moving BEYOND
the comfort zone.

TERENCE BLANCHARD cut his eye teeth as a professional musician when he was a member of jazz drummer Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers from 1982 to 1986. Blakey's unit served as a kind of graduate school for aggressive Bop and neo-Bop jazz. Its list of Trumpet players ranges from Clifford Brown and Donald Byrd to Lee Morgan and Chuck Mangione; Blanchard succeeded fellow New Orleanian Wynton Marsalis as the band's trumpeter. The anxiety of influence, both short-term and from a historical perspective, must have been considerable for Blanchard. Nonetheless, he went on to become a well-known and highly regarded jazz musician and bandleader.
IN ADDITION TO HIS REPUTATION as a virtuoso improviser, Blanchard, who has been nominated for thirteen Grammys, has become a noted composer, joining such other jazz musicians as Quincy Jones, Oliver Nelson, Benny Carter and Benny Golson as a film scorer. Blanchard has written music for more than sixty films, including most of Spike Lee's "joints" since Do the Right Thing (1989). He was nominated for the Oscar for Best Original Score for Lee's BlackKKKlansman in 2019 and for Da 5 Bloods in 2021.

Blanchard's first opera, Champion, commissioned by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in partnership with Jazz St. Louis and given its premiere at OTSL in 2013, deals with race, sex, violence, athletics and learning to accept oneself. The opera is based on the life and career of Emile Griffith, a welterweight and middleweight boxing champion who fought in the 1960s and '70s, and who was secretly gay—although Griffith's sexuality was something of an open secret among his peers. In 1962, Griffith accidentally killed fighter Benny "Kid" Paret, who died in the hospital after a televised bout so brutal that boxing was nearly banned nationally.

Blanchard's second opera, Fire Shut Up in My Bones, scheduled to open the Metropolitan Opera's 2021-22 season in September, also had its world premiere at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, in 2019. Another joint commission of OTSL and Jazz St. Louis, Fire Shut Up in My Bones is based on New York Times columnist Charles Blow's memoir of growing up in Louisiana. Blow grappled with a hard-working mother, a sexually abusive cousin, anger issues and uncertainty about his own sexuality, until he saw himself nearly replicating the abuse that he had endured.

It is another story of race, sex, violence and learning—in this case, to redeem oneself.

I spent a morning in May 2021 talking with Blanchard about his involvement with opera.

GERALD EARLY: Your father was a singer. Did he sing opera?
TERENCE BLANCHARD: He loved opera, and he sang opera, but never as a professional singer. I just had this conversation with a friend of my family who's my parents' age, and we were talking about this guy named Osceola Blanchet. He was the guy who taught my dad and a lot of young Black men opera here in New Orleans, and he also was the church organist at my church when I was growing up.

I'll tell you a funny story. Because my dad could sing, they thought that the gene was gonna
pass down, so they put me in the choir, but as soon as they heard me, they said, “Doesn’t he play the trumpet?” They said, “He could praise God back there, blowing his horn.”

But my father loved the music. He had a deep passion for it. You know, I always tell a joke about how my dad would be sitting in front, and he would put on his recordings, listening to Carmen or Rigoletto. He always listened to the classics. He wasn’t much into modern opera. But when he put that stuff on, you would hear doors slamming in my house.

Man, people were trying to find some peace and quiet.

**EARLY:** So, from a young age, you had been exposed to opera.

**BLANCHARD:** Oh, yeah, yeah, I heard it all the time in the house. That’s so ironic about me doing this [writing opera], you know. I didn’t think I was paying attention. You know what I mean? Anytime one of those classic operas would come on PBS, my dad would say, “Come here, boy, sit down. Now, that’s music, see.”

**EARLY:** I’d be interested in your opinion about the most famous opera centered on a Black community, Porgy and Bess.

**BLANCHARD:** I have mixed emotions about it. It’s one of those things where, on the one hand, I do think it’s a great opera, and I do think at the time it was written, it was revolutionary, because it allowed a huge cast [of African-Americans] to work in the field of opera, but I think we tend to put all the onus on Porgy and Bess and not on the opera community itself. For me to be the first African-American to have a piece done at the Met is a huge honor. But at the same time, I keep thinking that I know, good and well, I’m not the first one to have been qualified.

Therein lies the problem. We look at Porgy and Bess, and we want to crucify it. But, at the time it was done, it did a lot for allowing [Black] singers to enter
“OPERA HAS ROOM. IT IS NOT A BLACK MUSICAL FORM. IT’S NOT A WHITE MUSICAL FORM. IT’S LANGUAGE.”
into the world of opera. The problem is that the people who were commissioning operas didn’t further that by commissioning African-American composers to write for orchestra and voice.

So when I hear [Porgy and Bess] now, you know, I went to one of the performances at the Met, and I was totally amazed by it, because all of the performers were amazing. When I heard it, I go wow, the great orchestrations, all of the above. But at the same time, I still wonder what it would have been like if Duke Ellington would have [finished] one. Or Coleridge-Taylor Perkinson, you know. There are so many others, even my teacher, Roger Dickerson, he’s great. Hale Smith, who was another great African-American composer.

So I think the question needs to be more about having works by other composers, rather than just dealing with Porgy and Bess. I understand what it represents for a lot of people. Do get that, but at the same time, I think the focus is in the wrong area.

**EARLY:** Do you think this is just racism, systemic racism in the music industry, that has prevented it from cultivating Black composers to compose operas?

**BLANCHARD:** What other answer could there be? You know, it’s not like we didn’t have great composers. We had. I also think part of it comes from a non-willingness to change or try to find something new. Let’s put racism aside. I also think in terms of, just like jazz musicians [and their approach]. There’s a reluctance for you to experience something new. And therein lies the biggest problem of them all. You are always trying to operate within your comfort zone.

When I got into this world, what I really dug when we did Champion for the first time was that everybody involved was uncomfortable, because we were bringing these worlds together, but at the same time, everybody was excited about it, excited about the possibilities of trying to do something different. To me, that’s what art is. It’s really supposed to contain that level of excitement, of collaborating on something that hasn’t been done before.

**EARLY:** What attracted you to opera?

**BLANCHARD:** Well, Jim Robinson, who is artistic director of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, contacted me and said, “We think we want you to write an opera.” And I leaned over the table to smell his breath to make sure he wasn’t drunk. “You sure you got the right dude?” But I was intrigued by the challenge. I’m the type of artist who likes to venture out and try things. I kind of embrace that world of being uncomfortable. It kind of makes you grow and makes you stretch. Just being in my wheelhouse, saying, “Oh, I know what works;” doesn’t work for me.

So, when they called me to do it, I was really intrigued by it. And then, once I got into it, I was like, man, what did I do?! Because there was so much learning on my part. Writing for orchestra was not the big challenge in writing for opera. Writing for voice was the challenge. Every voice is different. Every voice blooms in different registers, even though they all can be labeled as one thing, whether it be baritone or soprano or alto or contralto or any of those things.

Therein lies the issue of writing opera, because you have to figure this out. The range of the voice is so different than writing for, like, a cello or trumpet or anything like that. So, you have to figure out a way to make things effective with those limitations. And not having any experience in that realm, that was the big challenge for me when I did Champion.

**EARLY:** Champion and Fire Shut Up in My Bones—what attracted you to these particular stories to make into operas?

**BLANCHARD:** You know, I was
the kid that would take up for the kid that was being bullied. I've always felt the need to even the scales, and maybe that comes from my upbringing, growing up in the church. Who knows? I think the thing that blew me away about Champion is, here's a guy who reached the pinnacle of his sport and couldn't share it openly with somebody he loved.

With Charles [Blow]'s story, it's the whole notion of just being different—because I'm not gay, but I was a different kid growing up. I wanted to play music, but I also played football. When I played football, I was cool, but carrying my horn to my lessons every week, you know, I got bullied a little bit. Not too much, because I could always handle myself. But people would try me. They would see me with my horn, and they would always make jokes. So Charles's story about being different as a kid really resonated with me. And with him still being around and being as successful as he is right now, I kept saying to myself, “Well, this would be a beautiful story to tell.” It's not about someone we can't interview. It's not about someone we can't go and get some responses from. And his story is not over. So, I thought to myself, why not? We always tend to do these stories about somebody who's no longer with us. Let's do this story about a person who has come through it.

I have to tell you this—I didn't let Charles hear anything until the night of the premiere, and then I was scared to death. But after, I walked over to him, and I said, “We good?” and he goes, “Yeah, Yeah.” And he said something I thought was really profound. He said watching that story made him realize that he is not that person anymore. And that made me feel good. He had passed over that situation and moved on in his life.

**EARLY:** Do you have any favorite operas?

**BLANCHARD:** La Bohème. I can't put it on, man. That aria for the soprano whose name I am not even going to try to pronounce has to be one of the most gorgeous pieces of music. That's what gets me about Puccini's work. He was brilliant at obviously creating beautiful melodic lines, but it's not just that. It's the way the lines develop with telling the story. There's an art to that, and he was a master at that level. La Bohème is a crowning achievement in that regard.

**EARLY:** Do you feel as a composer that you are pouring a different kind of musical style into opera?

**BLANCHARD:** Opera is like any other art form. It's vast. This is the thing that always interests me when I'm dealing with Black vocalists in opera. Most of the singers that I've dealt with come from the church. They have beautiful voices that have to be tamed in the operatic world: “Don't use that vibrato,” “Don't sing it that way,” “Don't phrase it that way.” What the two operas I've done allow them to do is to bring back that part of themselves to opera. And I felt blessed to be able to have done that, and the thing I constantly think about as well is if we had all of these other composers, like Duke [Ellington] and all these other guys, writing operas for years, this would not be an issue. It would be part of the lexicon of the operatic world.

So, I guess what I'm saying is opera has room. It is not a Black musical form. It's not a white musical form. It's language. I firmly believe opera is a tool to tell stories. You know, the problem has been that people only want the stories to be told one way. That has to change.

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"EVERY VOICE IS DIFFERENT. EVERY VOICE BLOOMS IN DIFFERENT REGISTERS, EVEN THOUGH THEY ALL CAN BE LABELED AS ONE THING."