



# Naomi André



Professor of Music  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

## Public Lecture Offerings

### Opera as a Space of Potential

What happens when opera tells new stories—not of kings and gods, but of people living today and the issues shaping contemporary life? Long associated with a fading past, opera houses are nonetheless being transformed in ways that speak directly to current realities. Alongside canonical works, operas centered on Black and Latino/a lives have long been in conversation with the mainstream tradition, addressing themes such as policing, magical realism, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela, and Federico García Lorca. By confronting histories of exclusion, the opera house can become a space of care, repair, and collective healing.

### Tracing Blackness in Opera

Let's explore the wide range of Black experiences in opera, from representations rooted in minstrelsy to innovative works by Black and interracial creative teams offering more accurate and expansive portrayals. It surveys operas about figures such as Harriet Tubman and Malcolm X, the Loving v. Virginia court case, police brutality, *The Factotum* (inspired by Rossini's *Barber of Seville*), and impresario Mary Cardwell Dawson and the National Negro Opera Company. Together, these works write new histories and generate fresh political meanings within a reimagined operatic genre.

**Global Carmens: Embodiment and Liberation**

The figure of Carmen—from Bizet's *Carmen* (1875)—is among the most iconic, eroticized, and frequently adapted subjects in music theater, with more than fifty notable productions worldwide. Through a legacy of embodied exoticism, Carmen has found renewed life across global contexts, including the African continent and the United States. This lecture focuses on two millennial, all-Black reinterpretations that examine how gender, race, sexuality, and nation intersect in ways that both engage Carmen's nineteenth-century French origins and reimagine the work for the twenty-first century. Ranging from the super-bling aesthetics of U.S. hip-hop culture to post-apartheid artistic innovations in South Africa, these productions speak directly to their respective audiences. Together, they reveal how the arts can open unlikely but powerful spaces for liberation.

## Classroom Discussion Topics

### **Voicing Gender and Representation in the Past and Today**

1. How do we hear gender in singing voices? What do masculinity and femininity sound like in song? We will explore several recordings that challenge traditional expectations about how voice types articulate character types in staged musical works, with repercussions for popular music today.

### **Adaptations and Transformations: Operas into Musicals**

2. Let's explore what happens when a well-known opera (Puccini's *La Bohème*) is the inspiration for the super-popular rock musical *Rent* (Jonathan Larson). Premiered 100 years apart (1896, 1996) and moving across genre, location, and time, the changes and transformations create new meanings as dialogues develop between the two works.

### **Opera in Expected and Unexpected Places**

3. Discussion about recent vibrant trends in opera today, including teaching opera in prison and studying opera in South Africa in the generation after the dismantling of apartheid (1994).