

Anthony Davis Biography — 2023-24 season

Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Anthony Davis is celebrated internationally for his operatic, orchestral, choral, and chamber works. *Opera News* calls him “a national treasure” for his pioneering music, while *The New York Times* recognizes him as one of the “great living American composers.” In the 2023-24 season, OPERA America will induct Davis into its Hall of Fame.

Davis is best known for his eight operas. He was the first composer to write in a new American genre: opera on a contemporary political subject. He uses music to address power structures in a way that creates awareness, empathy, and understanding.

In 2020, Davis received the [Pulitzer Prize in Music](#) for *The Central Park Five*, which premiered at Long Beach Opera in 2019. The libretto by Richard Wesley is based on the true story of teenagers Kevin Richardson, Antron McCray, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana Jr., and Korey Wise, who were wrongfully convicted and served time for the brutal rape of a white female jogger in Central Park in 1989. A recording from the Long Beach Opera performances will be released in the 2023-24 season.

In November 2023, Davis's *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, based on the life of the civil rights leader, will have its debut at the Metropolitan Opera, starring Will Liverman singing Malcolm. The work features a libretto by Thulani Davis and a story by Christopher Davis.

The 1986 New York City Opera world premiere of “X” was sold out and drew lines of operagoers around the block. Since then, “X” has taken on an almost mythic stature as the first theatrical work to seamlessly integrate the musical worlds of opera and improvised music with a compelling story about one of the most charismatic figures in American history.

The new production, directed by Tony-nominated Robert O'Hara, was launched in 2022 at the Detroit Opera, continued to Opera Omaha in 2022, and — following the Met — will travel to the Seattle Opera in 2024, and the Lyric Opera of Chicago in 2025. In 2022, BMOP/sound released a new recording, which was nominated for a GRAMMY® Award for Best Opera Recording and named “one of the year’s most essential, and urgent, opera recordings,” by *The New York Times*. The original recording of “X” on the Gramavision label (1992), was nominated for Best Contemporary Composition.

Davis's opera *Amistad*, also with a libretto by Thulani Davis, was inspired by a poem by Robert Hayden that chronicles the history of the Amistad mutiny, a successful uprising of captives on an enslaver ship. For *Tania*, with a libretto by Michael-John LaChiusa, Davis was inspired by the abduction of Patricia Hearst, while *Wakonda's Dream*, with a libretto by Yusef Komunyakaa, follows a contemporary Ponca family and the spiritual journey of their son, who is connected to the noted chief Standing Bear.

Davis's orchestral works have been performed by the Atlanta Symphony, Boston Philharmonic, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, and San Francisco Symphony, among

others. His instrumental works include *Violin Sonata*, commissioned by Carnegie Hall for its centennial; *Jacob's Ladder*, a tribute to his mentor Jacob Druckman; *Esu Variations*, for the Atlanta Symphony; *Happy Valley Blues*, for the String Trio of New York; *Maps*, a violin concerto; *Notes from the Underground*, premiered by the American Composers Orchestra; and *You Have the Right to Remain Silent*, a concerto for clarinet and orchestra.

During the 2023-24 season, clarinetist Anthony McGill — the principal clarinet of the New York Philharmonic — performs *You Have the Right to Remain Silent* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and London's Britten Sinfonia. The concerto was inspired by the composer's personal experience of a traffic stop: on his way to a concert, Davis was pulled over by the police and held at gunpoint for 45 minutes because he "matched the description" of a suspect fleeing a robbery. During performance, the musicians recite the Miranda rights while playing. Davis has said that parts of *You Have the Right to Remain Silent* became the basis for *The Central Park Five*.

Davis made his Broadway debut in 1993 composing music for Tony Kushner's critically acclaimed play *Angels in America: Part One: Millennium Approaches*, and for its companion piece, *Part Two: Perestroika*. He has made important contributions in choral music; *Voyage Through Death to Life Upon these Shores* is an a cappella choral work about the slave trade and the fateful Middle Passage, also inspired by Hayden's poem. *Restless Mourning*, an oratorio for mixed chorus and chamber ensemble with live electronics, presents Davis's powerful evocation of the September 11 tragedy, set to poetry by Quincy Troupe and Allan Havis, and Psalm 102.

Davis is also known for his cutting-edge virtuoso performances both as a solo pianist and as the leader of Episteme, a unique ensemble of disciplined interpreters and provocative improvisers in equal measure. On stage and on score, Davis has a gift for weaving a vein of improvisation through his compositions, resulting in "music that is both sensuous and intellectually engaging" (*The New York Times*).

A graduate of Yale University, Davis currently holds the Cecil Lytle Endowed Chair in African American Music at the University of California, San Diego. In 2021, he was elected as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. The following year, he was honored with the Shadow and Act Award from the Ralph Ellison Foundation. In 2008, he received the "Lift Every Voice" Legacy Award from the National Opera Association. In 2006, Davis was awarded a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation.

Davis has also been honored by the New York Foundation of the Arts, the National Endowment of the Arts, the Massachusetts Arts Council, the Carey Trust, Chamber Music America, the Meet-the-Composer Wallace Fund, the Multi-Arts Production Fund with the Rockefeller Foundation, and OPERA America. He has been an artist fellow at the MacDowell Colony, Civitella Ranieri and at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Center in Italy.