



# *A Loving Community*

A Play with Music

Commissioned by Virginia Opera for the 2024/2025 season

Inspired by

The music and history surrounding the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case

With musical excerpts from *Loving v. Virginia* by composer Damien Geter and librettist Jessica Murphy Moo (2025 Virginia Opera / Richmond Symphony world premiere)

Book and music selection by Dr. Keith B. Kirk

Dramaturgy by Dr. Jesse Njus and Karen T. Federling

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Directed by Helen Aberger

Music direction and accompaniment by Brandon Eldredge

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Study Guide prepared by Dr. Allison R. Smith  
Civic Engagement Coordinator, Virginia Opera

Featuring music from  
*Loving v. Virginia*

Music by Damien Geter  
Libretto by Jessica Murphy Moo

Commissioned by:



In partnership with:



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CONTEMPORARY ART  
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# *A Loving Community*



## Cast of Characters

Mildred Jeter Loving, Richard's wife

Richard Loving, Mildred's husband

Vox populi #1

Vox populi #2 / Lola Allen Loving, Richard's mother

Chase Sanders

Patrick Wilhelm

Daniel Esteban Lugo

Aria Minasian

## Summary

A group of folks are recording a radio play called “A Loving Community” for a radio station called WVAO. The radio show hosts discuss the history of the *Loving v. Virginia* Supreme Court case in the context of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Amidst this discussion, the story of Richard Loving and Mildred Loving also unfolds through a series of dramatically portrayed vignettes.

We first meet Richard and Mildred in their hometown in Caroline County, Virginia as the radio show hosts discuss how Americans in the 1950s and 1960s responded to the struggle for civil rights. Small rural communities like Caroline County viewed the struggle differently than large urban communities like Washington, D.C. Civil rights laws also differed from state to state, which often caused confusion and conflict.

Different views regarding civil rights caused conflict in communities and families. Richard and Mildred were separated from their families because their marriage was legal in Washington, D.C. but illegal in Virginia, where their families lived. As the radio show hosts reveal, the Lovings’ struggle was only one of many as civil rights protests continued to grow through the 1960s.

These protests did result in some positive changes, however, as several federal civil rights laws were passed in the 1960s. Mildred and Richard’s case also began to gain momentum, ultimately reaching the Supreme Court. In 1967, the Supreme Court ruled that laws against interracial marriage were unconstitutional. Mildred and Richard were not only able to return to Virginia to reunite with their families, their case also laid an important foundation for other civil rights cases to come.

## About the author of *A Loving Community*



Dr. Keith Byron Kirk is an Assistant Professor for the theatre department at Virginia Commonwealth University. He began his performance career as an actor in multiple productions with Houston's black Ensemble Theatre in the company's productions of *Do Lord Remember Me* and *Hunter*. He was then cast in Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater Co. productions of Steinbeck's, *The Grapes of Wrath* and Tuck Yourgrau's *The Song of Jacob Zulu*. The original Steppenwolf production of the Steinbeck work was soon followed by productions at The La Jolla Playhouse, The National Theater of Great Britain and eventually the show's Tony Award winning Broadway run. He returned to Chicago to perform in a number of productions at Steppenwolf, The Goodman

Theater, Wisdom Bridge, and Blind Parrot Theater, Drury Lane Oakbrook, and others. Also a singer, he then took a starring turn in the role of John for the 1st National touring production of Cameron Macintosh's *Miss Saigon* for which he was awarded a Joseph Jefferson Award for Best Supporting Actor in a Musical. He later performed the role in both the Broadway, Stuttgart, and Los Angeles productions. Recently Keith was invited to London by Sir Trevor Nunn to explore Nunn's new adaptation of *Bess as Porgy* and was also asked by Hal Prince to portray the role of Che Guevara in Mr. Prince's final tour of *Evita* and later in the roles of Grady and Mister in both the Chicago, Los Angeles and 1<sup>st</sup> National touring productions of *The Color Purple*. His work can be heard on the original cast recordings of William Finn's *A New Brain* and *Elegies* and on composer Georgia Stitt's recent CD release *This Ordinary Thursday* on PS Classics. Other performance credits include shows at Houston's Alley and Black Ensemble Theater's, The Williamstown Theater Festival, The Ahmanson Theater, The New Jersey Shakespeare Festival, Lincoln Center and The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Other Broadway appearances include *King David*, *The Civil War*, and *The Piano Lesson* as well as in numerous concerts and venues across the United States and Europe.

Dr. Kirk began his playwriting career as research assistant to playwright, poet and author Ntozake Shange during her tenure at the University of Houston and is the author of the plays *Ft. Lonesome*, *Urban Trilogy*, *As Reaper In Summer Grain* (developed at the Eugene O'Neill Conference), *Knees of A Natural Man* and a number of One Act plays. He is presently working on another full-length play, *Concealment/Coloration in the Animal Kingdom*, based on the works of artist Abbot Handerson Thayer and set in 1980's Chicago. Keith was a finalist in the Ensemble Studio Theater's recent marathon of One Act Plays and the first play from his 'Urban Trilogy' was performed there in Fall 2004. He was also a 2004 finalist for the Theodore Ward Prize at Chicago's Columbia College and his play *As Reaper in Summer Grain* was developed at the 2005 Eugene O'Neill Playwright's Conference. Recent projects include writing the book for a new musical based on the Montgomery Bus Boycott commissioned by Alabama State University and the Rosa Parks Library and New York's the Transport Group's *The Audience* which was nominated for a 2005 Drama Desk Award. He also mined the archival materials that became the African American narratives in Frank Wildhorn's *The Civil War* for the Broadway stage. His recent one act play *PARABLE* is based on the relationship between the late singer Marvin Gaye and his father and was presented at the Ensemble Studio Theater in fall 2008.

A BA graduate of SUNY (Anderson Scholarship recipient) Keith then received his MA in Performance Studies and Playwriting at New York University in the spring of 2007 (Newington/Cropsey Foundation Fellow, Alfred Gallatin Scholarship 2006/07) and his doctorate at Northwestern University's Interdisciplinary Theatre and Drama Program under the guidance of Professors Tracy Davis and Harvey Young. Dr. Kirk's research explores specific performances of African American Funerary Ritual as mobilization narratives and their performances as similar to oratory found in other standard dramatic works. His most recent work explores the emergent area of civic dramaturgy as an aspect of performance and community engagement. He is editor of an upcoming collection on playwright August Wilson's *Pittsburgh Cycle* and its audience. He is also presently editing another work for publication.

Other areas of interest include the intersectionality of history and memory in 20th-century African American Drama and African American and American performance historiography. From 2011 to 2016 he returned to Houston as Assistant Professor of Performance Studies and head of the MA program in Dramaturgy and Performance at the University of Houston and later served as assistant professor of Performance Studies and African American Drama in the University of Pittsburgh's Department of Theatre Arts.



Keith is a member of the faculty of Virginia Commonwealth University's Department of Theatre and is an Associate Professor of Performance and Theatre Studies and Graduate Program Director. He has strongly promoted collaborations of performance practice and research as the most effective method of bolstering the continued growth of performance on multiple fronts.



## About the composer of *Loving v. Virginia*



Damien Geter is an acclaimed composer who infuses classical music with various styles from the Black diaspora to create music that furthers the cause for social justice. His rapidly growing body of work includes chamber, vocal, orchestral, and full operatic works, with his compositions being praised for their “skillful vocal writing” (*Wall Street Journal*). He is Composer-in-Residence at the Richmond Symphony through the 2024-25 season, and serves as Interim Music Director and Artistic Advisor at Portland Opera, as well as the Artistic Advisor for Resonance Ensemble.

In the 2023-2024 season, Des Moines Metro Opera presented the full-length world premiere of Geter’s opera, *American Apollo*, while Virginia Opera held a workshop of *Loving v. Virginia*, a new major work co-commissioned by Virginia Opera and the Richmond Symphony which premiered as part of Virginia Opera’s 50th Anniversary Season in April 2025. Geter’s *Annunciation* was featured on Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s concert *Montgomery and the Blacknificent 7*, and Richmond Symphony premiered a brand-new work conducted by Music Director Valentina Peleggi. Additionally, The Recording Inclusivity Initiative recorded String Quartet No. 1 “Neo-Soul.”

Future commissions include premieres at Seattle Opera and Emmanuel Music, and world premiere operatic productions in 2024, 2025, and 2026 at the Seattle, Virginia, InSeries, and Portland Operas. Geter will also have subsequent premieres at Richmond Symphony.

In the 2022-2023 season, *COTTON* was given its world premiere in Philadelphia followed by its Washington, D.C. premiere at The Kennedy Center, presented by Washington Performing Arts, and his motet was performed by Emmanuel Music. Geter also conducted his own piece, *An African American Requiem*, at Fort Worth

Opera, plus led the performance of *ABSENCE: Terence Blanchard* with Portland Opera.

In 2022, Geter had six premieres as a composer, including his large work, *An African American Requiem*, in partnership with Resonance Ensemble and the Oregon Symphony with subsequent performances at the Kennedy Center; *I Said What I Said* for Imani Winds, co-commissioned by Anima Mundi Productions, Chamber Music Northwest, and The Oregon Bach Festival; his one-act opera *Holy Ground* for Glimmerglass Opera; *Elegy* for the American Guild of Organists; *The Bronze Legacy* for Chicago Symphony Orchestra; and the chamber version of *American Apollo* for Des Moines Metro Opera.

Favorite recent highlights include the commissions *Cantata for a Hopeful Tomorrow* for The Washington Chorus with subsequent performances at Pacific Chorale, Choral Arts Northwest, Bethune Cookman University, Northern Arizona University, Southwestern University, and Berkshire Choral International, with future performances at Minnesota Choral Artists; *The Justice Symphony* for the University of Michigan with subsequent performances with The Washington Chorus at the Kennedy Center, and future performances at Fort Worth Opera; *Buh-roke* for the Portland Baroque Orchestra which will have subsequent performances with the Seattle Symphony; *Invisible* for Opera Theater Oregon; and String Quartet No. 1 “Neo-Soul” for All Classical Portland and On-Site Opera. His piece *1619* also appeared with On Site Opera as part of their presentation “What Lies Beneath.”

Geter is an alumnus of the Austrian American Mozart Festival and the Aspen Opera Center, and was a semifinalist for the Irma Cooper Vocal Competition. He also toured with the prestigious American Spiritual Ensemble, a group that helps to promote the preservation of the American art form – the spiritual.

He is the owner of [DG Music, Sans Fear Publishing](#). *Music in Context: An Examination of Western European Music Through a Sociopolitical Lens*, the book he co-authored, is available on Amazon, or directly from the publisher, Kendall Hunt.

Learn more at [www.damiengetermusic.com](http://www.damiengetermusic.com).

## About the librettist of *Loving v. Virginia*



Jessica Murphy Moo wrote the librettos for the Lyric Opera of Chicago's 2019/20 opera for young audiences, *Earth to Kenzie*, a co-commission between Lyric Opera of Chicago and Seattle Opera, and for Lyric's 2018/19 Season's chamber opera, *An American Dream*, a commission by Seattle Opera.

Murphy Moo is editor of *Portland* magazine, the award-winning publication of the University of Portland. She is former senior communications manager for Seattle Opera, and an adjunct instructor teaching

nonfiction writing for the University of Washington's Professional and Continuing Education division.

Murphy Moo was a 2016 fellow at Tapestry Opera's Librettist Composer Laboratory Workshop. She has held teaching positions at Emerson College, Harvard University, Boston University, Seattle Pacific University, University of Washington, and Seattle Opera.

## Glossary of musical and dramatic terms

### **ACT**

A self-contained section of an OPERA or PLAY.

### **AMERICANA**

In music, a mixture of artistic, literary, cultural, musical, and social influences and traditions unique to the United States that can inspire compositional style.

### **ALTO** (al-toe)

A low female voice.

### **ARIA** (ah-ree-ah)

A song for solo voice.

### **BARITONE** (beh-ruh-tone)

The middle-range male voice, between TENOR and BASS.

### **BASS** (base)

Lowest of the male voices.

### **BLUEGRASS**

A genre of American music characterized by its use of string instruments, vocal harmonies, and influences from folk, country, and rock music.

### **BOOK**

The script for a PLAY with music or other piece of musical theatre that contains: the music, the lyrics, and the spoken text.

### **CHAMBER OPERA**

A form of OPERA intended for a small ENSEMBLE of singers and instrumentalists.

### **COMMISSION**

A formal agreement between a company (like Virginia Opera or Richmond Symphony) and a COMPOSER and LIBRETTIST team to create a new OPERA, PLAY, or other theatrical piece.

## COMPOSER

The person who writes the music.

## COMPOSITION

The process of creating a new piece of music; or, a piece that results from this process.

## DESIGNER

A person who designs scenery, costumes, lighting, projection, or sound.

## DRAMATURG (drahm-uh-terg)

A person who provides context, research, and feedback to DIRECTORS, actors, and playwrights to help improve the quality or accuracy of a production while being developed.

## DUET

Music written for two people to sing together, usually to each other.

## ENSEMBLE (on-som-buhl)

Two or more singers singing at the same time.

## GENRE (zhaan-ruh)

In music, the type of COMPOSITION, such as OPERA or SYMPHONY.

## GOSPEL

A GENRE of Christian music with African-American roots that expresses religious themes and emotions and is characterized by powerful vocal performances.

## HARMONY

The sound that results from musical tones that are played simultaneously.

## JAZZ

A GENRE of music that originated in African-American communities of the early twentieth century that is characterized by IMPROVISATION and complex HARMONY.

## IMPROVISATION

The invention of music while performing, whether with voice or an instrument.

**LIBRETTIST** (lih-bret-ist)

The person who writes the LIBRETTO.

**LIBRETTO** (lih-bret-oh)

From the Italian for “little book,” it is the text or words of an OPERA.

**MEZZO-SOPRANO** (met-so soh-pranh-oh)

The middle female voice, between SOPRANO and ALTO.

**OPERA** (ah-per-ah)

A dramatic work that uses singing instead of speaking and is accompanied usually by PIANO in rehearsals and ORCHESTRA in performances.

**ORCHESTRA** (or-khe-struh)

A group of musicians that play different musical instruments. They play the music for the singers in an OPERA.

**PIANO**

A musical instrument used to accompany singers in rehearsals when there is no ORCHESTRA.

**PLAY**

A GENRE of scripted, spoken theatre performed by actors.

**PREMIERE**

The first performance of a musical or theatrical work.

**SCORE**

The document which contains both the music and the text of an OPERA.

**SCENE**

A portion of an ACT that presents a unit of action, like a chapter of a book.

**SET**

The scenery used on the stage to show the location of the OPERA or PLAY.

## **SETTING**

The time period and location in which an OPERA or PLAY is set.

## **SOPRANO** (soh-pranh-oh)

The highest female voice.

## **SPIRITUAL**

A type of religious song that originated among enslaved persons in the United States.

## **STAGE DIRECTOR**

The person who decides how the singers will move on stage and how they will act while they are singing their parts.

## **SYMPHONY**

A musical work written for an ORCHESTRA.

## **TENOR** (teh-nor)

A high male voice.

## **VOX POPULI**

Literally meaning “voice of the people,” this role is assigned to performers who represent the opinions of a community.

## **WORKSHOP**

In opera, a public or private performance of a work in progress with the intention of receiving feedback.

## Glossary of historical and legal terms

### AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION (ACLU)

A non-profit organization that defends the Constitutional rights of American residents.

### APPEAL

A challenge to a previous legal decision.

### ATTORNEY GENERAL

A legal officer, on the county, state, and national levels, who gives the government legal advice and represents the county, state, or nation in court.

### CIRCUIT COURT

In Virginia, a court that hears felony cases, some civil cases, and appeals from the DISTRICT COURT.

### CIVIL RIGHTS

Rights that concern political and social freedom and equality.

### CLASS ACTION LAWSUIT

A type of lawsuit in which one or more PLAINTIFFS file on behalf of a group.

### CONSTITUTION

The fundamental law of a governing body, whether that is a state or a country.

### DEFENDANT

A person or entity who is sued or accused of a crime in a court of law.

### DISTRICT COURT

In Virginia, a court that hears cases pertaining to domestic relations, such as marriage.

### DIXIE

A nickname for the southern United States.



## **JIM CROW LAWS**

Former state and local laws that enforced racial SEGREGATION from the 1880s through the 1960s.

## **MOTION TO VACATE**

A formal request to annul a previous ruling or order.

## **PLAINTIFF**

A person or entity who initiates a lawsuit against another person or entity.

## **SEGREGATION**

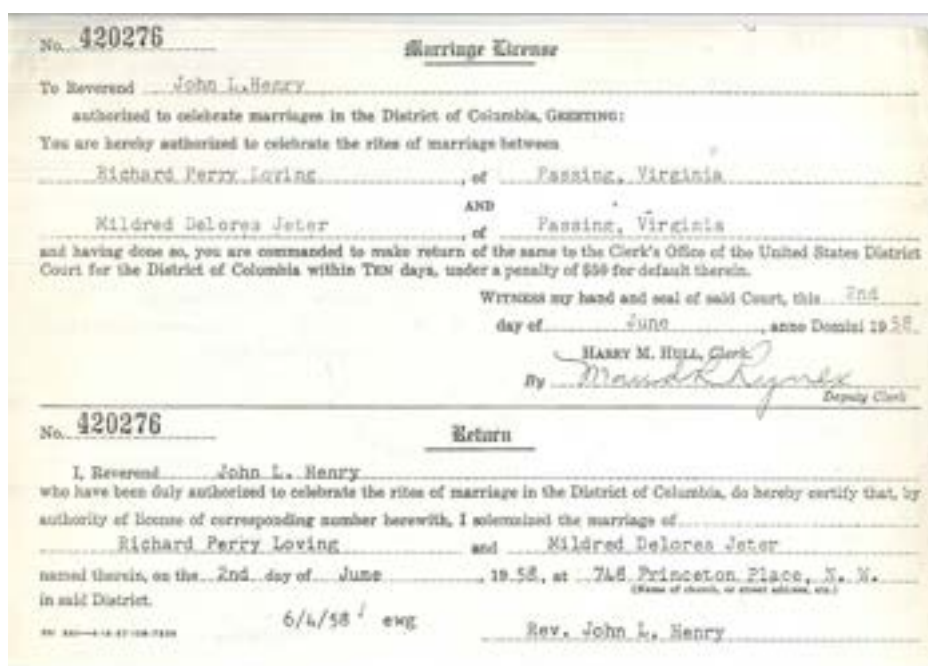
The action or state of keeping people or things separate.

## **SUPREME COURT**

A court that reviews the matters of the lower courts such as the CIRCUIT COURT and DISTRICT COURT. Each state has a Supreme Court that reviews the matters of its assigned state. The United States Supreme Court reviews matters for the whole country.

## A brief history of the *Loving v. Virginia* case

On June 2, 1958 Mildred Jeter, a Black woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, married in Washington, D.C. They were both from Central Point, Virginia in Caroline County but chose to get married in D.C. because interracial marriage was illegal in Virginia at that time. Virginia had a law called the Racial Integrity Act of 1924, which enforced strict racial segregation. This law included the “one-drop rule,” meaning that a person with any Black ancestry was considered “colored” under the law.<sup>1</sup> Because of this, Mildred and Richard’s marriage was illegal in Virginia; on their birth certificates, Richard Loving was classified as “white” and Mildred as “colored.”



The image shows a two-page document. The top page is a "Marriage License" with the number 420276. It is addressed to the Reverend John L. Henry, who is authorized to celebrate marriages in the District of Columbia. The license is issued to Richard Perry Loving and Mildred Delores Jeter, both of Passaic, Virginia. The ceremony took place on the 2nd day of June, 1958, at 748 Princeton Place, N. W. The license is signed by Harry M. Hull, Clerk, and Maud R. Reynolds, Deputy Clerk.

The bottom page is a "Return" form with the same number 420276. It is signed by Rev. John L. Henry, who certifies that he solemnized the marriage of Richard Perry Loving and Mildred Delores Jeter on the 2nd day of June, 1958, at 748 Princeton Place, N. W. in said District. The date is handwritten as 6/4/58 and signed ewg.

Richard and Mildred’s marriage license. Courtesy of The National Archives at Philadelphia.

After getting married, the Lovings returned to Virginia with what appeared to be a bright future for the newlyweds. Mildred was pregnant with their first child and Richard was making plans to build a home for their growing family. However, things took a dramatic turn in July 1958, about a month after their wedding. According to Mildred’s [account](#), the Caroline County police burst into their home during the night and informed them that she and Richard were under arrest for illegal cohabitation. In other words, it was illegal for the Lovings to marry where interracial marriage was

<sup>1</sup> The term “colored” will be used sparingly in this study guide since it was the legal term for Black people at the time with recognition that this term is no longer acceptable in everyday usage.

allowed and then return to live as a married couple in a place where it was not allowed. Richard and Mildred were arrested and spent some time in jail while waiting for their trial. Luckily, they were both released on bail before their trial date.

On January 6, 1959, the Lovings were found guilty of violating Virginia's laws against interracial marriage by the Caroline County Circuit Court. They were each sentenced to one year in prison. However, the judge suspended their sentences for twenty-five years on the condition that the Lovings leave Virginia and do not return as a couple. In order to avoid serving time, the Lovings decided to move to D.C. after their trial.

Even though the Lovings were able to live as a legally married couple in D.C., their lives were still challenging. For one, Mildred and Richard resented having to travel separately when visiting their families in Virginia. On one trip, they were even arrested for being together in Virginia, but they were let go with just a warning. Living in D.C. was also more expensive than living in Virginia, making it hard for them to make ends meet. Plus, D.C. did not feel as safe as the country life that they were used to. In Caroline County, the Loving kids could play outside without needing constant supervision. In D.C. one of the Lovings' kids, Donald, was struck by a car and nearly killed while playing outside. It was at that point that the Lovings knew they had to move back to Virginia. Frustrated with their situation, Mildred decided to take action. In 1963, she wrote a letter to the Attorney General at the time, Robert F. Kennedy, explaining how unfairly she and Richard had been treated by the Caroline County Circuit Court. She also asked for his advice. Kennedy referred the Lovings to the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) (ACLU), an American nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting people's rights in the U.S.

Philip Hirschkop and Bernard Cohen, both volunteer attorneys with the ACLU, were assigned to the Lovings' case. In 1963, Cohen filed a motion to vacate, asking the Caroline County Circuit Court to overturn the Lovings' convictions. While they waited for a decision on that motion, Cohen and Hirschkop also filed a federal class action lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia in 1964.

#### BONUS FACT!

The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment focuses on things like citizenship rights and equal protection. One important part of this amendment is The Equal Protection Clause, which stops both state and federal governments from making or enforcing laws that take away a person's life, freedom, or property without following the proper legal process.

Cohen and Hirschkop argued that the Lovings' conviction was unconstitutional because it was in violation of their 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment rights, especially the Equal Protection Clause.

On top of their financial stress and their worries about safety while living in D.C., Mildred was also pregnant with their third and last child, Peggy. The Lovings wanted Peggy to be born into a loving and safe environment, surrounded by family, so they chose to move back to Virginia in 1964, even though they knew they could go back to jail. The Lovings informed their attorneys about the move, and Cohen and Hirschkop advised them to keep a low profile while living in Virginia to avoid any trouble with the police. Despite the risks, the Lovings were determined to create a better life for their growing family.

In 1965, shortly before Cohen and Hirschkop were set to present their case to the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, Judge Leon M. Bazile denied the 1963 motion to vacate with the following words:

Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.<sup>2</sup>

The court date for the class action law suit was postponed because Cohen and Hirschkop immediately filed an appeal to Bazile's ruling to the Virginia Supreme Court in Richmond. In 1966, Justice Harry L. Carrico ruled that the Lovings' convictions would not be overturned. He argued that Mildred and Richard were treated equally under the law, so their convictions were constitutional.

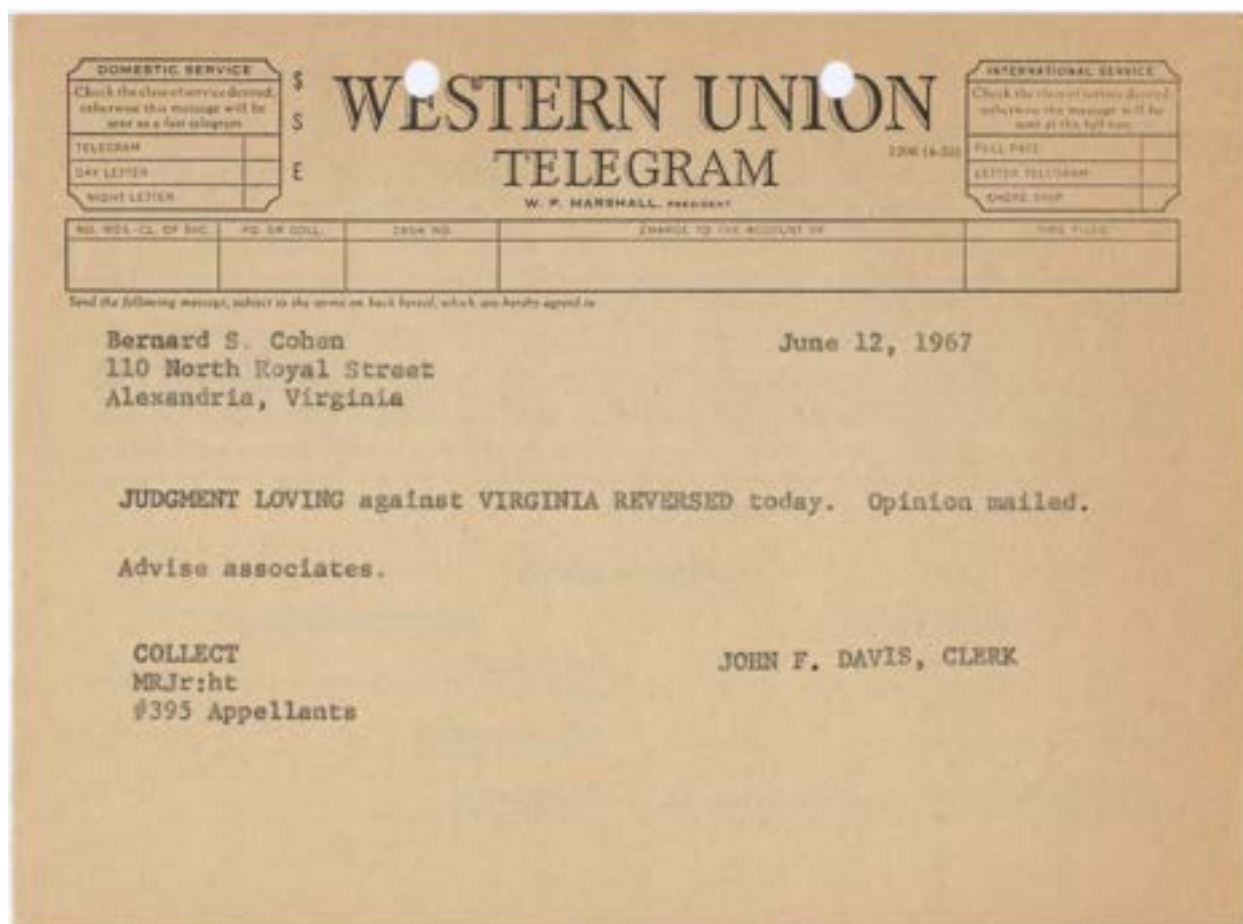
Frustrated but determined, Cohen and Hirschkop took the Virginia Supreme Court's ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court. This led to the *Loving v. Virginia* case, which began on April 10, 1967. Cohen and Hirschkop represented the Lovings while Robert McIlwaine represented the state of Virginia. The Lovings chose not to watch the arguments in court because they wanted to avoid the media spotlight. However, Richard did ask Cohen and Hirschkop to share his message with the court: "I love my wife, and it is just unfair that I can't live with her in Virginia."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Library of Virginia, "Judge Leon M. Bazile, Indictment for Felony," <https://lva.omeka.net/items/show/54>.

<sup>3</sup> "Excerpts from a Transcript of Oral Arguments in *Loving v. Virginia* (April 10, 1967)," *Encyclopedia Virginia*, <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/excerpts-from-a-transcript-of-oral-arguments-in-loving-v-virginia-april-10-1967/>.

On June 12, 1967 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Lovings in a unanimous decision, meaning all the Justices agreed. The Court stated that the Racial Integrity Act violated the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The Court ordered that the Lovings' convictions be reversed. Cohen and Hirschkop shared the amazing news with the Lovings - that they were finally able to live as a family in the home that Richard built for them in Caroline County without fear. It was a huge victory for love and equality.



The telegram that Bernard Cohen received that revealed the outcome of *Loving v. Virginia*. Courtesy of the National Archives Catalog.

Even after the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in favor of the Lovings, some states still had laws against interracial marriages. However, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision meant that it was illegal for states to enforce those laws. Despite this, some judges in Alabama were still upholding laws that prohibited interracial marriages. To put a stop to this, the United States sued a judge in Alabama named G. Clyde Brittain in

1970. As a result of this case, the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Alabama ruled that all laws preventing interracial couples from marrying in Alabama violated the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.



From left to right: Mildred, Richard, Twillie (Richard's father) and Donald. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.



From left to right: Peggy and Twillie. Courtesy of Special Collections and University Archives at the University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

## Writing an opera commission: Perspectives from the composer and librettist of *Loving v. Virginia*

Writing and commissioning an opera is a fascinating and team-driven journey that combines various art forms to produce a powerful performance. This process usually starts with selecting a composer who works closely with a librettist. Together, they create the music and the libretto, which is the text of the opera. This collaboration is key to crafting a story that engages audiences. The journey of creating an opera involves several stages. It begins with brainstorming the plot and developing characters. Then, the composer writes the music while the librettist focuses on the words. All of this requires careful planning and teamwork among the creative individuals involved. These people include: the composer, the librettist, and the commissioner(s) (in this case, Virginia Opera and the Richmond Symphony). The goal is to ensure that the final product reflects both traditional opera elements and fresh, innovative ideas.

Composer Damien Geter received the commission to write *Loving v. Virginia* in 2022. Virginia Opera had specific guidelines in mind, including the number of characters and musicians they could work with. They wanted to feature not just the main characters, the Lovings, but also important figures from their lives, like friends, family, and even the sheriff. Geter agreed that including these characters helps audiences connect more personally with the story. Virginia Opera also wanted *Loving v. Virginia* to be in two acts and to have a total running time under three hours.

As is common with opera commissions, Geter had the freedom to select a librettist, choosing Jessica Murphy Moo, with whom he had previously collaborated. “I really love her energy,” Geter affirms, “and when *Loving v. Virginia* came along, I thought it would be perfect for us.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Geter and Murphy Moo provided Virginia Opera’s Civic Engagement Coordinator, Allison R. Smith, with their personal insights and experiences regarding the commissioning and writing of *Loving v. Virginia*. All integrated quotes are drawn from that exchange.





Geter and Murphy Moo at a *Loving v. Virginia* workshop. Photo by Sandra Leigh Photography.

After accepting Geter’s invitation to write the libretto for *Loving v. Virginia*, Murphy Moo set to work researching the Lovings and their landmark case. She didn’t just rely on the many public resources available; she also looked for hands-on experiences and expert insights to deepen her understanding of their story:

I hopped on the first plane to Virginia! I met up with a local historian in Bowling Green, and he took me through their archives, to the jail where both Mildred and Richard Loving were held after their arrest, and to the Caroline County Courthouse where they had their first trial. He also drove me around Central Point [Virginia], so I could get a sense of the landscape. It is a beautiful place. I wanted to get a sense of the home that Mildred and Richard Loving longed for.

Having gathered their research, Murphy Moo and Geter then focused on the key moments or “plot points” of the Lovings’ story. While they had a wealth of information to work with, they faced the challenge of how to respectfully portray the lives of real people. Murphy Moo acknowledged that there was:

[...] some tension between the art form and the realism of this actual history and these very real people – Richard and Mildred weren’t walking around



singing about their situation, right? We wanted the words to fit who they were and what they said they wanted, and then the music is the way to tap into their emotions/inner thoughts.

Geter explained that he and Murphy Moo had to "fabricate" conversations among Richard, Mildred, and their family members to bring the story to life. However, they also included real quotes from primary sources, like Mildred's letter to the ACLU and Richard's messages to his lawyers. These quotations and references helped add authenticity to the opera.

With the guidelines from Virginia Opera and the research Murphy Moo gathered, they worked together to outline the story, decide the pacing, and set the overall tone. They discussed important questions, like how many scenes would fit into the two acts, what the music should sound like during key moments, and how to differentiate the sounds of Virginia as "home" from the "noise" of Washington, D.C.

Once they agreed on these details, Murphy Moo wrote the first draft of the libretto. She made a conscious effort not to be influenced by other fictionalized versions of the Lovings' story.<sup>5</sup> Instead, she immersed herself in poetry, which she found helpful because it's both brief and emotionally powerful. In opera, keeping things concise while delivering strong emotions is crucial. Murphy Moo emphasized that understanding your audience and the purpose of the work is vital when creating any art. Writing a libretto is especially complex because it involves balancing storytelling with musicality. Identifying the audience and purpose shapes how the story is told and experienced, making it an essential part of the creative process:

You're writing for the stage, for singers, for clarity for an audience, for a story that you want to move [people], but you're also writing toward a single composer who is their own unique individual trying to turn words into music that tells a story. You want the words you write to inspire that person. You want the words to "need" the music.

Throughout the process of creating *Loving v. Virginia*, Geter and Murphy Moo attended new operas together. This was both a fun experience and a great way for them to understand each other's creative styles and intentions. By watching other operas, they could see what elements worked well and which ones didn't, helping

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<sup>5</sup> Accounts such as: the 1996 film, *Mr. and Mrs. Loving* (directed by Richard Friedenberg) and the 2016 film, *Loving* (directed by Jeff Nichols).

them think about how their own opera would fit into the broader world of opera and culture.

As they continued to collaborate, they went through several drafts of the libretto. Virginia Opera also organized workshops where they could get feedback and suggestions for revisions from others. After making these changes, Geter started composing the music.

Like Murphy Moo, Geter drew inspiration from various sources for his music. He knew that Richard Loving loved playing bluegrass, and Mildred enjoyed listening to it, which was a big part of their life in Bowling Green, Virginia. To reflect this, Geter incorporated moments of bluegrass, rock, and blues into the score, capturing the sound of their environment. Geter also thought about how being a contemporary American composer writing about a recent historical event influenced his music. He aimed to create a sound that not only honored the Lovings' story but also resonated with today's audience, blending tradition with modernity in a way that felt genuine and impactful.

I also pull from conventional classical styles and atonality. I wanted to paint the scene of Americana – there's a little bit of everything. Just like the [American] composer [Aaron] Copland, who I have been compared to a lot lately, which I'm not mad about.<sup>6</sup>

Although Geter drew inspiration from both popular and classical music, he made sure to let his own unique style shine through in his work. He explained that he usually doesn't listen to music while composing because it can blur his focus. Instead, he found endless inspiration in Murphy Moo's text and the story of the Lovings. He said, "I never had a moment where I thought, 'I can't think of anything to write today.'" With his experience in writing operas and vocal pieces, Geter also follows a formula: "once you set all the motifs and musical themes, eventually they all come back together."

This glimpse into how *Loving v. Virginia* was created shows that writing an opera is a complex process with many moving parts. As Murphy Moo puts it, "Making an opera is hard work, but it's also so much fun." Their insights reveal how composers and librettists are revitalizing opera as an art form and a way to tell stories.

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<sup>6</sup> Aaron Copland (1900-1990) was a pioneering American composer of classical music. Though he wrote two operas (*The Second Hurricane*, 1937 and *The Tender Land*, 1954), he is most well-known for his orchestral and ballet works such as: *Fanfare for the Common Man* (1942), *Rodeo* (1942), and *Appalachian Spring* (1944).

To continue evolving and diversifying opera, it's essential to have new composers and librettists who are passionate about sharing their own stories. Geter and Murphy Moo also have advice for those who aspire to join the next generation of creators in this exciting field.

For composers: "Listen to as much music as you can; as many different styles of music as you can. Be open to feedback and trust your instincts."

For librettists: "Take in as much opera as you can! I think it's important to know the tradition, to find out what you love there, and then to see as many new operas as you can. There is so much exciting stuff going on right now in the contemporary opera world! There are also a lot of fellowships and workshops out there to apply for to get in there and try and learn and fail and try again."

## The rise of contemporary American opera

Contemporary American opera is an exciting and diverse part of the classical music scene. Although American opera started gaining popularity in the second half of the 20th century, its roots trace back to the 1700s. This art form keeps evolving, mixing traditional operatic elements with modern themes and innovative techniques, often featuring unique staging.

Composers like Philip Glass, Gregory Spears, Du Yun, and Damien Geter are pushing the boundaries of opera by exploring current social issues, historical events, and personal stories.<sup>7</sup> Their works often blend different musical styles and use English lyrics, making them more relatable to American audiences. This results in dynamic and engaging musical storytelling that appeals to both long-time opera fans and newcomers.

While American opera has been influenced by European traditions, it has developed its own distinct identity. Musicologist Elise Kirk points out that when opera arrived in America in the 18th century, it already felt different. American operas tended to be less serious and more comedic than European operas. Because opera originated in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, European creators felt the pressure of centuries-old European traditions. On the other hand, Americans had the freedom to experiment with this old genre in the New World. This allowed them to craft a unique form of opera that reflected their own experiences and cultural context.

In the early days of American opera, creators borrowed ideas from ballad opera and other British styles. These forms often mixed popular songs with new lyrics and spoken dialogue to tell stories. American opera made this style its own by adding local plots, music, politics, and humor. The people behind these early operas were often regular folks, not professional composers or writers. Many had other jobs and worked together to create operas that appealed to the public.

This collaborative approach is similar to how modern American operas, like *Loving v. Virginia*, are developed today. A team of artists collaborates, sharing ideas and getting feedback through workshops to shape the final piece. This process results in a vibrant artwork that includes different perspectives and tells a compelling story.

During the late 18th century and into the 19th century, opera also played a role in shaping ideas of American nationalism and patriotism. For example, operas like *Slaves in Algiers* by Susanna Haswell Rowson and *Tammany: The Indian Chief* by

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<sup>7</sup> Works of note by these composers include: Glass's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), Spears's *Fellow Travelers* (2016, performed by Virginia Opera in 2023), Du Yun's *Angel's Bone* (2016), and (in addition to *Loving v. Virginia*) Geter's *American Apollo* (2024).

Ann Julia Hatton presented stories that romanticized the relationship between European colonizers and the land that would become the United States. These works often portrayed fictionalized accounts of Indigenous Americans and enslaved Africans, framing them in ways that justified the colonizers' actions and beliefs about their rights to the land.

As the 20th century progressed, the trend of patriotic operas continued as a wave of new American styles emerged. The Metropolitan Opera (or the Met), founded in 1880 in New York, played a key role in this evolution by staging and commissioning new American operas during the early 1900s. In the 1920s and 1930s, Black-owned theaters began producing both classic and new works, hiring Black opera singers and contributing to a unique American opera scene that stood apart from European traditions.

These American operas drew inspiration from popular styles like jazz, gospel, and marches, helping to establish opera as a distinct genre on the global stage. With the rise of TV and radio, opera reached audiences beyond the theater, making it more accessible. At the same time, universities started offering music programs, which allowed composers to write smaller operas for student performances. These chamber operas featured smaller casts and simpler sets, making them easier for smaller, newer opera companies to produce.

While early 20th-century operas often had lighthearted plots and showcased the diversity of American music, post-World War II operas took a more serious turn. This shift likely reflected the emotional and financial challenges many Americans faced during that time. Serious works called melodramas and elements of horror became more popular, and orchestras expanded, allowing composers to use richer musical textures to create mood changes and deepen character development.

Throughout the country, local opera companies began to pop up, with places like the New York City Opera focusing on new works. In contrast, larger and more established companies, like the Metropolitan Opera and the Lyric Opera of Chicago (founded in 1954), mostly stuck to classic European operas. Even though fewer original American operas were being produced by the big companies, the 1960s brought new funding to support American opera. President Dwight D. Eisenhower established the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), which provided crucial financial support to opera companies of all sizes. This also created connections with private donors who became interested in supporting the arts. Under Eisenhower, operas were even performed in the White House, helping to foster long-term support from influential figures. Opera singers also began to perform at presidential inaugurations and other important political events.



From left to right: Famed American opera singer Marian Anderson, Reverend George W. Anthony, Director Newton Drury of the National Park Service, and former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt at the dedication of former President Franklin D. Roosevelt's home at Hyde Park, New York as a national shrine on April 12, 1946. Courtesy of Harry S. Truman Presidential Library and Museum.

As technology advanced in the 1970s and 1980s, new compositional techniques emerged, including electronic music and aleatoric music (which involves randomness in its creation). While these new styles were interesting and innovative, they often didn't appeal to a wide audience, so many of these operas were mainly performed by smaller companies or at universities where the composers worked.

In the 1990s and 2000s, opera began to change to appeal to a wider audience. Instead of focusing on complicated or overly dramatic themes, many operas returned to telling stories about historical and political figures. Composers started using a more minimalist style, which was simpler and more melodic, making it easier for audiences to connect with the music. This style often featured repetitive patterns that felt calming and accessible.

While Eisenhower's establishment of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) provided crucial funding for opera companies, it wasn't enough to support every company out there. As we entered the 2000s, more non-profits and charitable

foundations emerged to help fund new operas. Additionally, opera companies started collaborating more frequently. For instance, the Virginia Opera worked together with the Richmond Symphony to co-commission *Loving v. Virginia* and partnered with the Minnesota Opera to produce it. These collaborations help share the costs of everything from composer fees to costumes and sets, making it easier to bring new operas to life.

Organizations like Opera America, founded in the 1970s, have played a big role in boosting interest in American operas. They offer grants to support writers, composers, directors, and other creatives, ensuring that there's a diverse group of people working on new and innovative operas. This funding helps to bring a wider variety of voices and stories into the opera scene.

Just like early American operas thrived on collaboration, today's composers and writers also work together in creative workshops. For example, the Washington National Opera hosts an annual American Opera Initiative (AOI), where three different teams of composers and librettists create short, 20-minute operas. Some of these pieces may even be expanded into full-length operas later on. This initiative allows artists to showcase their work on a national stage while getting real-time feedback during the creative process. These shorter operas are also more affordable to produce, which increases the chances they'll be performed again (or revived) in the future. Overall, these collaborative efforts help keep opera fresh and relevant by giving new voices a chance to shine.

Reviving new operas is a big challenge for contemporary American opera. Even when a new opera is shorter—usually under three hours and with fewer performers—many still use technology like projections to enhance the storytelling. While these tech elements can make the experience more engaging, they can also be pricey. This means opera companies might need to hire extra team members and rent or buy new equipment.

Producing a new opera also comes with risks. Sometimes, audiences might not be ready to embrace a fresh piece, especially if it's their first experience with opera. If they don't connect with the new work, they might not return for future performances. Even though there are more funding sources for new operas today, that money isn't always guaranteed. This means companies have to carefully consider how their choices will affect their audiences and supporters.

On the flip side, major opera institutions like the Metropolitan Opera are focusing on new productions to attract audiences again after the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, the Met announced it would feature seventeen new or recent operas, including five that are newly commissioned. By doing this, the Met is showing other American



opera companies how to strike a balance between classic works and new creations.

New operas might seem a bit intimidating to seasoned opera fans who love their classic favorites, but they can actually be a great entry point for newcomers. Most new American operas are performed in English and are shorter—often closer to the length of a movie. Many U.S. opera companies also host post-show talkbacks, where audience members can ask questions and interact with cast and creative team members like directors and composers. This makes premieres exciting and gives people a chance to hear the artists' takes on familiar stories or topics. These elements help the audience connect personally with the operas since they're in a language and context they understand.

For instance, the Virginia Opera has found a way to mix classic operas with new ones. Since Adam Turner became Artistic Director in 2018, Virginia Opera has paired its three classic operas each season with a more contemporary one. This has led to the current world premiere of *Loving v. Virginia*. Before this season, Virginia Opera has produced works like *Sanctuary Road* (2017) and *Fellow Travelers* (2016), both based on important moments in American history, as well as *Three Decembers* (2008), which is inspired by an American play. All of these operas are in English, making them more accessible and relatable for audiences.

Beyond the mainstage, the Civic Engagement department works closely with the Artistic and Production teams to create and tour new works for both adults and kids. One exciting initiative is the annual Pride in Black Voices series, which started in 2023 and features pieces by contemporary Black composers. For example, the second year of this series included Damien Geter's song cycle, *Cotton* (2022). Virginia Opera also tours short children's operas like *Frida Kahlo and the Bravest Girl in the World* (2019), composed by Joe Illick with a libretto by Mark Campbell, and *Earth to Kenzie* (2019), composed by Frances Pollock with a libretto by Jessica Murphy Moo.





The cast of Virginia Opera's 2024 production of *Frida Kahlo and the Bravest Girl in the World* from left to right: Daniel Lugo, Carla Vargas Fuster, Elary Mede, Erik Grendahl, Emily Harmon.  
Photo by Karen Federing.

Since opera first arrived in what would become the United States in the 18th century, it has reflected the country's political and social climate, both positively and negatively. It has given many diverse musicians the chance to share their cultures, histories, and styles within American opera. Musicologist Naomi André points out that opera's flexibility makes it a great way to preserve historical moments and explore new ideas and musical styles. Together, the creative musicians behind new operas and the audiences—both new and experienced—play a vital role in shaping the unique and lasting beauty of American opera.

## Listening activity: lullabies in opera

“Lullaby” is one of the pieces from Damien Geter’s and Jessica Murphy Moo’s opera, *Loving v. Virginia*, that is featured in *A Loving Community*. A lullaby is a soothing song intended to lull a child to sleep. In *A Loving Community*, Mildred sings this lullaby to her daughter, Peggy, at the end of Scene 3. In this scene, the audience learns that Mildred gave birth to a baby, Peggy, while she and Richard were awaiting trial.

Listen to the recording of “Lullaby” from *Loving v. Virginia* as you follow along with the text in the table below. As you listen, consider the following questions:

- How would you describe what you hear in the music?
- What kind of effect does the text have on you – is it soothing? Comforting?
- How do the words and music work together to create a sense of calm and safety?
- How does the singer’s style convey that this is a lullaby? Does she change her speed or volume?

“Lullaby,” <i>Loving v. Virginia</i> (2025) Music by Damien Geter, Libretto by Jessica Murphy Moo Flora Hawk, soprano, Jeremy Reger, piano	
Perfection is a mighty high bar. Oh, sweet Peggy, The things they’ll say. Oh, sweet Peggy, Don’t pay them any mind. I’ve heard it all, Heard it all before. Not white enough for this. Not Black enough for that. Not Indian enough for Everything in between. You are always enough, sweet Peggy. You will know who you are. Don’t pay them no mind. When they say these things— And they will say these things— You come straight to your mama, You ask your mama	To tell you a story Of a child who was born In a House called Love Made from strong oak trees planted generations before, Shaded by the sycamore, Winters warmed by hickory cords. Oh, Peggy, this House called Love Is the color of brilliance Where children are all happy and strong, Secure in the night, Swaddled in their belonging, Always safe, Always whole. When you hear things, Peggy, You come to your mama and I’ll tell you of the House called Love.

Lullabies aren't new to opera - or, for that matter, to American opera. Richard Danielpour's (composer) and Toni Morrison's (librettist) 2005 opera, *Margaret Garner*, also features a mother's lullaby to her baby. This opera, which was co-commissioned by Michigan Opera Theatre, Cincinnati Opera, and Opera Philadelphia, is loosely based on the life of an enslaved woman, Margaret Garner. Margaret sings this lullaby to her daughter after she and her husband, Robert, return to their cabin after a long day of labor. Their warm family moments are one of the few bright spots in the opera and in Margaret's life.

Listen to "Margaret's Lullaby" and compare it to "Lullaby" from *Loving v. Virginia* as you consider the following questions:

- Does each lullaby evoke a similar mood?
- How do the music and text work together in "Margaret's Lullaby?"
- Are the singers' styles similar or different?
- Be sure to note both the similarities and differences between "Margaret's Lullaby" and "Lullaby" from *Loving v. Virginia*.

**BONUS FACT!**

Famed mezzo-soprano **Denyce Graves** is also the stage director for *Loving v. Virginia*.

<p><u>"Margaret's Lullaby," <i>Margaret Garner</i></u> (2005) Richard Danielpour, music Toni Morrison, libretto (time marker 34:04-37:30)</p>	<p>Denyce Graves, mezzo-soprano Stefano Lono, conductor Charlotte Symphony Orchestra The Charlotte Contemporary Ensemble Opera Carolina Chorus</p>
<p>Sad things, far away Soft things, come and play Lovely baby... Sleep in the meadow, Sleep in the hay Baby's got a dreamin' on the way. Bad things, far away Pretty things, here to stay Sweet baby, smile at me Lovely babe, go to sleep.</p>	<p>Sleep in the meadow, Sleep in the hay Baby's gonna dream the night away. Lovely baby, pretty baby Baby's gonna dream the night away. Sleep in the meadow, Sleep in the hay Baby's gonna dream (x3)</p>

Finally, we have one more example of a lullaby from an American opera - “Lullaby” from Gian Carlo Menotti’s (composer and librettist) 1950 opera, *The Consul*. This opera follows John and Magda Sorel, who are attempting to escape an unnamed totalitarian country with John’s mother and John and Magda’s unnamed child. In this case, John’s mother (simply named ‘Mother’) sings this lullaby to her grandchild, who is ill. The home is full of stress and uncertainty - John is waiting for his family at the country’s border as Magda and Mother try to secure their visas. At the same time, they must keep John’s location secret as he is currently wanted by the police.

Compare “Lullaby” from *The Consul* to the other lullabies from *Loving v. Virginia* and *Margaret Garner*, in terms of the music, text, and performance style as you consider the following questions:

- How do these lullabies fit in with the ongoing plots in each opera?
- Are the other characters in each scene in turmoil?
- What is the environment like for the characters - both the children being sung to and those around them?
- What purpose do you suppose a lullaby serves in an opera?

<p>“<u>Lullaby</u>,” <i>The Consul</i> (1950) Gian Carlo Menotti, music and libretto</p>	<p>Soon Cho, mezzo-soprano Mark Gibson, piano</p>
<p>I shall find for you shells and stars I shall swim for you river and sea Sleep my love, sleep for me My sleep is old. I shall feed for you lamb and dove I shall buy for you sugar and bread Sleep my love, sleep for me My sleep is dead.</p>	<p>Rain will fall but Baby won’t know He laughs alone in orchards of gold Tears will fall but Baby won’t know His laughter is blind. Sleep my love, for sleep is kind.</p>

## Opera innovators: create your own biographical play with music

*A Loving Community* is a biographical play with music that provides a snapshot of a period in Mildred and Richard Loving's lives. At the same time, it contextualizes their life within the civil rights movement between the 1950s and 1960s. By featuring music that was sung during the civil rights movement, the creators of *A Loving Community* forged connections between that movement and the Lovings' story. The Lovings initially built their relationship around their mutual love of music. In that way, music was an important part of their story.

In its most simple form, a biography tells someone's story. Think of a biography you have read or a biopic you have watched. Consider what other elements went into that biographical work to effectively tell someone's story by considering the following questions:

- What kept you engaged in the story?
- What did you most want to know about that person?
- What events shaped who that person became?
- What do you think that person will be remembered by?

Consider the ways that you can tell a story. All stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. However, not all stories have to be told in chronological order. *A Loving Community* and *Loving v. Virginia*, for example, both use flashbacks to tell the Lovings' story. Rather than starting in 1958 and moving chronologically through 1967, we see snapshots of their story at different points in time.

By yourself or in a small group, pick one of the opera innovators in the table below. Each of these people were trailblazers in representing the wealth of operatic talent across identity markers such as race and gender. Each of these artists either were from the United States, or they worked or studied in the United States. Construct a biographical narrative of the person you chose while considering the following questions:

- Does this person fit into more than one category (e.g. are they a singer and composer)?
- Where and when was this person born? Who are their family members?
- Which people had an impact on this person's life - their spouse? Parent?
- What made this person famous?
- What challenges did this person face? How did they overcome?
- What goal(s) did this person achieve?
- What can we learn from this person today?

COMPOSERS	SINGERS	LIBRETTISTS	FOUNDERS & EDUCATORS
William Grant Still	Leontyne Price	Cerise Lim Jacobs	Muriel “Mimi” Hom
Ueta Solomona	Barbara Smith	David Henry	Sharon J. Willis
Missy Mazzoli	Conrad	Hwang	Denyce Graves
Edmond Dédé	Robert McFerrin	Tsianina	Sandra Seaton
Zitkála-Šá	Paul Robeson	Redfeather	Benjamin
Zhou Long	Marian Anderson	Blackstone	Matthews
Damien Geter	Sissieretta Jones	Anita Gonzalez	Mary Cardwell
Scott Joplin	Grace Bumbry	Michael Abels	Dawson
Rhiannon Giddens	Teresa Carreño	Toni Morrison	Carlos Simon
Margaret Bonds	Elizabeth Taylor	Jeanine Tesori	Camilla Williams
	Greenfield	Sokunthary Svay	Gregory Hopkins
	Mervyn J. “White Eagle” Moore	Jessica Murphy	Carol Brice
		Moo	
		Leilehua Lanzilotti	

Now that you’ve chosen and researched the subject of your biographical play with music – it’s time to select some music! *A Loving Community* does not feature original music. That is, all of the music in *A Loving Community* is from something else. Some of it is from Damien Geter’s and Jessica Murphy Moo’s opera, *Loving v. Virginia*, and some of it is drawn from protest music or music that was popular in the United States between the 1940s and 1960s.

You’ll remember that this practice of using music that is already written to make an opera or a play has history in the United States already. When opera arrived to the colonies in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, teams of creators would write a story that was interspersed with popular songs called ballads. Now, you can continue the tradition to show how far opera has come in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century United States!

So, using the resources below, make your own playlist for your play with music. Listen to the music and consider the text of each song, just as you did with the lullabies exercise. Consider how each piece helps to tell the story of the opera innovator that you chose. Then, share your play with music with your other classmates!

- Virginia Opera’s [playlist](#) containing music selections inspired by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.
- Smithsonian Folkways Recordings [playlist](#), “My Song Is My Weapon: The Long Sonic History of Black Resistance.” Curated by Dr. Tammy L. Kernodle.

- Smithsonian Folkways Recordings [playlist](#), “Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966.”
- Smithsonian Folkways Recordings [playlist](#), “Creation’s Journey: Native American Music.”
- Smithsonian Folkways Recordings [playlist](#), “Hawaiian Chant, Hula, and Music.”
- Smithsonian Folkways Recordings [playlist](#), “The World’s Vocal Arts.”



## Discussion questions

1. Compare the attitudes toward interracial couples in the time of *A Loving Community* with today. Have attitudes toward such relationships changed? How?
2. Consider how music is used as an instrument of storytelling. How do the popular songs used in *A Loving Community* help tell the Lovings' story? Do they provide cultural context? Do they help you get to know the Lovings better?
3. After reading Damien Geter's and Jessica Murphy Moo's advice on becoming a composer or a librettist, consider which one you'd like to be. Or, perhaps after creating your play with music about an opera innovator, you'd rather be a singer or an educator. Which opera-related job would you most like to have and why? How would you want your opera innovations to be remembered?
4. Mildred Loving insisted that she did not see herself as a civil rights activist. She said that both hers and Richard's only intention was to return to Virginia where Richard built their family home. In her lullaby to Peggy, Mildred sings about the "House called Love." Considering both the libretto and the music, how does the song present themes of "home" and "love?" Does the music sound similar at each iteration of "House called Love?" How does the text evoke a sense of home?
5. Both *Loving v. Virginia* and *A Loving Community*, like many contemporary American theatrical pieces, tell a real historical story. Do you think this trend should continue? Do the arts have a responsibility to educate audiences?