

*Terence Blanchard's new opera, at the Met, deftly captures the churning inner world of its protagonist.*

**By Alex Ross**



Blanchard, who began as a jazz trumpeter, has a gift for musical storytelling. Illustration by Pola Maneli



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Terence Blanchard's "Fire Shut Up in My Bones," which opened the Metropolitan Opera season, tells of a young Black man growing up in a rural Louisiana town, his exuberant childhood shadowed by family discord and sexual abuse. Such a story would be nothing too newsworthy in an Off Broadway theatre or in an indie movie house, but it's a radical novelty for the mainstream opera world, which dwells largely in the European past. This is, in fact, the first time that a Black composer and a Black librettist have found their way to the Met: until now, Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess" has been the principal, problematic vehicle for capturing African American experiences. The libretto is by the screenwriter, director, and actor Kasi Lemmons, who adapted it from the eponymous memoir by the *Times* columnist Charles M. Blow.

The book is very much an interior narrative, with Blow recounting, in lyrically candid prose, his youthful struggles to define his masculinity and his sexuality. He is preyed upon by an older cousin and also by an uncle; at the same time, he feels intermittently attracted to men. He attempts to bury his feelings through zealous churchgoing, and at college he loses himself in frat-house culture. Shame and rage bring him to the brink of violence: at the beginning of both the book and the opera, he is on his way to his mother's house with a loaded pistol, intending to kill the cousin. He doesn't go through with the act, and finds his way to a different future. The title comes from the Book of Jeremiah: "His word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay."

Much of that interiority inevitably goes missing in the operatic adaptation, as Blow's writerly consciousness no longer controls every scene. There's a compensating gain, though, in the addition of a sophisticated, agile

compositional personality. Blanchard's path to opera has hardly been a conventional one: he began as a jazz trumpeter, and then established himself as a prolific film composer, collaborating regularly with the director Spike Lee. He first tried his hand at opera in 2013, when he wrote "Champion" for the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, which also premièred "Fire," in 2019. But the opera-writing profession has no conventional avenue of approach: the skills it requires are so idiosyncratic that they can be discovered only in practice. What Blanchard possesses, above all, is a gift for musical storytelling: he summons up disparate characters and scenes within the frame of a distinct personal voice.

In the early pages of the score, Blanchard establishes a lingua franca for the lead character's tense, turbulent world: quick harmonic movement, astringent orchestral textures, added-note dissonances, unison string lines that twist about and fail to find repose. During Charles's spells of solitude, the restless motion slows, allowing for generous stretches of post-Puccini lyricism. When a crowd dynamic takes over, R. & B. and gospel styles come into play, with a combo of guitar, bass, piano, and drums piercing the ensemble. The transitions between inner and outer worlds are handled with unfailing deftness.

Since the opera's inaugural production, Blanchard has beefed up the work in various ways, with an eye toward filling the vast Met stage. Some of these changes blur the intimate cogency of the score, as Anthony Tommasini, at the *Times*, pointed out. (I saw the original production on video.) The second act begins with a dream ballet that suggests, over sinuous, string-dominated textures, Charles's repressed desires. For the Met production, Blanchard augmented the prelude by more than thirty bars, exhausting the material. Likewise, Charles's plaintive aria of reflection ("I was once a boy of peculiar grace") receives one reprise too many.

In the fraternity scene, Blanchard has added an orchestral interlude of startling power—a blistering evocation of an uncommonly sadistic hell week. In one

passage, the brass section lashes back and forth between B-flat-major and B-flat-minor chords, in fractured triplet rhythms. Yet this critique of frat hazing is undercut by the high-spirited stepping routine that James Robinson and Camille A. Brown, the co-directors of the show, unleash onstage. Although the sequence is a tumultuous joy to watch, you're left with the sense that frat life is just boys being boys, which is not at all the message that Blow delivers in his book. "In flight from pain, I became an agent of it," he writes. The production is handsomely mounted throughout, but it struggles to dramatize the lead character's ambivalence toward group dynamics and male-bonding rituals: the vitality of the crowd keeps winning out.

A stronger lead performance might have corrected that balance. In St. Louis, Charles was sung by the intensely charismatic bass-baritone Davóne Tines. Will Liverman, at the Met, stood out for his rounded tone and his keen attention to the text, but he had sporadic trouble making himself heard, and the character lacked seductive complexity. Angel Blue, playing a trio of female roles, including the voices of Charles's inner conflicts, soared impressively over the orchestra, as did Latonia Moore, as Charles's explosively tempered mother, and Ryan Speedo Green, as his uncle Paul. Walter Russell III created a sweetly heartbreaking portrayal of Charles in boyhood. Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducted with characteristic vigor and enthusiasm, sometimes at the singers' expense.

When Benjamin Bowman, one of the Met orchestra's concertmasters, arrived on the podium to lead the tuning up, a wild ovation shook the house. The audience had not forgotten that this brilliant ensemble, one of the most accomplished of its kind anywhere in the world, had gone without pay for most of the pandemic. Similar noise erupted when the players assembled the following night, for a revival of Mussorgsky's "Boris Godunov." The applause equally seemed to honor the small army of people who were finally back at

work at the Met: chorus members, stagehands, lighting technicians, makeup artists, costume designers, ticket-takers, ushers, and the rest.

This season, "Boris" is playing not in the familiar four-act version but in Mussorgsky's shorter original version, from 1869—seven tightly wound scenes showing the fall of the murderer tsar and the rise of the pretender Dmitri. To see this stupendous creation alongside Blanchard's "Fire" is to be reminded that "Boris" is the archetypal realist opera, a clinical study of political ambition and psychological decay. The production, by Stephen Wadsworth, has too much foreground clutter and lacks scenic depth, but we have no trouble following the brutal interplay among the ruler, his boyars, his subjects, and the holy fool.

The lambent bass of René Pape, who performed the title role, has been mesmerizing Met audiences for nearly thirty years. When he sang King Marke, in "Tristan," in 1999, I wrote that he was "possibly a bass for the ages." The possibility remains in play, although the undiminished beauty of Pape's voice goes hand in hand with a deficit of dramatic fire. The portrayal was physically acute, at once regal and tottering, but in vocal terms it missed the necessary extremes. An accomplished cast surrounded Pape, including the increasingly formidable Green, as the vagabond Varlaam, and two notable débutants: the English tenor David Butt Philip, giving a creamy sheen to the role of the pretender, and the Russian American baritone Aleksey Bogdanov, lamenting grandly as the boyar Shchelkalov. Sebastian Weigle worked marvels in the pit, etching details without sacrificing shadows.

In all, it was a bracing return after a long absence: a bristling twenty-first-century score followed by a nineteenth-century one that has not lost its power to unsettle. What if every Met season began with a première? No other gesture would communicate more strongly the company's often repeated intention to engage with the modern world. ♦

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