

# Review: Anthony Davis's Malcolm X Opera Finally Arrives at the Met

"X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X," from 1986, receives its grandest treatment yet, in a production expected to play on opera stages from coast to coast.

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Will Liverman sings the title role in Anthony Davis's "X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X," a 1986 work that made its company debut at the Metropolitan Opera on Friday. Sara

## X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X

The epigraph of Anthony Davis's opera ["X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X"](#) is a quote from an interview in which, asked about the cost of freedom, Malcolm responds, "The cost of freedom is death."

That tension — between hope and reality, between liberation and limitation — courses through a new production of "X" that [opened at the Metropolitan Opera](#) on Friday, in the work's company premiere. This staging dreams of a better future, with a towering Afrofuturist spaceship that, at the beginning, appears to be calling Malcolm X home. But the beam-me-up rays of light are pulled away to reveal a floating proscenium, gilded at the edges and decorated with a landscape mural. It is a replica of the podium at the Audubon Ballroom in Manhattan, where he was assassinated on Feb. 21, 1965.

As an outlook it's unsettling, but true to Malcolm X. In [his autobiography](#), narrated to Alex Haley and posthumously published, he recounts the killing of his father and says: "It has always been my belief that I, too, will die by violence. I have done all that I can to be prepared." And since "X" premiered, in 1986, there has been only more violence, a fact lost neither on [the work's creators](#) — Davis, following a

story by his brother, Christopher Davis, and a libretto by their cousin Thulani Davis — nor on this production's director, Robert O'Hara, who at times treats the surface of the spaceship as a memorial, projecting the names of Black victims onto it.

The list covers decades — the Rev. George W. Lee, James Byrd Jr., Breonna Taylor, to mention just a few — and it's an unfamiliar sight at the Met, where complex, current political realities rarely make their way onstage. But "X," Davis's first opera, has arrived there as part of a programming wave that inevitably speaks to contemporary life: After the murder of George Floyd, the Met announced that it would return from its pandemic closure with its first work by a Black composer, Terence Blanchard's ["Fire Shut Up in My Bones."](#) It wasn't long before "X" was in the pipeline, too.

"X" had its official debut next door to the Met in a New York City Opera production at what is now the David H. Koch Theater. It had the makings of a great American opera score: a breakdown of genre boundaries that restlessly flows between detailed notation and improvisation, as well as between classical and modern, homegrown styles like swing and jazz. Avant-garde idioms nestle comfortably next to tuneful pop melodies like that of "Shoot your shot!" In its subject matter, the work fits alongside so-called CNN operas like John Adams's "Nixon in China," which premiered a year

later in Houston and took a similarly mythic approach to characters from recent history.

But “Nixon” became firmly a classic, while “X” languished for decades — revived by Oakland Opera Theater in 2006, then dormant again until O’Hara’s staging of a newly revised score [premiered at Detroit Opera last year](#). This production, thankfully, was also commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago, Opera Omaha and Seattle Opera. At last, “X” is set to be played from coast to coast.

In its move from Detroit to New York, “X” has been scaled to fill the Met’s stage. The creative team, all in their company debuts, has made everything bigger: the spaceship, the centerpiece of Clint Ramos’s scenic design; the chorus, about half in period dress and the others in Dede Ayite’s spectacular Afrofuturist costumes; Yee Eun Nam’s projections, almost constantly present, by turns sci-fi and documentary.

Bigger, though, in this case also means busier. (And Davis’s score is busy enough.) In Detroit, four dancers complemented and accentuated the action; but now, there is a full ensemble that, in Rickey Tripp’s slight choreography, distracts more than it illuminates. Still, all these elements cohere into a grand, pageantry treatment of Malcolm X’s life that eschews realism for dreamy abstraction befitting the opening’s oratorio-like choral incantation “We’ve been

waiting for a prophet," and Brechtian touches that signal "X" as distinctly theatrical storytelling.

We don't hear from the adult Malcolm until the end of Act I. (Before that, he is represented by a child, Bryce Christian Thompson, who is given the achingly simple aria "Momma, help me.") But when we do, the moment is meant to arrive like a lightning bolt. On Friday, it was more of anticlimax. The orchestra, under the baton of Kazem Abdullah, who also led the Detroit run, pulled back to accommodate the small baritone sound of Will Liverman's Malcolm.

This is a role that demands charisma and titanic presence, especially as the evening progresses. In Detroit, the bass-baritone Davóne Tines commanded the stage with ease and resonant authority. (He also [made an excellent recording](#) with the Boston Modern Orchestra Project and Odyssey Opera las year.) But Liverman, while passionate and warm as always, hasn't found a role he can fully inhabit.

Liverman might have had more success in a concert setting, but onstage his performance had dramatic consequences: His was a Malcolm X repeatedly overshadowed by those around him. As Malcolm's mother, Louise, and later as his wife, Betty, the soprano Leah Hawkins persuasively traced within brief, contained appearances the pained arcs of women who come to terms with the doomed lives of their partners. And the mezzo-soprano Raehann Bryce-Davis,

another singer doing double duty, as Malcolm's sister Ella and Queen Mother, was a smooth-voiced source of comfort.

Mighty, too, were the men surrounding Malcolm: the penetrating bass-baritone Michael Sumuel, as Reginald; and the tenor Victor Ryan Robertson, bright and assured as Street and as Elijah Muhammad — the Black separatist and religious leader whom Malcolm X adulated before breaking from him, politically and philosophically, near the end of his life.

Supporting this cast was a chorus that performed with the kind of unevenness that tends to improve after opening night. The same could be said for the orchestra, which despite Abdullah's sure hand occasionally lapsed in its articulation but still communicated the expansive variety in Davis's score.

With a few further changes since Detroit, Davis has settled on a version of "X" with true staying power: its shifts from meditative pause to propulsive action confidently balanced, its unbroken flow from genre to genre as graceful as anything in opera. A hallmark of this music is the use of improvising instrumentalists, who follow directions both free ("respond to Malcolm") and evocative ("à la Jimmy Garrison" and "Miles Davis Funk!").

It shouldn't be taken for granted that a score with

instructions like "'Bitches Brew' Miles!" should be at the Met. This was unfathomable only a few years ago. Just as history moves quickly in "X," so, too, is it beginning to in opera. Neglected for decades, this work can now be discussed with multiple casts and recordings to compare. And, with performances planned long after the run in New York, it has the opportunity to become what it always should have been: an American classic.

## **X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X**

Through Dec. 2 at the Metropolitan Opera, Manhattan;  
[metopera.org](http://metopera.org).