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'X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X' Review: Songs of Struggle at the Metropolitan Opera

Director Robert O'Hara resurrects Anthony Davis's 1986 work about the black civil-rights leader, in a production that gives thrilling voice to a richly jazzy score.

By Heidi Waleson

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Will Liverman (center) in a scene from Anthony Davis's 'X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X' PHOTO: MARTY SOHL/THE METROPOLITAN OPERA

New York

Nearly four decades after its birth, Anthony Davis's "X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X" has arrived at the Metropolitan Opera. At the time of its 1986 New York City Opera world premiere across the Lincoln Center Plaza, its controversial subject and unconventional musical idiom would have been unthinkable at the conservative Met; today, it is part of a vigorous company initiative predicated on the idea that new operas attract new audiences. The

times have finally caught up with “X,” even as the events that it chronicles have receded into the more distant past.

The onstage resurrection of “X” was spearheaded by Yuval Sharon, artistic director of the Detroit Opera; the revised work, in a five-company co-production, had its premiere there in May 2022. The show is grander at the Met and director Robert O’Hara’s concept, framing “X” as a mythic tale seen through an Afrofuturist lens, is clearer, though if you haven’t read an explanation of it in advance, you may still be mystified. Two dozen choristers in elaborate sci-fi/African costumes and wigs—visitors from an idealized future—now witness the proceedings, which play out as a historical re-enactment on the inset gold-framed proscenium stage. Their spaceship, suspended above, is much bigger here; some additional projections help establish the settings, which were vague in Detroit; and a larger dance ensemble clarifies scenes such as the riot in the final act. (The production team includes Clint Ramos, set; Dede Ayite, costumes; Alex Jainchill, lighting; Yee Eun Nam, projections; Mia Neal, wigs; and Rickey Tripp, choreography.)

Even more important, a much larger chorus gives the opera its intended epic, oratorio-like weight. In Mr. Davis’s richly varied score, the chorus is the community—telling the story, commenting on events, and underpinning the solo moments, which jump out of the texture.

In the story by Christopher Davis and librettist Thulani Davis (Christopher is Anthony’s brother; Thulani is his cousin), each act covers a period (and a different name) in Malcolm’s life. In Act 1, his family is broken up after his father’s violent death; he becomes a street hustler in Boston and is arrested and jailed. In Act 2, he converts to Islam in prison; changes his “slave name” Little to X; becomes a magnetic preacher of black power in Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam and then falls afoul of the organization. In Act 3, he makes a pilgrimage to Mecca; has a vision of unity; takes the name El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz; forms his own movement; and is assassinated, age 39, at the Audubon Ballroom in Manhattan.



Mr. Liverman PHOTO: MARTY SOHL / MET OPERA

In Detroit, the opera was performed with a single intermission after the first scene of the second act. The Met reverted to the original three-act format, which is dramatically stronger. For example, in the concluding scene of Act 1, the chorus disappears, and we hear the adult Malcolm's voice for the first time. He's been arrested, and he sings an aria of bitterness and helpless anger at the black man's lot that concludes, "You want the truth, but you don't want to know." Baritone Will Liverman, who snapped into the character with naked ferocity, sounded the best I've ever heard him. The directing was overkill—the house lights were raised and Mr. Liverman came to the edge of the stage to directly address the mostly white audience—but the fierceness of that aria resonated through the intermission.

Soprano Leah Hawkins shone in her two very different arias—first as Louise, Malcolm's mother, reliving the terror of Ku Klux Klan raids and falling apart as she worries about her missing husband; later expansively sympathetic as Betty, Malcolm's wife, in the poetic "When a man is lost, does the sky bleed for him?" Raehann Bryce-Davis's sumptuous mezzo brought lively energy to Ella, Malcolm's sister, who brings him to Boston, as well as to the Queen Mother, a soapbox preacher advocating a return to African ways. Tenor Victor Ryan Robertson seemed vocally underpowered as the seductive hustler Street but came into his own as the dominating Elijah Muhammad. Michael Sumuel's resonant bass-baritone was effective in the role of Malcolm's brother Reginald, who introduces him to the Nation of Islam.



Raehann Bryce-Davis as Queen Mother PHOTO: MARTY SOHL/THE METROPOLITAN OPERA

Kazem Abdullah ably led the Metropolitan Opera orchestra, which kept pace with the driving energy of Episteme, the eight-member, improvising jazz ensemble embedded in it. The orchestra and chorus captured the big canvas of this complex score, limning its polyrhythms and letting the wailing sax and trumpet fly.



A scene from 'X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X' PHOTO: MARTY SOHL/THE METROPOLITAN OPERA

"X" has some flaws. The piece loses focus after Malcolm's journey to Mecca. The scenes of his return to America, the founding of his new organization, and the bombing of his house are chaotic and confusing; the wordless assassination at the end is muted and anticlimactic. In this production, with the visitors from the

future watching Malcolm get shot, and the curtains of the inset proscenium closing on him, one gets the feeling that these events happened in the distant past and their meaning is purely historical, no different from the assassination of King Gustavo of Sweden in “Un Ballo in Maschera,” also playing in repertory at the Met. The fervor of the 1960s black power rhetoric becomes quaint artifact rather than the expression of a struggle that continues.

But this is a major score, and one that warrants exposure on a big stage. Met attendees who venture downstairs to the exhibition space on the concourse level can get a taste of the 12 contemporary works planned for the next four seasons, which include world premieres of Missy Mazzoli’s “Lincoln in the Bardo” and Huang Ruo’s “The Wedding Banquet,” and Met premieres of works that have been seen elsewhere, like John Adams’s “Antony and Cleopatra” and Kevin Puts’s Pulitzer-winning “Silent Night.” Presentation at the Met, with all its resources and reach, will help determine which of the many new works written and produced in recent decades will get a place in the operatic repertory. But the Met will have to keep bringing back the best of them to make that happen.

—*Ms. Waleson writes on opera for the Journal and is the author of “Mad Scenes and Exit Arias: The Death of the New York City Opera and the Future of Opera in America” (Metropolitan).*