

## Northwest African American Museum and Seattle Opera team up for drive-in concert film celebrating Black voices

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African American artists have been [performing opera since the 1800s](#), but the significant contributions of Black artists to the art form have often been ignored. It wasn't until 1955 that Marian Anderson became [the first African American artist to perform at New York's Metropolitan Opera](#). This week, two local organizations are showcasing seven talented singers whose international careers are drawing attention to the contributions of Black artists in opera.

"[A Night at the Opera: Celebrating Black Voices](#)" is a coproduction of the Northwest African American Museum (NAAM) and Seattle Opera that features African American vocalists performing classical music and songs that highlight and honor Black history. The prerecorded performances will be screened in a drive-in movie format on Saturday, Feb. 13, at the Museum of Flight parking lot.

The production renews a partnership that copresented soprano Angela Brown's recital "Opera From a Sistah's Point of View" last year. After the pandemic closed both institutions to in-person visitors, they separately explored new ways to sustain their communities. NAAM has organized book giveaways, virtual exhibits and online events. Seattle Opera produced virtual performances throughout the remainder of 2020, including recitals in which singers performed programs of their own choosing.

"Through our recital series, we had a lot of really fantastic Black artists and so we knew that we could pull from those recitals to create a cohesive concert," said Alejandra Valarino Boyer, Seattle Opera's director of programs and partnerships. "I'm super excited that we have another opportunity to present these incredible Black artists that have been a part of Seattle Opera, and that we're able to do it in partnership with NAAM."

"A Night at the Opera" is a new 90-minute program using selections from six recitals recorded last year: sopranos Angel Blue and Mary Elizabeth Williams; tenor Frederick Ballentine; baritones Will Liverman and Jorell Williams, and bass-baritone Damien Geter. These artists have all appeared in pre-COVID Seattle Opera productions, including mainstage classics "Tosca" and "The Barber of Seville"; contemporary productions like "Yardbird" that specifically tell African American stories; and Seattle Opera's innovative and intimate chamber productions "As One" and "The Falling and the Rising." A seventh artist, soprano Jasmine Habersham, will have her Seattle Opera debut in a recital on Feb. 19 and will perform the role of Zerlina in Seattle Opera's upcoming production of "Don Giovanni," available for streaming March 19.



Soprano Jasmine Habersham is part of "A Night at the Opera: Celebrating Black Voices," a coproduction of the Northwest African American... (Courtesy of Jasmine Habersham) More

"A Night at the Opera" will begin with popular arias and classical art songs; these will be followed by hymns and spirituals, as well as works by Langston Hughes. [Seattle Opera's scholar-in-residence](#), Naomi Andre, will provide introductions and context.

"We wanted to create an experience that will feel like our community is sitting together in an audience. Without leaving their cars, visitors will be able to enjoy an inspirational evening of Black opera at its finest," said LaNesha DeBardelaben, president and CEO of the Northwest African American Museum.

"I remember going to drive-in movies with my family when I was a little girl. There's such excitement with being entertained in the small

space of the vehicle and watching a performance on this large screen. We are replicating that exact same classic drive-in movie experience.”

The only difference — the sound will be radio broadcast, allowing each family to listen on their car stereos, with better sound quality than those little window-mounted movie speakers.

DeBardelaben and Valarino Boyer are both confident their organizations will partner on future performances.

“This is the beginning of a new mode of programming. We look forward to working with Seattle Opera on future programs that center Black music and Black voices,” said DeBardelaben, who is already thinking about creative ways to generate more experiences like “A Night at the Opera.”

### **‘A Night at the Opera: Celebrating Black Voices’**

6:30 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 13; Museum of Flight Space Gallery Parking Lot, 9404 E. Marginal Way S., Tukwila; \$40; 206-518-6000, [naamnw.org/events/opera](https://naamnw.org/events/opera)

Gemma Alexander is a Seattle-based freelance writer; [gemmaalexander.com](https://gemmaalexander.com). This report is supported, in part, by the Rubin Institute for Music Criticism, San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation.