CEDRIC ANGELES

THE FIRE THIS TIME

TERENCE BLANCHARD is making history at the Metropolitan Opera—and paying his respects to Wayne Shorter

BY E.E. BRADMAN

It takes a special kind of polymath to successfully fuse jazz and opera in 2021. A deep knowledge of jazz performance and composition is paramount, of course, as are world-class orchestral skills. The ideal candidate would have a background of study with great teachers, work with strong directors, and a mature style that shows a solid grasp of both jazz and operatic history. In a perfect world, they'd prioritize storytelling. Most important, the consummate jazz/opera composer would be especially attuned to this extraordinary moment in time.

It's no surprise, then, that Terence Blanchard's *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, written to a libretto by filmmaker Kasi Lemmons, has achieved such widespread acclaim. The opera, adapted from the 2014 memoir of *New York Times* opinion columnist Charles Blow, tackles intense themes such as tough love, violence, and sexual abuse, and in lesser hands, the melodrama might be daunting. But Blanchard's fresh approaches—including his expertly crafted relationships between vocals and melodies, his nimble handling of dense harmonic textures, his signature orchestration, and his masterful use of big-band, gospel, and blues flavors—make *Fire* the perfect opener for the Metropolitan Opera's 2021-2022 season, the first work by a Black composer to be performed by the Met in its 138-year history.

The New Orleans native's journey to this career highlight began with a father who was a part-time opera singer, piano lessons at five, and trumpet at eight. All around him, giants such as Louis Armstrong and James Booker were still performing, and as a teenager, he watched a new generation—the Neville Brothers, the Meters, Dr. John, and others—make their mark. Having first met Wynton and Branford Marsalis in elementary school, Blanchard followed them to the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, the arts high school where he took courses in critical analysis, sight-singing, and jazz theory. Meanwhile, he played keyboard in pop bands, subbed on trumpet in big bands, and gigged with Ellis Marsalis, with whom he was studying at NOCCA, as he dreamt of moving to New York. A year and a half after he arrived at Rutgers in 1982, he was gigging with the Lionel Hampton Orchestra and then replacing Wynton Marsalis in Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers, with whom he stayed until 1990.

In the three decades since, Blanchard has managed to maintain concurrent careers as a film composer, educator, and bandleader. Although he's worked with esteemed auteurs like George Lucas and Gus Van Sant, Blanchard has earned the bulk of his Academy Award, BAFTA, and Golden Globe nominations alongside Spike Lee; theirs is one of the great composer/director partnerships of our time. As an educator, Blanchard's vast experience includes stints at the Thelonious Monk Institute of Jazz, the Henry Mancini Institute at the University of Miami, Berklee, and UCLA, where he's the Kenny Burrell Endowed Chair in Jazz Studies at the Herb Alpert School of Music until 2024. A handful of sessions with Blakey, Joanne Brackeen, Ralph Moore, McCoy Tyner, and Cedar Walton make up his discography

Blanchard performs with the E-Collective in Bryant Park, New York, August 7, 2021

as a sideman, but Blanchard has done more than 20 albums as a leader, winning six Grammys along the way.

The summer of 2021 finds the 59-year-old maestro busier than ever. His latest album, *Absence*, is an homage to Wayne Shorter that features his band the E-Collective and the Turtle Island String Quartet. Several 2019-20 works featuring Blanchard scores—including Lee's *Da 5 Bloods*, the *Perry Mason* reboot for HBO, Lemmons' *Harriet*, and O*ne Night in Miami*, Regina King's directorial debut—are still riding high. Next up are *Bruised*, Halle Barry's first effort as a director, and *NYC Epicenters 9/11-2021½*, Lee's HBO documentary about New York City. The upcoming Met premiere of *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* has also inspired a surge of interest in *Champion*, Blanchard's first opera, premiered in 2013 (a 2020 production scheduled at Michigan Opera Theatre was canceled due to the pandemic).

Nearly 40 years after he first arrived in New York City, Blanchard is introspective about the way various threads of his career have brought him to the present. "For the longest time, opera, which was my dad's thing, was over there; film was over here; and my jazz career was over here," he says. "Jazz and film started to intermingle at some point, suddenly opera comes in, and all this stuff is coming together. It's almost as if the universe has been preparing me for this moment."

***JT:* You grew up in the '60s and '70s—that was an exciting era for New Orleans music.**

TERENCE BLANCHARD: It was a magical time. From the brass bands to the guys who were playing the more modern forms of jazz, the one common denominator was an infectious sense of rhythm. Street beat, a second line, straight-ahead, swing, two-feel, whatever—there was no division. That's the beauty of coming from New Orleans. You don't realize it until you go other places.

Were there great trumpet players who aren't as well-known as they should be outside New Orleans?

Leroy Jones was in 12th grade when I was in eighth. At football games, Leroy and three baritone horn players would get together—one would play the bass line, the other two played harmony, and Leroy would play time. It was the most incredible thing I ever heard, and it was unique. And they were just having fun! That's New Orleans.

What was it like to join the Lionel Hampton Orchestra just out of your teens?

Frankie Dunlop, Oliver Beener, and Curtis Fuller all looked out for me. Curtis would always talk to us about playing with John Coltrane and Art Blakey, and Oliver Beener was a soulful trumpet player who took me under his wing. Those guys set the tone for what it meant to be a jazz musician. I loved those years, man, and I wouldn't trade them for anything.

It sounds like you were also learning how to mentor younger musicians.

Of course! Art Blakey would always feature us and encourage us to write for the band. I learned that no matter what we wrote, it never changed the sound of the Jazz Messengers. We weren't trying to write like Wayne Shorter's or Lee Morgan's version of the band, but we still had that Messenger sound. That's how I've always led my bands, giving everyone room to create.

Speaking of Wayne, I'm so grateful that he and Herbie Hancock are still among us. It's something I don't take for granted.

Exactly. That's the reason we did *Absence*. I don't want to do a tribute to Wayne after he's gone—I want him to know how I feel about him now!

Amen!

And it's not necessarily just about doing Wayne's music. I mixed original compositions and Wayne's music because he's always encouraging people to step up. And the way he talks about writing … It ain't about notes on the page. It's about intention. Blakey used to say that Wayne has the imagination of a child, that Wayne's mind has no limitations whatsoever.

ALAN NAHIGIAN

At the Village Gate, New York, with the Jazz Messengers (Donald Harrison at left), August 22, 1986

"MY TEACHER, ROGER DICKERSON, KEPT TELLING ME, 'DON'T THINK ABOUT WRITING AN OPERA. JUST TELL A STORY.' AND THAT'S WHAT I DID."

I'm excited for *Iphigenia*, the opera he's writing with Esperanza Spalding. How did you first meet him?

We met years ago, when I was playing with Blakey, but it wasn't until I was teaching at the Monk Institute that I got a chance to be around him and Herbie Hancock. Wayne's been a mentor in a very unique way. I'll sit next to him, and he'll start dropping knowledge, stuff I mull over and go, "Wow!"

Can you share an example?

One time at Jazz Fest in New Orleans, he told me a story about a violinist who was so despondent about her unsuccessful auditions that she was close to committing suicide. When the violinist told her mother what was happening—Wayne is narrating—"her mother said, 'It takes courage to be happy!'"

That phrase hit me like a ton of bricks. You're out there doing what other people want you to do and expecting happiness to arrive, but you have to fight for it. It takes courage! That turned my life around. Wayne is that type of dude.

Great story! Herbie is such an inspiration too.

He's another one that doesn't wallow in the past. He's like, "Okay, next!" The little bit of DNA I picked up from those guys makes me constantly search for the next thing. It's always a challenge, you know, because you have to throw your fears away.

How did you decide to jump into the world of opera?

Opera Theatre of St. Louis wanted to do a jazz opera for kids, so my name came up, but after they listened to my film scores, they got excited about putting something on the main stage. It just kind of grew from there.

What did you initially think of the idea?

I was like, *me*? You want *me* to write an opera? [*Laughter*] And then one of the administrators said something that blew me away. He said that no one had ever really defined American opera, but it seemed that American opera should have a component of jazz. That made a lot of sense to me. But I didn't want to write a jazz opera.

You've described *Champion* and *Fire* as "operas in jazz." What's the difference between an "opera in jazz" and a jazz opera?
A jazz opera is based around the language of jazz and swing from beginning to end. *Champion* and *Fire* have moments that are purely orchestral, so I feel like it would be misleading to call them jazz operas.

Do you have a favorite opera?
I'm a big Giacomo Puccini fan, and I love *La Bohéme*. I saw a production of Richard Strauss' *Salome* at Opera Theatre of St. Louis before I started writing, and I checked out John Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles*. But as I began *Champion*, my teacher, Roger Dickerson, kept telling me, "Don't think about writing an opera. Just tell a story." And that's what I did.

What do you love about Puccini's writing?
How his lines develop in coordination with the libretto. There's a correlation with the story that just seems so natural; it has a fluidity that I love, and that's what I've always tried to do. The story is always in the forefront of my mind.

Hearing the way you intertwine music and words in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* made me wonder how you thought of pairing up particular passages.
I'd write out the libretto by hand and read it out loud. Something would hit a rhythm in the way that I was reading, and I'd write that rhythm down. I did that for every scene, notating the rhythm underneath the libretto, and when I started messing around with those rhythms on piano, the music began to reveal itself.

That reminds me of an interview where you mentioned that Spike Lee loves strong melodies, even underneath dialogue.
I can't remember what movie it was on, but I was worried about a particular melody fighting the dialogue, and Spike got mad when I suggested something atmospheric: "It's been scientifically proven that the brain can concentrate on more than one thing at a time!" [*Laughter*] Since then, I've learned how to have melodies interact with dialogue in a more natural way. But my use of melody in *Champion* and *Fire* is inspired by *La Bohéme*. There's just something about how strong that melodic content is. And as a jazz musician, I have an emotional concept of how to use harmony in those regards.

What's one notable difference between composing for opera and composing jazz?
In most operas, a 32-bar melodic passage is based off a single tonal center, whereas in jazz, the chords in a 32-bar section are always moving. I've been trying to write within that jazz framework while removing some of those obvious markers so that it has all the fluidity of a Puccini opera, it doesn't seem bound by structure, and it still has the color changes from the world of jazz.

That sounds like a fun challenge—but a challenge nonetheless.
It *is* a challenge, because sometimes those phrases and melodies don't fall where we think the harmonies should fall, so I might insert another chord or two. Being jazz musicians, we're so used to even numbers—12-bar blues, 32-bar song form—but in opera, that doesn't matter. As long as the storyline is moving, it's going to feel natural.

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Just like adding or cutting bars of music to fit picture, right?
It's the same thing. The music plays, something happens on screen, and you may have to put in a bar of 5/4 or 7/4 so that the music continues. People reading it might notice that's an odd meter, but when you're listening to it, it doesn't even matter.

Is there an element of improvisation in opera?
I leave plenty of room for the singers to improvise, especially in the way they approach the arias. In *Champion*, for example, I wrote an aria for [singer] Denyce Graves and bass. I initially thought of it like a duet between Ella Fitzgerald and Ray Brown, so I had written a bass groove, but Denyce made the entire thing rubato, which was killin'! The lines were still there, but it was all fluid based on how she was singing that night, which made for more personal performance.

Do you feel connected to the lineage of great Black composers?
I'm standing on their shoulders, no doubt. When people ask me how it feels to be the first African-American composer to have something at the Met, [composer] William Grant Still comes to mind, as does my teacher, Roger Dickerson; his mentor, the great composer Howard Swanson; and Hale Smith, with whom I studied after Roger. It's an amazing honor, but let's be real: I'm not the first composer qualified to be in this position. I feel a connection to them, and I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure this is a success. I take it very seriously. *Porgy and Bess* and now *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* are the two operas [most associated with jazz], but there's so much music in between that deserves a shot.

How would you define the legacy of William Grant Still?
I was listening to one of his pieces in St. Louis recently, and it occurred to me that his music is the missing link between modern opera and Aaron Copland, who was heavily influenced by Black culture. When you put William Grant Still in the context of Charlie Parker and other great jazz musicians, you hear that Still pointed to where all this stuff could go. How many young kids, had they known about William Grant Still and Bird and Trane and Miles, could have come up with something more like American opera should be? I hope *Fire* will be the spark of inspiration for a new generation.

It's no secret that many people hesitate to hire Black composers for projects that aren't telling an overtly Black story. As the composer on projects like *Perry Mason*, *Gia*, and *The Comedian*, what would you say to someone who wonders what a Black composer brings to a non-Black project?
We bring a fresh perspective to the table. You can say the same for women too. Composers like me, Marcus Miller, and Stanley Clarke—as well as Quincy Jones before us—have had careers other than film scoring, so we're less interested in sounding like [typical Hollywood composers]. And there's an honesty because we know there's a lack of opportunities for people of color, and nobody wants to be the weak link.

"YOU'RE DOING WHAT OTHER PEOPLE WANT YOU TO DO AND EXPECTING HAPPINESS TO ARRIVE, BUT YOU HAVE TO FIGHT FOR IT. IT TAKES COURAGE!"

Right. We'll give you a thousand percent …
… because we know we won't get a second chance. [*Laughter*]

For someone just starting out, it's amazing to witness your three-decade relationship with Spike Lee.
I've never taken it for granted, because I understood what it all meant in the grand scheme of things. I understood that Spike is a visionary and that he gave me these opportunities, but also that he was helping me to grow and get to where I was going.

Would you say that your film-scoring aesthetic has been shaped by your relationship to Spike and, by extension, to the music of Bill Lee and the Natural Spiritual Orchestra?
Of course. When I first began working with Spike on *Mo' Better Blues*, his dad was doing the music. The other thing is that Bill was a contemporary of Oliver Nelson; when you talk about my lineage, that's what I hear.

How did you go from being a jazz musician to an orchestral composer?
Well, a lot of that started with my early introduction to music. My dad loved opera, so I heard orchestral music all the time. I played in civic orchestras when I was in junior high, and I got to see how an orchestra could move. When I started doing films, Roger recommended that I create a language of jazz articulations for the orchestra, just as composers like Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók made folk music a big part of their orchestral language. It's been an interesting journey.

You've mentioned that composer Miles Goodman persuaded you it was more important to spend time developing your own voice than studying scores by other composers.
I studied a few scores in the beginning, and I'd asked Miles to give me some lessons. He came to see me while we were making *Crooklyn*, I think, and I asked him what we were going to work on. He was getting ready to say something and then he stopped and said, "Your weaknesses are your strengths. If I show you what I know, you'll sound like everyone else in Hollywood."

Did that make sense to you at the time?
It took a while for me to pick up on what Miles was saying, but now I feel like I've bloomed into whatever it is I'm supposed to be, whereas then I may have been chasing something I would have never been. ***JT***