

## ***X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X***

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The Life and Times of Malcolm X by Anthony Davis and his cousin Thulani Davis premiered in 1986. In the operatic tradition, this would be considered a contemporary work. For many people it can be rather overwhelming to experience a new opera. The plot might be too political, too dense, or fail to take advantage of an entertaining, and palatable plot. Due to modern trends in composition it can be difficult, if not impossible to find a singable melody, or a tune to whistle home. The staging can be so unexpected that, as an audience member, you're not sure that the show onstage is the same as the one described in your Playbill. Generally the anxiety over these issues leads to complete avoidance of this musical adventure. Instead, let this article assist in calibrating the mind, ears, and eyes to this modern work.

(Before diving in a little more deeply, a brief synopsis of the plot can be found on the Metropolitan Opera Website: <https://www.metopera.org/discover/synopses/x-the-life-and-times-of-malcolm-x/>)

What caused composer Anthony Davis to choose Malcolm X as the subject of his opera? Politically, Malcolm X was considered a charismatic, commanding, and controversial man. He was assassinated at the age of 39. Because of his thoughts and actions, he became a legend in the conversations about Civil Rights. Composer Anthony Davis thought Malcolm's life made him a tragic hero, lending the story well to the operatic stage. Although this show is based on the life of Malcolm X, Anthony and Thulani Davis hoped not only to "make the story of Malcolm X a living history for the younger generations who didn't experience and live during his time", but to cause the individual to reflect (May 3, 2022. Interview at Detroit Opera with Anthony and Thulani Davis, [https://youtu.be/bDgbB\\_Z4mOY?si=b8rgkJEJ3100znuv](https://youtu.be/bDgbB_Z4mOY?si=b8rgkJEJ3100znuv)). They wanted to encourage the audience to consider their individual ability to change and be dynamic forces in the world. So instead of looking for a big verismo climax, be prepared to experience the slow rolling undulations of the human struggle.

The music of *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* is modern in nature. A full orchestra with a plush cushion of strings is traded in for the timbre of an American chamber orchestra. From the downbeat of the overture, anyone familiar with Gershwin or American Big Band will have some tonal and stylistic reference for anchor.

Anthony Davis uses many techniques to deftly achieve shifts in the circumstances and the psyche of the characters. Three selections that stand out include the Social Worker, Child's Aria, and Act 2 Scene 1. The scene of the Social Worker is pure genius. Davis takes away any sense of tonal center and leans into fairly avant-garde, jagged improvisation to aurally represent the amount of chaos not only in the mind of Malcolm's mother Louise, but the tangible environment in the home and its children. After this scene is the Child's Aria. In stark contrast to the rhythmic improvisational breaks of the former number, Davis orchestrates a very expansive void by employing shifting, hollow long tones. In doing so he gives us a true sense of the inner feelings of young Malcolm: As if he has nothing to anchor to, that he's lost and confused. Later in the opera, whenever the group of the Nation of Islam is involved, they sing vaguely like a gospel choir. These voices are united in rhythm, and generally in harmony. There is a superficial connection to religion in this compositional application. It seems that a slightly deeper meaning is the appeal to unity in the midst of a story and life that has been composed of chaos and violence. It is true however that there aren't many tunes to hum while leaving the theater. As a whole, there are numerous brilliant moments achieved by Anthony Davis's composition and Thulani's text.

The staging and visual aspects of this production are the work of Robert O'Hara. He is mostly known for his work in Broadway and Musical Theater, but he was excited to be a part of this new work. What inspired him most was showing the transformation of Malcolm in his behaviors, thoughts and ideologies. In an interview with Leo Adam Biga and the American Theater publication, O'Hara said. "...You can see how one can evolve in various ways of understanding. That is what's so powerful about the message to me of the Malcolm X story: It's an evolution. His liberation evolved, so I think there is that lesson in that one can actually learn as one teaches." (Nov. 2, 2022) O'hara uses his knowledge of the score to create fairly abstract sets and staging to capture these quickly moving scenes. It seems that this helps create a time-less space and setting, thus assisting in creating a more contemplative environment and atmosphere for the audience.

The way that Anthony and Thulani Davis approached creating *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, and Robert O'Hara's staging might be the best way to approach such a complex topic and person. They each allowed the story to be less about the controversial preachings of a gripping political figure, and more about bringing perspective on his evolution as a human. Hopefully some trepidation has been eased and curiosity has been sparked. The molding of the future of opera comes from our willingness to experience these new works, appreciate them for their aims, and talk critically about production as a whole. *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* will be in cinemas on November 29th.

A list of links below to research the show a bit more:

<https://www.wisemusicclassical.com/work/27257/X-The-Life-and-Times-of-Malcolm-X--Anthony-Davis/>

[https://youtu.be/bDgbB\\_Z4mOY?si=b8rgkJEJ3100znvu](https://youtu.be/bDgbB_Z4mOY?si=b8rgkJEJ3100znvu)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/15/arts/music/malcolm-x-opera-detroit.html>

<https://www.americantheatre.org/2022/11/02/the-evolution-of-anthony-daviss-malcolm-x-opera/>