup>-century Seattle.



For “Charlie Parker’s Yardbird,” which Seattle Opera is presenting Feb. 22–March 7, André is moderating a panel called Black Representation in the Arts. Shown here is a Lyric Opera of... [More](#)

“I like to ask questions beyond the historical context,” said André, who finds powerful connections between contemporary experiences and the themes of classical opera. “The text can tell you one thing and the music another. Opera is an appropriate forum for tough topics.”

She points to Verdi’s “[Rigoletto](#),” [performed earlier this season at Seattle Opera](#). “I’m interested in that sheltered young woman whose father knows how dangerous the world is. What happens when you love a kid so much you hurt them? We can all feel Rigoletto’s regret as parents,” she said. “Opera is about things you care about. It’s about love that’s too strong or too desperate. We still have these issues because we are all too human.”





"We can all feel Rigoletto's regret as parents," André says of the opera "Rigoletto." "It's about love that's too strong or too desperate." Shown here are Madison... (Sunny Martini) More

Although André grew up in a household filled with music, her love of opera really developed when she was a college student attending live performances in New York City.

"It used to be that you got to know opera through radio. It was primarily an aural experience," she said. But the theatrical experience of seeing opera live and hearing "those pristine voices unmic'ed" drove home the power of opera's exaggerated style of storytelling to help people understand human experience.

According to Marc Scorca, president and CEO of OPERA America, [an organization with Seattle roots supporting opera companies nationwide](#), André's roles with Seattle Opera are not usually found in one person. Many opera companies have an expert in opera history, a dramaturge, who develops educational materials. And some have internal committees that work on issues such as implicit bias. (Seattle Opera had both when they hired André.) But as for having a scholar in residence, "I don't know of another such title in the opera field," Scorca said.

What André adds to Seattle Opera's efforts, said Valarino Boyer, is the ability to "talk about the history as well as the contemporary relevance of opera. We are getting additional ideas on how to explore race and equity in works we present."

Seattle Opera is already participating in the city of Seattle's [Race and Social Justice Initiative](#) to end institutionalized racism in city government and the Seattle Center Racial Equity Cohort, which works to ensure organizations based at the Opera Center reflect and serve the region's diversity. The organization also maintains its own interdepartmental racial-equity team, which now includes André. The team is finalizing a plan this spring to identify the organization's top equity priorities and propose steps to achieve them. In the fall, Seattle Opera is partnering with Seattle Symphony and Pacific Northwest Ballet to launch a fellowship for arts administrators of color.

For André's part, "I'd like to see a more diverse audience. I want to see operas with people of color on the stage, behind the stage and in administrative areas. My agenda and what I see Seattle Opera doing really align."

She was pleased to learn that Seattle Opera has produced several less-expensive chamber operas like "[An American Dream](#)" and "[As One](#)," which tell stories of marginalized groups, and that it offers deeply discounted season tickets to patrons under 40 through its [Bravo! club](#). André believes many arts organizations are too afraid of alienating established audiences, so she was excited to join a company that trusts its audience enough to try new things.

"I love the knowledgeable old guard! The traditional, older opera crowd craves new stuff and is frightened to see the audience for the art form dwindle," she said.

That fear is not ungrounded. According to the [National Endowment for the Arts' 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts](#), only 2.2% of respondents had attended an opera performance in the past year. It's a number that has held steady in the past two decades after dropping significantly in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The proportion of nonwhite operagoers who responded to the 2017 survey was too small to quantify with statistical confidence.

For opera to continue, it needs to shake off the elitist reputation and attract younger, more diverse audiences. And on that front, Seattle Opera's efforts seem to be paying off.

In a survey of attendees at Seattle Opera's production of "Carmen," nearly a third of first-time patrons identified as nonwhite, while 15% of Bravo! club subscribers this season self-identify as nonwhite. The percentage of all Seattle Opera attendees under age 50 has grown from 24% in 2012 to 40% in 2019.

André's motivation isn't just the numbers, though. There is also an element of missionary zeal.

"I believe opera is for all audiences," André said. "I'm willing to do whatever you want me to do to spread the word and make opera accessible to everybody."

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**Black Representation in the Arts**, 7 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 13; Tagney Jones Hall at the Opera Center, 363 Mercer St., Seattle; free; 206-389-7600, [seattleopera.org](http://seattleopera.org). RSVPs are closed; walk-ups are welcome.

**"Charlie Parker's Yardbird,"** Feb. 22-March 7; Seattle Opera at McCaw Hall, 321 Mercer St., Seattle; \$35-\$250, 206-389-7676; [seattleopera.org](http://seattleopera.org)

*This story has been updated to reflect that the fellowship Seattle Opera, Seattle Symphony and Pacific Northwest Ballet are launching in the fall is for arts administrators of color.*

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