

SEATTLE OPERA BLOG

Monday, October 19, 2020

MEET THE ARTIST: JORELL WILLIAMS



Premiering this Friday, Oct. 23 is Jorell Williams in Recital with pianist Rachael Kerr. The streaming performance is available free to the public until Friday, November 13, 2020. Jorell Williams is “a robust baritone capable of descending to delicate threads of sound” (*Operawire*). From his Seattle Opera debut in the powerful chamber opera *As One*, to his more recent appearances as Dizzy Gillespie in *Charlie Parker’s Yardbird*, and his moving

performance as Homecoming Soldier in *The Falling and the Rising*, Jorell is fast becoming one of our favorite singers. Learn more at seattleopera.org/williams.

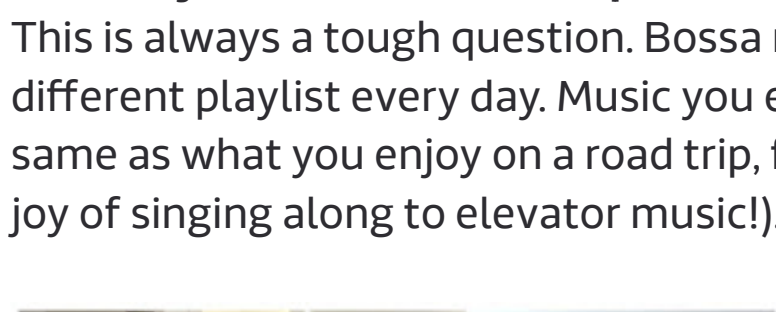
What most excites you about your upcoming Seattle Opera recital?
I love the intimacy of concert work in recital. While there is no live audience, this is an opportunity to tell stories through introspection. The songs in the program are funny and full of heart and hope. The opening number is a doozy—it’s about an election!

Seattle Opera audiences first met you when you sang the role of Hannah before in *As One* (’16)—a chamber opera about a transgender woman’s journey. We, the audience were literally a few feet away from you in this intimate presentation at Washington Hall. Tell me about that experience.

As One was one of the most vulnerable performances I’ve ever given in my entire career. It presented an opportunity to break through a wall that ultimately, opened me up to a more diverse range as an artist. I am not afraid to be vulnerable now. When I do an audition for television, for example—I can return to that place of vulnerability at the drop of a hat. What helped me achieve this during *As One* is hard to describe. It was everything: knowing the librettists. Getting to work with Maestro John Keene. Everyone in the rehearsal room, really. They created a safe space to tell this story.

What’s one of your favorite Seattle Opera memories?
Performing in *The Falling and the Rising*. We had a chance to shine a light on active-duty soldiers and veterans. To be able to receive the support and approval of human beings who went through these types of experiences...this production is one of the memories that I hold near and dear to my heart. It was an opportunity of a lifetime. I might never sing Figaro from *The Barber of Seville* or Mercutio from *Romeo and Juliet*. But this role (Homecoming Soldier) was for me from the beginning.

What’s your favorite non-opera music?
This is always a tough question. Bossa nova. Bill Evans jazz. My playlist is a different playlist every day. Music you enjoy in a coffee shop might not be same as what you enjoy on a road trip, for example. (I actually have a strange joy of singing along to elevator music!).

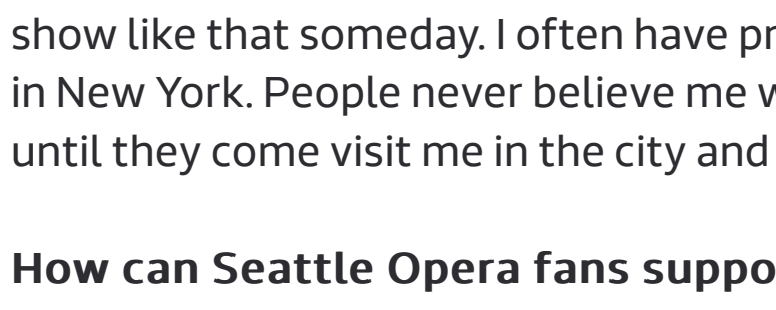


Left: Jorell Williams (Hannah before), Taylor Raven (Hannah after), Maestro John Keene and the St. Helens String Quartet backstage during *As One* with Seattle Opera (’16). Right: *As One* production photo by Rozarii Lynch

What about TV shows—any favs?
Modern Family is my jam right now. I could see myself as a series regular in a show like that someday. I often have pretty ridiculous scenarios happen to me in New York. People never believe me when I tell them stories about my life, until they come visit me in the city and they’re like, “Oh, he’s not kidding!”

How can Seattle Opera fans support you, and opera artists in general right now?

Make sure you’re not contracting COVID-19. Be responsible with the social climate in the world—which will prevent the sickness from spreading, which will remove the need from us having to protest. Everyone is suffering. Give that energy of wanting to help to your local hospital or medical centers. They have been in the thick of it since the beginning of COVID-19. (You can also [sign up](#) to donate blood at Seattle Opera’s upcoming blood drive in partnership with Bloodworks Northwest).



Williams in rehearsal as Homecoming Soldier in *The Falling and the Rising* (’19). Philip Newton photo

We could all use a laugh right now. What’s the funniest thing that’s ever happened to you onstage? (Or any funny singer story you can share?)

When I was in fourth grade, we performed the play version of Disney’s *Robin Hood*. We were midway through when the Merry Men steal gold from the castle, when my costume—which was basically a dress—fell off mid-pirouette turn. While I could have run offstage, instead, I threw up my hands and took a bow. There is video footage of this.

At some point after this, I was later asked to write a paper on future career prospects, and I wrote a 3.5 essay on how entertainment onstage is the worst job anyone can have, because you never know what’s going to happen when you’re performing. The closing argument was essentially a diatribe on entertainment.



A young Jorell Williams; courtesy of the singer.

What’s been the biggest challenge for you this year? And what have the opportunities been?

The biggest challenge currently is not being able to travel freely. My wife is Canadian, and we are currently in Canada. Due to the restrictions, I have not been able to return to the states. Being at home has given me the opportunity to focus on other things—in addition to continuing to perform in new ways. I have been working with a voiceover specialist. I have been taking a writing course. I’m also a composer, and have a commission in the works with Kentucky Opera, which will focus on civil rights songs.

What is one thing you will never forget from 2020? (Or a lesson that you’ve learned this year that you will carry forward?)

All of it. Everything. We all have experienced every possible advantage and every possible loss imaginable. It’s still happening. Every day is a different thing. A lesson that I will continue to teach, and that I hope for others to learn—is that each day as an important day. Every good deed—even just saying, “hello,” or “good night” is extra credit, and you can use that as a catalyst to get through your day

Why does opera still matter—even though we cannot all be together in the opera house right now?

Opera is important. And right now, it can allow audiences who are not familiar with this traditional form of music to press pause on the challenges in life, so that they can wade through whatever tomorrow will bring.

Posted by [Gabrielle Kazuko](#) at [10:03 PM](#)

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