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Amsterdam Opera gives 'Blue' a magnificent European premiere

Jeanine Tesori's work, which tells the tragic story of a Black teenager killed by a White policeman, joins a groundbreaking movement of African-American operas created since 2019

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Rehearsal of Jeanine Tesori's "Blue" at the Amsterdam Opera House. November 4, 2022. CLÄRCHEN ET MATTHIAS BAUS

On Monday, November 7, the last notes had not quite rung out as the Amsterdam Opera House audience rose to its feet, enthusiastically acclaiming the European premiere of *Blue*. The Dutch National Opera is presenting this work by American composer Jeanine Tesori until November 22. The opera is at the heart of a movement, unprecedented in history, which between June and July 2019 saw the creation and recognition of three Black operas.

Premiered at New York's Glimmerglass Festival, the work's commissioner, *Blue* won the 2020 Music Critics Association of North America Award. At the same time, *The Central Park Five*, written by African American Anthony David, became the first opera to win a Pulitzer Prize for Music. And Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* (a novel adapted by Kasi Lemmons) became the first opera by a Black composer ever performed at the Metropolitan Opera of New York in October 2021.

Universal tragedy

In the United States, Black opera was born from the street and driven by traumatic events – the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. "Blue" is the color of police. It is also the color that a population, victim of endemic violence, can't shake off. In *Blue*, it's a deadly threat that looms over boys from before they are born, expressed by the horrified cries of the mother's three friends upon learning the sex of the child she is carrying. From here on, the story gives birth to a tragedy that the symbolic trilogy of the main characters – Father, Mother and Son – renders universal.

The uniformly white courtyard of a building with blind windows is where the African-American playwright and theater director Tazewell Thompson staged the story of this Harlem couple trying to raise their son according to the principles of law, community and religion. "Stay alive, that's what you have to do," the father thunders to the rebellious teenager, whose jacket bears the clenched fist of Malcolm X on the back. The young man, an artist and an activist, will be killed during a peaceful demonstration by a White policeman, a colleague of his father.

There is much humor and love in *Blue*. For starters, the portrayal of women with relationships that are as spicy as the "cuisine of their ancestors" whose flavors they carry on, a dual memory of slavery and African origin. For example, in the reconciliation meal at the funeral of the Son. There's also the unshakeable faith in a God, who has himself sacrificed his own only son, and whose law commands forgiveness. The whole last part, essentially a chorus, like an ancient tragedy, is an immense prayer.

An explosive trio of singers

With exuberantly colorful costumes and black mourners' garments, lighting from the windows (the scene in the church gives the central aisle a crucifix-like appearance) and a few prop changes, the set soberly highlights each event, from the mother's bed to the angry teenager's ravaged room, from the funeral meal to the white coffin covered with white flowers. *Blue* is performed entirely by Black artists, right up to Canadian Trinidadian conductor Kwamé Ryan. It features an explosive trio of female singers (Vuvu Mpofu, Thembinkosi Magagula and Rehanna Thelwell), along with Aundi Marie Moore's sorrowful Mother, Kenneth Kellogg's tortured Father and Will Liverman's handsome tenor of the Reverend carrying words of peace.

Jeanine Tesori cultivates an eclectic and uninhibited language that blends elements of gospel, jazz and African percussion with classical standards

Ms. Tesori, born in 1961, is little known in Europe. She is, however, one of the most influential composers on the Broadway musical scene, where she has won no less than five Tony Awards. Her most famous musical is *Fun Home* (2013), based on Alison Bechdel's best-selling graphic novel, which addresses issues of homosexuality and family. She supervised Steven Spielberg's film version of *West Side Story* (2021) and is about to deliver a fourth opera, *Grounded*, which will premiere in 2023 at the Metropolitan Opera as well as the Washington

National Opera.

Fiercely championed by Mr. Ryan conducting the Hague Resident Orchestra, Ms. Tesori's score adheres fully to the elements of the drama, despite a few sentimental, even grandiose peaks. The orchestration is mostly subtle and poetic, a captivating melodic ensemble with harmonic tones that are reminiscent of Geroge Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein but also of Aaron Copland. The American has developed an eclectic and uninhibited language, which mixes classical standards (up to the dissonances of contemporary music) with elements of gospel, jazz and African percussion. It's a musical accomplishment of which the recording made in 2021 by the Washington National Opera Orchestra, under the direction of Roderick Cox and released in March as part of the American Opera Series, is proof.