



The Oratorio Society
of New York

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ORATORIO SOCIETY OF NEW YORK PRESENTS TWO WORLD PREMIERES AT CARNEGIE HALL ON MONDAY, MAY 7, 2018:

**SANCTUARY ROAD, AN ORATORIO
BASED ON THE WRITINGS OF
WILLIAM STILL, A CONDUCTOR FOR
THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD,
MUSIC BY PAUL MORAVEC, TEXT BY
MARK CAMPBELL – AN OSNY
COMMISSION**

**WE ARE ONE
BY BEHZAD RANJBARAN – A LOS
ANGELES CHAMBER ORCHESTRA
COMMISSION**



William Still



Laquita Mitchell, Raehann Bryce-Davis, Joshua Blue, Malcolm J. Merriweather, Dashon Burton (photo links below)

Paul Moravec: “The saga of the Underground Railroad is always timely, and perhaps especially so now, in this era of historical amnesia driven in part by persistent political and cultural forces.”

Mark Campbell: “We can only move forward as a country by reminding ourselves where we’ve been.”

Behzad Ranjbaran: “*We Are One* is an expression of our shared desire for respect, justice, freedom, and peace.”

Kent Tritle: “We must express the values we hold as humanists alongside those we hold as artists. There is no life for one without the other.”

World premieres of an oratorio about the Underground Railroad that sets narratives of slaves running for freedom and their lives, and a work that sets poems calling for peace in Farsi, Spanish, Hebrew, Arabic, and English: ***Sanctuary Road***, music by Paul Moravec and text by Mark Campbell based upon the writings of William Still, a conductor for the Underground Railroad; and ***We Are One*** for chorus and orchestra by Behzad Ranjbaran, both completed within the last year, will be given their first performances by the Oratorio Society of New York (OSNY) led by Music Director Kent Tritle as the culminating concert of the OSNY’s 145th season on Monday, May 7, 2018, at Carnegie Hall.

Sanctuary Road was commissioned by the Oratorio Society of New York. *We Are One* was commissioned by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The soloists for *Sanctuary Road* are soprano **Laquita Mitchell**; mezzo-soprano **Raehann Bryce-Davis**, who just won a 2018 George London Award; tenor **Joshua Blue**, who won the 2017 OSNY Lyndon Woodside Oratorio-Solo Competition; baritone **Malcolm J. Merriweather**, the music director of The Dessoif Choirs; and bass-baritone **Dashon Burton**, who won the 2012 Woodside competition.

Pulitzer Prize winners both, Paul Moravec and Mark Campbell collaborated on the 2016 opera *The Shining* and on the choral-orchestral work *Light Shall Lift Us* (2016) that premiered as part of the One Voice Orlando benefit concert in the aftermath of the Pulse nightclub shooting.

“The power of an oratorio to combine the personal and universal make it an ideal genre to lend resonance to the epic stories of William Still and those involved in the Underground Railroad,” **said Paul Moravec**. “Mark’s compelling libretto faithfully projects the luminous spirit of Mr. Still’s own words describing and recording ‘the death struggles of slaves in their efforts of freedom.’ Throughout the creative process of imagining the music, I was guided by their ennobling courage and strength. The saga of the Underground Railroad is always timely, and perhaps especially so now, in this era of historical amnesia driven in part by persistent political and cultural forces.”

“This piece is more important than ever,” **said Mark Campbell**. “There are people in our current political climate who would like us to ‘dis-remember’ the bravery of African Americans seeking freedom and people like William Still, who chronicled that bravery. We can only move forward as a country by reminding ourselves where we’ve been.”

Kent Tritle said, “Ironically, when we embarked on the *Sanctuary Road* project we knew it was important, but real life events since our flame sparked have made this project ever more relevant, and needed. This is a time when artists struggle for the words, music and performance opportunities to bridge that realm where our training, our passion for art and our real lives intersect. Without that real and visceral connection of life meeting art, especially now in light of the denigration of principles we hold so dear as artists – equality, mutual respect, unity through our diversity – I can see that musicians, dancers, actors, and visual artists in our community atrophy and wither. We must express the values we hold as humanists alongside those we hold as artists. There is no life for one without the other.”

Tritle continued, “Now in the light of the white supremacist resurgence and the refusal by national leaders to name and restrain it, *Sanctuary Road* reminds us of that history others would forget: that here in the United States of America suppression and abuse of a minority population was not only an accepted facet of our society, but a most important factor in the economic advantage that accrued to the white population of this country, Northern and Southern.

“I am personally galvanized by this music and this message, and I see it in the faces of my singers. We are proud to present the premiere of this oratorio alongside the premiere of Behzad Ranjbaran's *We Are One* and we find that the very preparation of these works for public performance is healing and renewing.”

The OSNY commission of *Sanctuary Road* was made possible by a gift from **Joanne Spellun**, a former member of the chorus and longtime friend and patron of the group. When she announced her decision to support the commission, she said, “I made this commission because I feel it is important to sing choral pieces that are musically new and yet reflect timeless concerns. Human enslavement and escape has been with us throughout history, and is still present in today's societies around the globe.”

Sanctuary Road

“This is meant to be terrifying,” said composer Paul Moravec, describing passages that portray slaves in flight to members of the 200-voice OSNY in February. When Moravec and librettist Mark Campbell visited a rehearsal, they offered insight into the work's origins and inspiration.

William Still (1819 or 21–1902), one of 18 children born to a freedman and an escaped slave, has been called the “Father of the Underground Railroad” for his work helping hundreds of slaves escape to freedom through Philadelphia. In 1872 Still published a landmark, 800-page book *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c. Narrating the Hardships, Hair-Breadth Escapes, and Death Struggles of the Slaves in Their Efforts for Freedom as Narrated by Themselves or Others, or Witnessed by the Author: together with Sketches of Some of the Largest Stockholders and Most Liberal Aiders and Advisors of the Road*, which is the source for *Sanctuary Road*. (Read more about William Still in an essay on the OSNY [website](#).)

Paul Moravec wanted *Sanctuary Road* to remind people of the importance of Still's work. The stories related in the oratorio "trace one arc, a trajectory that spans 15 years," as he says, taking from Still's accounts of slaves he helped escape to Canada, framed by Still's own commentary, texts from contemporary newspaper accounts, legal documents, handbills, and letters he received from those who successfully crossed the border.

Moravec said that his model was an New Testament oratorio, such as Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, and its use of a narrative voice (William Still, sung by Dashon Burton) along with *dramatis personae*. Here are some excerpts from Campbell's libretto:

From Section 1, "Write"

WILLIAM STILL

From cities and plantations,
Rice swamps and cotton fields,
Kitchens and mechanic shops,
From cruel masters, and kind masters,
They arrived.
By steamer, by skiff,
By train, on foot,
Shipped in a crate,
They arrived.

From Section 3, "Reward!," quoting from descriptions of escaped slaves

CHORUS (OVERLAPPING)

Can read and write well...
Plays on the violin...
A confident manner...
Quick spoken...
Laughs a good deal...
Of awkward manners...
Stammers, stammers, some.

From Section 4, "The Same Train – Ellen Craft," relating a female slave's escape disguised as a white man

MEZZO-SOPRANO SOLO

They see me as a sick, white gentleman,
A sick white gentleman,
Who has his own valet,
A black man who sits with the other slaves,
In the other car.
But he's not my valet.
That man is not my valet.
He's the man I will marry,
The man I will marry in Philadelphia.
He's in a different car.
But we're on the same train,
Humming along like a hymn,
All the way to Philadelphia,
To Philadelphia.

From Section 7, “This Side Up – Henry ‘Box’ Brown,” recounting the story of a slave who had himself shipped to Philadelphia in a box

BARITONE SOLO

They can’t seem to read.

They don’t seem to know.

The crate I’m in.

It says: “THIS SIDE UP WITH CARE”

...

This crate I mailed myself in arrives safe and sound in Philadelphia.

Philadelphia.

Now if only these fools could READ.

From Section 12, “Run (Part III) – Wesley Harris,” relating a runaway slave’s harrowing flight from pursuers

TENOR

Was that a shot?

CHORUS

You don’t hear it?

TENOR

Was that another shot?

CHORUS

You don’t hear it.

You don’t feel it.

TENOR

There was no shot.

And it’s so close,

So close,

So close,

You can wrap your arms around it.

CHORUS

You can taste it.

You’re nearly there.

TENOR

So close, nearly there.

From Section 16, “Finale,” letters to Still from slaves who reached Canada

TENOR

Shaking hands with the lion’s paw.

Hear that big cat roar.

I’m unbound,

Unchained,

Unshackled.

A slave no more.

Sanctuary Road is the third work by Paul Moravec that the OSNY has performed. The other two are *Songs of Love and War* in 2008, and *The Blizzard Voices* in 2013.

We Are One

Behzad Ranjbaran’s *We Are One* for chorus and orchestra was commissioned by the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra in honor of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on the 50th anniversary of his assassination. As the composer says, *We Are One* is an expression of our shared desire for respect, justice, freedom, and peace. It draws from a variety of texts, ranging from an ancient

Hebrew prayer sung in solemn tone to the ornamental singing of a mystic Persian poem to the liberating words of an African-American spiritual performed with boisterous jubilation. *We Are One* employs a unified musical tone throughout while also paying homage to musical traditions related to the chosen texts. It culminates in a grand celebration with the word ‘peace’ sung in 20 different languages representing more than 100 countries.”

As Marie Gangemi describes in the program notes, “*We Are One* opens with the words of Benito Juárez, the 19th-century president of Mexico through a civil war and the French invasion. The words are inscribed on two statues of Juárez – in Washington, D.C, and in Bryant Park, New York City. Both statues were gifts from Mexico. The second text is excerpted from a poem by the 13th-century Persian poet Sa’di. It is one of the most celebrated and widely recited poems in Farsi and was chosen to be included in the Voyager spacecraft as the sole representation of the poet’s native Iran. The next text is drawn from traditional Hebrew prayers. It is followed by a poem by Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), the great Andalusian mystic Sufi poet who wrote during the golden age of religious tolerance when medieval Christians, Muslims, and Jews lived in peace for several hundred years in southern Spain. *We Are One* concludes with ‘We Shall Overcome,’ an African American spiritual and the anthem of the Civil Rights movement ... illustrating the timelessness and universality of King’s message.”

Paul Moravec, winner of the 2004 Pulitzer Prize in Music, has composed over one hundred orchestral, chamber, choral, lyric, film, and electro-acoustic compositions. He is University Professor at Adelphi University and recently also served as the Artist-in-Residence with the Institute for Advanced Study. Both positions are unique to their respective institutions. www.paulmoravec.com

Mark Campbell’s work as a librettist is at the forefront of the current contemporary opera scene in this country. He premiered five new operas in 2017. His most known work is *Silent Night*, music by Kevin Puts, which received the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in Music and is one of the most frequently performed operas in recent history. www.markcampbellwords.com

Behzad Ranjbaran is known for music which is both evocative and colorful, and also strong in structural integrity and form. He frequently draws inspiration from his cultural roots and Persian heritage in form or subject matter, as exemplified by the tone poems of the *Persian Trilogy*, or the interpretation of sounds and styles in works such as the Violin Concerto and *Songs of Eternity*. He is on the faculty of The Juilliard School. www.behzadranjbaran.com

Soprano **Laquita Mitchell** consistently earns acclaim in eminent opera companies throughout North America and Europe. Already in her young career, she has led performances with the Los Angeles Opera, San Francisco Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, New York City Opera, Washington National Opera, and Opéra Comique in Paris, among many others. www.laquitamitchellsoprano.com

Mezzo-soprano **Raehann Bryce-Davis**, a recent winner of a 2018 George London Award, joins Theater an der Wien for her first performances of Wellgunde in *Der Ring des Nibelungen* in the

2017-18 season. She also sings performances of Elgar's *Sea Pictures* at the Musikverein in Vienna. www.raehannbrycedavis.com

Tenor **Joshua Blue**, the 2017 first-prize winner of the OSNY's Lyndon Woodside Oratorio-Solo Competition, is a 2018 Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions semi-finalist. A Toulmin Foundation Scholar, Blue is a second year Masters student at The Juilliard School, pursuing a degree in vocal performance under the tutelage of Dr. Robert White. www.joshuablutenor.com

Baritone **Malcolm J. Merriweather** is Music Director of New York City's The Desoff Choirs, Director of Choral Studies and Voice Department Coordinator at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, Artist in Residence at Union Theological Seminary, and Artistic Director of Voices of Haiti, a 60-member children's choir in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, operated by the Andrea Bocelli Foundation. Merriweather is also in demand as a baritone soloist, often performing throughout the eastern United States. www.malcolmjmerriweather.com

Bass-baritone **Dashon Burton**, the 2012 first-prize winner of the OSNY's Lyndon Woodside Oratorio-Solo Competition, joins the Cleveland Orchestra and Franz Welser-Möst this season for reprise performances of their groundbreaking production of Janacek's *Cunning Little Vixen* and for performances of Beethoven Symphony No. 9 at home and in Vienna and Japan. He also sings Beethoven Symphony No. 9 with the Handel & Haydn Society in Boston and in Sweden with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic. www.dashonburton.com

OSNY Music Director since the 2005-06 season, **Kent Tritle** is also Music Director of the professional chorus Musica Sacra, and Director of Cathedral Music and Organist at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where he directs the concert series *Great Music in a Great Space*. Mr. Tritle is Director of Choral Activities and Chair of the Organ Department at the Manhattan School of Music and a member of the graduate faculty of the Juilliard School. An acclaimed organ virtuoso, he is the organist of the New York Philharmonic and the American Symphony Orchestra. www.kenttritle.com

Since its founding in 1873, the **Oratorio Society of New York**, New York's 200-voice avocational chorus, has become the city's standard for grand choral performance, having performed world, U.S., and New York premieres of works as diverse as Brahms's *Ein deutsches Requiem* (1877), Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette* (1882), a full-concert production of Wagner's *Parsifal* at the Metropolitan Opera House (1886), Britten's *The World of the Spirit* (1998), Filas's *Song of Solomon* (2012), and Moravec's *The Blizzard Voices* (2013). On its 100th anniversary the Oratorio Society received the Handel Medallion, New York City's highest cultural award, in recognition of its contributions. www.oratoriosocietyofny.org

Monday, May 7, 2018, at 8:00 pm

Stern Auditorium / Perelman Stage, Carnegie Hall

ORATORIO SOCIETY OF NEW YORK

Kent Tritle, conductor

Laquita Mitchell, soprano

Raehann Bryce-Davis, mezzo-soprano

Joshua Blue, tenor

Malcolm J. Merriweather, baritone

Dashon Burton, bass-baritone

Orchestra of the Society

RANJBARAN *We Are One* (World premiere)

MORAVEC/CAMPBELL *Sanctuary Road* (World premiere, OSNY commission)

Tickets: \$90–\$25

Photo links:

Oratorio Society of New York: <http://www.oratoriosocietyofny.org/press.php>

Kent Tritle: <http://www.kenttritle.com/photo-gallery/>

Laquita Mitchell: <http://www.uzanartists.com/portfolio/laquita-mitchell/>

Raehann Bryce-Davis: <http://www.guybarzilayartists.com/Raehann-Bryce-Davis>

Joshua Blue: <http://www.joshuabluetenor.com/biography.html>

Malcolm J. Merriweather: <http://malcolmjmerriweather.com/potpourri/>

Dashon Burton: <http://www.dashonburton.com/photos/>

March 13, 2018