



For Immediate Release

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## A New Vision for Vanqui

Opera Columbus' Crane Directing Fellow Helms Reimagined *Vanqui* as Part of *40 Days of Opera*

Opera Columbus will present a reimagined production of Leslie Savoy Burrs and John A. Williams' *Vanqui* as part of its *40 Days of Opera* festival. Helmed by Crane Directing Fellow Luther Lewis III, the opera is part of a partnership with The Ohio State University's Journeys to Equity program.

"We are very proud that the world premiere of this updated *Vanqui* will be led by OC's inaugural Crane Directing Fellow, Luther Lewis III," stated Opera Columbus General Director + CEO Julia Noulin- M  rat. "*Vanqui* is an important part of Opera Columbus' history, and I couldn't imagine celebrating our 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary without performing it. Luther's vision and this new 90-minute version are an ideal combination for bringing this more accessible *Vanqui* to life for even more Columbus residents. Opera Columbus produced the world premiere of Leslie Burr's opera at the Southern Theatre in 1999, and we are proud to present it this year at the Lincoln Theatre."

*Vanqui* is a tale of death and resurrection through the eyes of the heroine, Vanqui, a 19th-century enslaved woman. The music of Leslie Savoy Burrs and the libretto by John A. Williams frame a uniquely American experience in a compelling, multi-dimensional work of art. This opera portrays the story of two Africans, Vanqui and Prince. Enslaved in America, the married couple is torn apart to later be cruelly murdered. They resurrect as spirits who ride the wind searching for each other and for the Baobab tree. During their journey, they encounter famous freedom fighters including Henry "Box" Brown and Nat Turner. Reunited in the end, Vanqui and Prince symbolize the triumph of enslaved people over an inhumane system and the ultimate triumph of the human spirit.

"[In creating this opera, librettist] John A. Williams and I gave ourselves the responsibility to really capture the issues of dignity, humanity, and the rich history of the fight for our freedom as a race – as well as a more accurate depiction of how the peculiar institution of slavery manifested itself in this country. Luther is a very astute director. I was extremely impressed and inspired that his vision will focus on the regal elements of the characters found in the *Vanqui* opera stories that often get overlooked by the public. These elements include the resiliency, strength and humanism of Vanqui's

African/American characters while confronting the daily inhumane obstacles and atrocities imposed upon them as a race.”

“Something that excites me about *Vanqui* is that it’s not a savior piece – it’s taken from the perspective of ancestral guidance,” remarked Lewis. This production of *Vanqui* will de-emphasize the trauma experienced by its characters. The *Vanqui* and Prince of Lewis’ vision are regal and dignified, with a physical production reflecting the strength and culture of the protagonists. “We won’t be seeing anyone in chains or rags,” said Lewis. “I was inspired by a recent international trip, where I visited cities without so much as sidewalks. The community still found ways to bring joy and pride to their buildings and dress with their use of color.”

*Vanqui* will play the Lincoln Theatre on May 22. “I’m excited to be at the Lincoln Theatre,” Lewis noted. “My production will honor the legacy of this magnificent and historic venue, and the jazz legends who performed there, from Etta James and Count Basie to Columbus native Nancy Wilson.”

*Vanqui* will be sung in English with English titles and will be led by Antoine T. Clark. Run time is approximately 90 minutes without intermission. *40 Days of Opera* kicks off on May 4, 2022, marking the 40th anniversary of Opera Columbus. This city-wide, multidisciplinary celebration will feature partnerships with many of Columbus’ cultural institutions.

*40 Days of Opera* and *Vanqui* are supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts and PNC Arts Alive as well as by the Impresarios of Opera Columbus.

**CAST & CREATIVE:** Adia Evans, *Vanqui*; Marcus Jefferson, Prince; Hannah Marie Bullock, Ola/ Garner/ Moremi; Artega Wright, Spurton/ Nat Turner; Skye Marie Johnson, Melody Caldwell/ Ruth; Robert Ker, Jefferson Caldwell/Slave Catcher; Eric McKeever, Henry “Box” Brown; Aryssa Leigh Burrs, Ramona; Justin T. Swain, Ulysses/ Davids.

Antoine T. Clark, conductor; Luther Lewis III, director & set designer; Larry Griffin, chorus / music director Esther Abena Sands, costume designer; Maxx Finn, lighting designer; Rickelle Williams, stage manager.

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### **About Luther Lewis III**

Luther Lewis III is a multidisciplinary artist, singer, teacher and director within Classical Voice/Opera, Theater and Visual Art and is currently the Crane Directing Fellow at Opera Columbus. He has appeared with several major Opera companies in supporting and chorus roles including Lyric Opera of Chicago, Cincinnati Opera, San Francisco Opera, Opera de Montreal, as well as international tours in Austria, France, Germany, Israel, South America, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. In 2018, he presented an Art Gallery Concert featuring his illustrations of legendary African American Opera singers at the iconic Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Illinois in collaboration with Chicago Opera Theater. Luther has studied Vocal Performance at Oberlin Conservatory of Music and the University of Kentucky as well as Visual Art Studio at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

### **About Antoine T Clark**

Compelling interpretations, inventive performances and an energetic stage presence are the hallmarks of American conductor Antoine T. Clark. The founding Artistic and Music Director of the Worthington Chamber Orchestra in Ohio, now in its ninth season, Mr. Clark was named Assistant Conductor of West Virginia’s Wheeling Symphony Orchestra in fall 2021. A passionate advocate of arts education, he was named Cincinnati Symphony’s 2022 MAC Music Innovator. Amongst the orchestras with which he has guested are the Vermont Symphony Orchestra, Opera Columbus, Chamber Orchestra of New York, and

Richmond Symphony. With a focus on building strong relationships in communities, Mr. Clark creates bold programs that often include innovative collaborations with artists from various artistic disciplines. A winner in the 2017 International Conductor's Workshop and Competition, he has participated in several festivals and masterclasses, and was a Project Inclusion Conducting Freeman Fellow with the Chicago Sinfonietta, with which he also served as Assistant Conductor.

### **About Leslie Burrs**

Leslie Savoy Burrs has been acclaimed as an award-winning performer, composer and educator. Mr Burrs was commissioned by New Courtland Elder Services to write an opera TRANSITIONS: SUNG STORIES. An excerpted live performance of this opera was presented at the 2021 national OPERA America Conference in Philadelphia, PA. In addition, Mr Burrs was invited by OPERA America to be a guest panelist for their Creative Aging seminar presented at the conference. This session demonstrated the unique model Mr Burrs established to address an effective approach that combines opera, the humanities and community engagement while contributing a new work to the American opera repertoire. A documentary film created ONI was also presented at the seminar. The documentary highlights Mr Burrs' methodology for engaging senior citizens in residential settings through interactive music workshops. In 2008, Leslie Burrs collaborated with the international award winning author, poet, and sculptor Barbara Chase Riboud to create the opera Portrait Of A Nude Woman As Cleopatra based on Ms Riboud's award-winning book of poetry of the same name. Mr Burrs has many commissions to his credit, two of which resulted in a new American opera titled Vanqui for Opera Columbus. He has appeared as guest soloist and composer with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Baltimore, Atlanta, Louisville, New Jersey and Richmond Symphonies Orchestras. In 2002, Mr Burrs was the first composer to receive the National Opera Association's coveted Legacy Award for Vanqui.

### **About Opera Columbus**

Under the vision of General Director + CEO Julia Noulain-Mérat, Opera Columbus is redefining and reimagining the concept of regional opera with world-class productions that celebrate extraordinary talent and artistic partnerships, engaging a new, diverse audience for this most magnificent of art forms. From groundbreaking collaborations to innovative and breathtaking productions, Opera Columbus is passionate about creating artistic moments for each and every patron. Opera Columbus's slogan, "Make It Yours," demonstrates the company's commitment to inclusivity, and invites everyone in the community to join with us.

For more information, visit [www.OperaColumbus.org](http://www.OperaColumbus.org), Facebook: [www.facebook.com/OperaColumbus](https://www.facebook.com/OperaColumbus), Instagram: @Opera.Columbus or Twitter: @OperaColumbus

Join the conversation by using #VanquiOC #MakeItYours #OperaCbus #OCTurns40

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