

# *Loving v. Virginia*

An Opera in Two Acts

Based on  
The *Loving v. Virginia* court case

Music by Damien Geter  
Libretto by Jessica Murphy Moo

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Study Guide prepared by

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# ***Loving v. Virginia***

## **Premiere**

First performance on April 25, 2025 at the Harrison Opera House in Norfolk, Virginia.

## **Cast of Characters**

**Mildred Jeter Loving**, Richard's wife

**Richard Loving**, Mildred's husband

**Bernard Cohen**, ACLU lawyer

**Philip Hirschkop**, ACLU lawyer

**Sheriff Garnett Brooks / Judge Leon M. Bazile**

**Raymond Green**, Richard's friend

**Annette Byrd**, Mildred's cousin

**Theoliver "Jake" Jeter**, Mildred's father

**Musiel Byrd Jeter**, Mildred's mother

**Lola Allen Loving**, Richard's mother

**Chorus**

Flora Hawk

Jonathan Michie

Troy Cook

Christian Sanders

Benjamin Werley

Adam Richardson

Tesia Kwarteng

Phillip Bullock

Melody Wilson

Alissa Anderson



## 2024-2025 Season

### Brief Summary

In April 1967 in Caroline County, Virginia, **Richard** and **Mildred Loving** are grappling with the stress of their U.S. Supreme Court case currently ongoing in Washington, D.C. In 1958, Richard (a white man) and Mildred (a woman of color) married in D.C. and returned to their home in Virginia. In 1959, Richard and Mildred were found guilty of violating Virginia's laws against interracial marriage. On behalf of the Lovings, lawyers **Bernard Cohen** and **Philip Hirschkop** argue before the Supreme Court that such laws are unconstitutional and seek to overturn Mildred and Richard's guilty verdicts. Through a series of flashbacks between Caroline County, Virginia and Washington, D.C. between the years 1958-1967, Mildred and Richard's story unfolds.

During the Lovings' first case at the Caroline County Circuit Court in 1959, **Judge Bazile** questions the Lovings' decision to plead not guilty in court. He emphasizes that the consequences for violating Virginia's laws against interracial marriage are severe; Mildred and Richard could be imprisoned. Despite their doubts, Richard and Mildred ultimately change their plea to guilty and agree to a suspended sentence on the condition they leave Virginia for 25 years. Before court adjourns, Richard reassures Mildred that, no matter what happens, they will face the future together.

After a series of unsuccessful appeals, Philip and Bernard inform the Lovings that their case is headed to the U.S. Supreme Court. On April 10, 1967, the two lawyers present their oral arguments before the Court. Philip condemns Virginia's marriage laws and argues for the Lovings' rights under the 14th Amendment. Bernard highlights the Lovings' mistreatment and passes on Richard's message to the court: "I love my wife and it's unfair that I cannot live with her in Virginia."

The opera concludes with the **Law Chorus** announcing the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn the Lovings' convictions, thereby affirming the legalization of interracial marriage. Mildred and Richard, smiling broadly, express their love for each other and walk hand in hand to their tranquil home, feeling liberated by the court's decision.

## Detailed Synopsis

**Setting:** Caroline County, Virginia and Washington, D.C. between 1958 and 1967.

### ACT I

**Scene 1: April 1967, stage split between Jake and Musiel Jeter's house in Virginia and the U.S. Supreme Court building in Washington, D.C.**

**Richard Loving** is preparing to leave for work. **Mildred Jeter Loving** is worried about their ongoing court case in Washington, D.C. Her worry is compounded by the presence of a strange car that was parked in the driveway of her parents' home. Richard seems worried as well, but encourages Mildred to stay strong and keep the children safe before leaving for work.

Meanwhile, **Bernard Cohen** and **Philip Hirschkop** arrive at the U.S. Supreme Court building. They remind themselves why they have been working so hard on the Lovings' case, of what's at stake. Taking a deep breath, they go inside. As Bernard begins his oral arguments before the Court, the strange car returns to the Jeters' home.

### **Scene 2: 1958, a drag strip in Caroline County, Virginia**

A crowd gathers, ready to watch the drag race. Mildred and her cousin, **Annette Byrd**, are among the crowd. Richard and his friend, **Raymond Green**, are working on Richard's car as the first round of cars race past. Annette tells Mildred that she's moving to Washington, D.C - she's excited about her new start in a new city. Mildred says she'll miss her, but that she prefers life in the country. Annette notices Mildred looking at Richard and advises her to be careful.

Richard continues working on his car and does not notice Mildred approaching. When he notices her, Richard closes the hood of the car, shifting his focus to Mildred. Raymond and a few others push Raymond and Richard's car toward the starting line, leaving Richard and Mildred alone. Richard starts to ask Mildred a question, but they are interrupted by the start of the race. Raymond wins the race and Richard kisses Mildred in celebration.

Amidst the chaos of the celebration, an angry driver starts a fight with Raymond and Richard, but crowd members separate them before the fight escalates. A person from the crowd threatens Richard because he saw him kiss Mildred; Richard tells him

to get lost. The encounter seems to have worried Mildred, however, and she encourages Richard to discuss their relationship with her father.

### **Scene 3**

The **Law Chorus** summarizes Virginia's stance on interracial marriage. The person from the drag race crowd who threatened Richard decides to report Richard and Mildred to **Sherriff Brooks**.

### **Scene 4: Jake and Musiel's home, Virginia**

Mildred and Musiel are eavesdropping on Jake and Richard's conversation in the next room. It is implied that Richard has asked for Jake's blessing to marry Mildred. Jake is reluctant to give Richard and Mildred his blessing because he sees trouble ahead for the couple. He is worried because he knows that when one grows up as a person of color, they "grow a sensibility" and notice things that white people do not. Richard, as a white man, would not be able to sense trouble before it occurs, in Jake's view. Richard reassures Jake that he loves Mildred as Mildred also reassures her mother that she loves Richard.

Still reluctant, Jake acknowledges that he cannot stop the couple from getting married. Richard tells Jake he plans to take Mildred to D.C. where interracial marriage is legal. To keep Mildred safe as best as he can, Jake insists on accompanying the couple to D.C.

### **Scene 5: A marriage clerk office**

The clerks and Law Chorus recite the current marriage laws in Virginia while they work. They pass the Lovings' marriage license along, looking to verify the validity of their marriage.

### **Scene 6: Jake and Musiel's home, Virginia**

In celebration of their recent marriage Mildred hangs up hers and Richard's framed marriage license. Richard promises that their living with Mildred's parents is only temporary - he plans to build a house for Mildred and their growing family. Although he loves the Jeters, he wants Mildred and their children to have their own homestead. Mildred and Richard kiss as they tumble into bed.

Meanwhile, The Law Chorus hands the Sherriff an arrest warrant for Mildred and Richard. The Sherriff decides to wait until the middle of the night to arrest the Lovings when their defenses will be down. While Jake, Musiel, Richard, and Mildred are asleep, the Sherriff and two deputies bang on the front door of the Jeters' home. Once inside the home, they enter Mildred and Richard's bedroom, shining a bright light in their faces. Immediately protective of his wife, Richard places himself between Mildred and the officers. The Sherriff demands that Mildred identify herself – Mildred states that she is Richard's wife, pointing to their marriage license on the wall. The Sherriff argues that, according to Virginia law, she is not Richard's wife.

Awakened by all of the commotion, Jake and Musiel rush into Richard and Mildred's bedroom. Jake encourages Richard to comply with the officers – the trouble that he foresaw is now in the family home. Mildred asks her mother if she can make the officers go away but Musiel responds, dejected, that there is nothing that she can do.

### **Scene 7: Caroline County jail, Virginia**

At the county jail, Mildred is alone in her cell while Richard is imprisoned with other men. Richard's cellmates are taunting him for kissing Mildred in public. Richard nearly fights them, but the Sheriff breaks up the fight. He informs Richard that someone has paid his bail and he is free to go.

As the Sheriff escorts Richard out, they pass Mildred's cell. Richard calls for her, attempting to get to Mildred. He says that he will not leave without her. Richard offers to trade himself for Mildred, allowing her to be set free. The Sheriff encourages Richard to leave Mildred behind entirely. He says that she was a mistake and that, because their marriage is illegal in Virginia, he should leave her behind now for good.

It's hard for Richard to leave Mildred behind but he does. As soon as he leaves, a prisoner in another cell taunts Mildred. She shrinks to the corner of her cell, clearly afraid. Mildred realizes that her parents were right – trouble has come and now she's alone. Laying her hand over her stomach, she prays to God for strength. She promises her unborn child that she will be strong and survive.

Jake and Musiel appear outside of Mildred's cell window. Musiel asks if Mildred is alright and assures her that her son, Sidney, is safe at home. Jake is crying – he's too upset to speak. Musiel tells Mildred that Richard stopped by their home and assures her that they are all working on securing Mildred's bail as soon as possible. Musiel gently instructs Mildred to lie down, encouraging her to rest.



### **Scene 8: Richard's parents' house, Caroline County, Virginia**

Richard receives a notice to appear before the Caroline County court in the mail. He hands the letter to his mother, **Lola**, who reads it and confirms that Richard needs to appear in court. She impresses on Richard the reality of his situation – that he will have to choose between Virginia or Mildred and, if she has raised him right, Richard will know the correct choice to make.

Mildred enters – she and Richard are so relieved to see each other once again. Richard grows concerned that someone in jail harmed Mildred because she won't hold his gaze. Mildred assures him that's not the case, but it is clear that something is troubling her. Hesitantly, she reveals to Richard that she is pregnant. Richard's initial surprise quickly turns to excitement about the baby.

As Richard dreams about their future, Mildred's mind is on their legal matters. She stresses to Richard that they need money and lawyers because she can't return to jail. Richard promises Mildred that he'll make it right and kisses her before she leaves.

### **Scene 9: January 1959, Caroline County Courthouse**

**Judge Bazile** asks the Lovings' lawyer if they are sure that they want to plead not guilty. Richard and Mildred stand accused of a felony, and if they plead not guilty but are found guilty they will go to prison.

Mildred encourages Richard to follow their lawyer's advice – she believes it is the only way to ascertain that she will not return to prison. Richard complies and gives their lawyer a nod, signaling that he and Mildred will plead guilty. Judge Bazile asks if Richard or Mildred have anything to say before they are sentenced. They stay silent – Richard takes Mildred's hand, bracing for what is to come.

Judge Bazile accepts the Lovings' guilty pleas and sentences them to one year in prison. However, he offers to suspend the prison sentence provided the Lovings leave the state of Virginia and do not return together for twenty-five years. Mildred and Richard give their lawyer a nod, indicating they agree to these terms. Court adjourns and Richard takes Mildred's hand as he rises. "We go, together, we go," he promises.

## **ACT II**

### **Scene 1: Summer 1962, Washington, D.C.**

Richard is working with a group of bricklayers on a busy street corner. He is dissatisfied with urban life because it's loud and it's difficult to make a living. A sense of community is also lacking in D.C., unlike the community that Richard was used to in Virginia.

Suddenly, Richard and the other workers hear the squeal of car brakes. A passerby calls for help because a child has been hurt. Richard runs toward the scene of the accident.

### **Scene 2: Summer 1962, a public street in Washington, D.C.**

Mildred runs toward the child that was hit by a car; she is horrified to discover that the child is her son, Donald. She checks his breathing and is relieved to find that he is still alive. Richard runs to Mildred and Donald – he comforts Donald and jokes about his hard-headedness. Donald tries to laugh but he winces. Richard picks Donald up and carries him home as Mildred stands motionless, still stunned.

As Richard is carrying Donald home, Mildred lets Richard know that she has reached her breaking point. She wants to return to Virginia as soon as possible. Richard is skeptical – he and Mildred risk going back to prison if they return to Virginia.

Mildred mentions that her cousin suggested that she write to the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, to see if he can help their case. Richard is still skeptical – he is not sure that it is possible to have their sentences overturned. Mildred asks him to believe in her and takes Donald from him. Richard takes Mildred's hand and glances at the spot where Mildred had reached her breaking point. He assures her that he will follow her wherever she goes despite the unknowable road ahead. The full realization that their son almost died seems to hit Richard for the first time, and he draws Donald and Mildred close.

### **Scene 3: 1963, Richard and Mildred's apartment in Washington, D.C.**

Mildred is cooking a meal while her children, Sidney and Donald, play around her feet. She's pregnant with her youngest, Peggy. Mildred asks the boys to go outside to play and sits down, exhausted.

Annette enters with some groceries and the Lovings' mail. Mildred is excited to find that the mail contains a letter from the Attorney General's office, but she decides to wait for Richard's return before she opens it. She reveals to Annette that she wants their baby born in Virginia, but she is afraid to tell Richard because she is not sure how he will respond. Richard returns home from work and Annette encourages Mildred to be honest with him.

Mildred opens and reads the letter from Robert Kennedy only to find that he can't help their case. However, Kennedy encourages Mildred to write to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Richard says that's what they'll do then.

Following Annette's advice, Mildred confesses to Richard that she can't stay in D.C. any longer because she wants their baby born in Virginia. He assures Mildred that he also wants to return to Virginia, but that he can't risk letting her go to jail again. However, he promised Mildred that wherever they go, they will always go together; he agrees that they will return to Virginia.

#### **Scene 4: Stage split between the Lovings' apartment in Washington D.C. and the ACLU office in Richmond, Virginia**

As Mildred is writing her letter to the ACLU, Bernard Cohen, one of the attorneys that the ACLU assigned to the Lovings' case, opens the same letter. In Mildred's consciousness, she is supported by Musiel and Annette.

Thinking about how to approach the Lovings' case, Bernard notes that the racial discrimination in the Loving case is obvious. He could argue the constitutionality of their sentences and take this case to the U.S. Supreme Court. He is worried about his capability to do so, however. Bernard has only recently graduated from law school and has never tried a case in court. He also knows that filing appeals will be difficult not only because the Lovings already pleaded guilty; their case is also several years old. Reflecting on how beautiful their surname is in relation to their case, Bernard vows to call around to figure out how to help the Lovings.

#### **Scene 5: Caroline County, Virginia**

Richard and Mildred, together with their families, fawn over the Lovings' newborn daughter, Peggy. Richard is keeping watch at the window of the home, worried that someone will turn them in to the authorities.

Mildred promises Peggy that she and Richard will always protect her, in spite of the terrible things that she may hear. She assures Peggy that she and her family are strong and will always be protected by “the House called Love.”

At the window where he is keeping watch, Richard confides in Raymond that he doesn’t belong in Caroline County anymore. Raymond asks if he’d like to go for a ride, trying to distract his friend for a moment. Richard doesn’t seem to hear Raymond – he continues to muse on how unsafe the Lovings are in Virginia. Raymond jokes that he’s never heard Richard talk so much in his life – the city must have really changed him.

Richard suddenly slips out of the front door; a police officer is outside.

### **Scene 6: ACLU office, Washington, D.C.**

Philip Hirschkop, the other ACLU lawyer assigned to the Lovings’ case, shows Bernard an article about their case in a newspaper published by the Ku Klux Klan. Bernard begins to read the article, but stops, temporarily shaking off his fear and worry.

Bernard tells Philip about the Lovings – they’re both “quiet” and “lovely.” He also lets Philip know that the appeal he filed with Judge Bazile has been idle for months. Philip is worried that Bernard may have inadvertently set a trap – Bazile may decide to send the Lovings to prison if he vacates their sentences. Further, if Bazile resents the Lovings, they won’t be able to appeal. Philip reasons that putting federal pressure on Bazile may force his hand.

A knock on the door interrupts Bernard and Philip’s strategic meeting. Mildred, Richard, and their three children enter and greet the attorneys. Bernard makes small talk as the kids play. Mildred tries to calm the children and hold a conversation with Bernard simultaneously, though it is clear that she is distracted by her children.

Mildred continues trying to redirect the children toward playing more quietly as the attorneys lay out the possibilities regarding their case. Philip admits to the Lovings that, although it is possible that their case could reach the U.S. Supreme Court, the Court only hears roughly 1 of every 400 cases. However, he is confident that the Lovings’ case will be one of them. Mildred is surprised by his certainty.

Philip reveals his and Bernard’s plan – they will call a three-judge panel and start applying federal pressure on Virginia. Sensing her trepidation and growing

exasperation with her children, Bernard gives Mildred a glass of water and a toy to the children in a bid to distract them. He assures the Lovings that the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment is on their side.

Affirming Bernard, Philip continues that he and Bernard will make an equal protection argument and a due process argument. Richard notices that there is a bit of disagreement between the attorneys as to how their strategy will unfold. It is difficult, however, for anyone to focus on the attorneys' explanation of their strategy amidst the children's constant disruptions.

Mildred asks the attorneys what she and Richard can do. Philip encourages them to just wait and stay out of trouble. Bernard clarifies that this process could take several years. Mildred is clearly worried about how long this will take – she gathers the children and leaves the office. Richard confides in the attorneys that he and Mildred have already moved back to Virginia.

Philip is concerned about what could happen to the Lovings if they are caught. Richard continues that he and Mildred needed to be with their family despite the risks. Accepting that the Lovings can choose which risks they are willing to take, Bernard instructs Richard to call himself or Philip immediately if he or Mildred find themselves in trouble. Once more, he impresses the importance of patience on Richard.

### **Scene 7: 1965, split stage between ACLU law office and an outdoor demonstration, Washington, D.C.**

There is a protest in Washington, D.C. The protesters name some of key court cases that resulted in new civil rights laws in Virginia.

Inside their office, Bernard and Philip await Judge Bazile's decision on the Lovings' case in Caroline County. A spotlight shines briefly on Judge Bazile as he recites the reasoning behind his decision to not overturn the Lovings' conviction: "Almighty God creates the races on separate continents. That he separated them shows he did not intend for them to mix."

Bernard and Philip acknowledge how dangerous Judge Bazile's words are, but reason that they can use his words against him. At that moment, Bernard receives a letter that reveals that Bazile has denied the attorneys' motion to vacate. Bernard and Philip want to move forward with an appeal, but need to speak about this development with the Lovings first.

### **Scene 8: Split stage between Virginia and the ACLU office in Washington, D.C.**

Mildred is listening to the attorneys on a payphone as Richard stands nearby. Mildred passes on the attorneys' news to Richard – their case is going to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Bernard and Philip, on the other end of the phone, ask that the Lovings be present for their oral arguments in D.C., to take place in one- or two-years' time. Shaking her head, Mildred confirms that she and Richard will stay in Virginia – they will not be attending the trial.

### **Scene 9: April 1967, split stage between Musiel and Jake's home, Virginia and the inside of the U.S. Supreme Court building, Washington, D.C.**

In Washington, D.C. court is called to session. Meanwhile, Mildred anxiously looks out of the window at her parents' home in Virginia. The strange car from the first act is outside again. While waiting for Richard to come home, she repeats his advice to herself: "keep a bag packed, let my parents know, keep the children near." Mildred points out the car to Musiel, who also appears worried.

In court, Philip makes opening arguments. He condemns Virginia Code 20-57 and Virginia Code 20-59 as slavery laws that violate the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. He asks the Court if the state should be able to determine if two consenting adults are allowed to marry.

As Bernard begins his arguments, Jake enters the home and assures Mildred that no one is outside. Mildred is relieved to find the car gone when she looks out of the window again. Jake checks outside once more, and confirms that the car is gone.

Bernard's arguments illustrate the traumatic treatment that the Lovings have received from the Caroline County law enforcement. He relates how they've felt unsafe and that Virginia must find an alternative to its current marriage laws. He relays Richard's message to the court: "I love my wife and it's unfair that I cannot live with her in Virginia."

Back in Virginia, there is a flash of light outside of Jake and Musiel's home; Mildred smells smoke. Jake, Mildred, and Musiel all go to the window and find a cross burning outside. Musiel immediately gathers the children. Richard rushes to the scene and he and Jake put out the fire. Richard then goes inside to comfort a distraught and frightened Mildred.

As this harrowing incident is unfolding in Virginia, Philip is finishing his arguments. He concludes that Virginia's laws against interracial marriage are "the most odious laws to come before the Court."

In Virginia, Mildred and Richard are still shaken up by the night's events. They wonder if they were wrong to think that they could build a home as a family in Virginia.

**Scene 10: June 1967, press conference in Washington, D.C.**

The Law Chorus is setting up a press conference. They recite the Court's decision for the *Loving v. Virginia* case: "under our Constitution, the freedom to marry, or not to marry, a person of another race resides with the individual, and cannot be infringed by the State. These convictions must be reversed. It is so ordered." Bernard and Philip shake hands to celebrate their victory – the Court unanimously voted to overturn the Lovings' conviction.

Smiling broadly, Mildred and Richard greet Bernard and Philip outside of the press conference room. There is a large crowd of reporters taking photos of the Lovings and asking them about their future. The attorneys tell the Lovings that they've made history. Both Richard and Mildred seem overwhelmed; the only comment Mildred makes is that she feels free.

Just outside of the press conference room, Richard and Mildred express their love for each other. They walk, hand in hand, past the noise to their peaceful forever home.

## About the composer

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 Blackknifcent 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

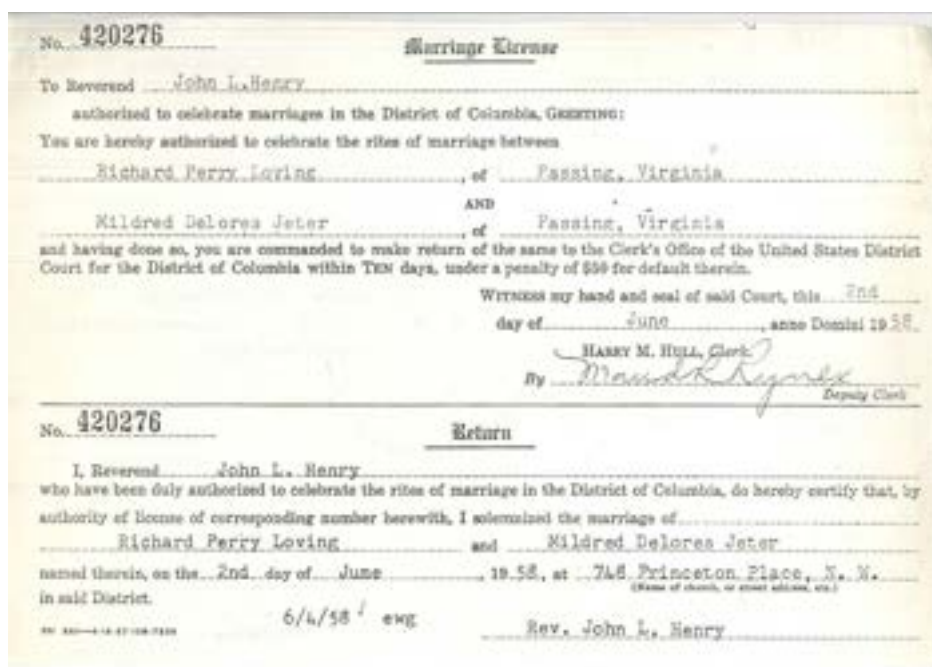
Jessica Murphy Moo wrote the librettos for the Lyric Opera of Chicago's 2019/20 opera for young audiences, *Earth to Kenzie*, a co-commission between Lyric Opera of Chicago and Seattle Opera, and for Lyric's 2018/19 Season's chamber opera, *An American Dream*, a commission by Seattle Opera.

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.

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

On June 2, 1958 Mildred Jeter, a Black and Indigenous woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, married in Washington, D.C. The Lovings were both from Central Point, Virginia in Caroline County. They chose to get married in Washington, D.C. because, at that time, interracial marriage was illegal in Virginia but was legal in D.C. In Virginia, the Racial Integrity Act of 1924 was still in practice. This Act legalized the “one-drop rule,” meaning that a person with any Black ancestry, no matter how far removed, was considered “colored” under the law.<sup>1</sup> The Racial Integrity Act required Virginia residents to be classified as “white” or “colored.”<sup>2</sup> Interracial marriage and cohabitation was illegal under this Act in order to entrench racial segregation. Richard Loving was classified as “white” and Mildred Jeter Loving was classified as “colored,” rendering their marriage illegal in the state of Virginia.



No. 420276

**Marriage License**

To Reverend John L. Henry

authorized to celebrate marriages in the District of Columbia, GRANTING:

You are hereby authorized to celebrate the rites of marriage between

Richard Perry Loving, of Passapatan, Virginia

AND

Mildred Delores Jeter, of Passapatan, Virginia

and having done so, you are commanded to make return of the same to the Clerk's Office of the United States District Court for the District of Columbia within TEN days, under a penalty of \$50 for default therein.

WITNESS my hand and seal of said Court, this 2nd day of June, anno Domini 1958.

HARRY M. HULL, Clerk

By *Maudie Rogers* Deputy Clerk

No. 420276

**Return**

I, Reverend John L. Henry

who have been duly authorized to celebrate the rites of marriage in the District of Columbia, do hereby certify that, by authority of license of corresponding number herewith, I solemnized the marriage of

Richard Perry Loving and Mildred Delores Jeter

named therein, on the 2nd day of June, 1958, at 748 Princeton Place, N.W. in said District.

6/4/58 ewg

Rev. John L. Henry

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

After marrying, the Lovings returned to Virginia where they lived as husband and wife; Mildred was also pregnant with their first child. According to Mildred's [account](#), the Caroline County police entered their home in the middle of the night in

<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.

<sup>2</sup> Racial classification was typically determined at birth and was an item on one's birth certificate.

July 1958 (roughly one month after the Lovings married) and informed the couple that they were under arrest.

The Lovings were charged under two sections of state law. Section 20-58 of the Virginia Code prohibited interracial couples from marrying outside of Virginia and then returning to Virginia. Section 20-59 classified interracial marriage as a felony that was punishable by one to five years in prison. The Lovings pled guilty to and were convicted of both charges by the Caroline County Circuit Court on January 6, 1959. They were each sentenced to one year in prison; however, the prison sentence would be suspended for twenty-five years on the condition that the Lovings leave Virginia and do not return together. In order to avoid serving a prison sentence, the Lovings moved to D.C. following their conviction.

Though the Lovings were able to live as a legally married couple in D.C., a few factors impacted their quality of life. Firstly, Mildred and Richard resented having to travel separately when visiting their families in Virginia. They were even arrested during one visit when they traveled together, though they were let off with a warning. The cost of living in D.C. was also higher than in Virginia and they struggled financially. When the Lovings' son, Donald, was struck and nearly killed by a car while playing outside in D.C., Richard and Mildred knew a life in D.C. was not sustainable. Desperate to find a solution, Mildred wrote a letter to the Attorney General at the time, Robert F. Kennedy, in 1963. She protested the validity of hers and Richard's convictions in Caroline County. Kennedy referred the Lovings to the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) (ACLU), an American nonprofit organization that works to protect the constitutional rights of American residents.

Philip Hirschkop and Bernard Cohen, both volunteer attorneys with the ACLU, were assigned to the Lovings' case. In 1963, Cohen filed a motion with the Caroline County Circuit Court requesting the court to vacate the Lovings' conviction. While awaiting a decision regarding the motion to vacate, Cohen and Hirschkop also filed a federal class action lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia in 1964. Cohen and Hirschkop argued that the statute under which the Lovings were sentenced was unconstitutional because it was in violation of their 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment rights, particularly the Equal Protection Clause.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment covers citizenship rights, equal protection, apportionment, and civil war debt. The Equal Protection Clause guarantees (among other things) equal protection of all U.S. citizens under the law. It also prohibits state and federal bodies from creating or enforcing laws that deprive a citizen of life, liberty, or property without due process. See the full text [here](#) via the Constitution Center.

In addition to their financial stress and the trauma of their son's near-death experience, Mildred was also pregnant with their youngest child, Peggy. The Lovings wanted Peggy to be born into a loving and safe environment with her extended family – in 1964 they chose to move back to Virginia, despite the risk of imprisonment.

In 1965, shortly before Cohen and Hirschkop were scheduled to argue 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>4</sup>

Cohen and Hirschkop immediately filed an appeal to Bazile's ruling to the Virginia Supreme Court in Richmond, Virginia. This action postponed the court date for the class action law suit filed with the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia. In 1966, Justice Harry L. Carrico ruled on behalf of the Virginia Supreme Court that the Lovings' sentencing was not in violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment – their conviction would not be overturned.

Justice Carrico's decision was two-fold. Firstly, Justice Carrico cited precedent (such as *Naim v. Naim*) to argue that Virginia's laws against interracial marriage were constitutional.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, both Richard and Mildred Loving were given equal sentences and were, in Justice Carrico's view, treated equally under the law. Therefore, Justice Carrico argued, their convictions were not in violation of the Equal Protection Clause.

Cohen and Hirschkop then appealed the Virginia Supreme Court's ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court. Oral arguments for *Loving v. Virginia*, the U.S. Supreme Court case, began on April 10, 1967. Cohen and Hirschkop represented the Lovings and Robert McIlwaine represented the state of Virginia. The Lovings did not attend oral

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<sup>4</sup> Library of Virginia, "Judge Leon M. Bazile, Indictment for Felony," <https://lva.omeka.net/items/show/54>.

<sup>5</sup> The decision of the *Naim v. Naim* (1955) case helped entrench laws against interracial marriage in Virginia. The Supreme Court of Virginia upheld the ruling of the Circuit Court of the City of Portsmouth that a marriage between a white woman and a Chinese man was able to be annulled on the grounds that it was an illegal union in the state of Virginia.

arguments, but Richard requested that his representation relate the following to the court: “I love my wife, and it is just unfair that I can’t live with her in Virginia.”<sup>6</sup>

On June 12, 1967 the U.S. Supreme Court made a unanimous decision to rule in favor of the Lovings. The Court concluded that the Racial Integrity Act, the primary statute on which the Lovings’ conviction was based, was in violation of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment. The Court ordered the Lovings’ conviction to be reversed. Cohen and Hirschkop called the Lovings and delivered the good news. The Lovings were finally able to live as a legal family in the home that Richard built for them for the first time.



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.

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<sup>6</sup> “Excerpts from a Transcript of Oral Arguments in *Loving v. Virginia* (April 10, 1967),” *Encyclopedia Virginia*, <https://encyclopedia.virginia.org/primary-documents/excerpts-from-a-transcript-of-oral-arguments-in-loving-v-virginia-april-10-1967/>.



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

Despite the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling, laws against interracial marriage remained in place in several states until 2000. However, the Court's ruling did render these laws unenforceable, with one exception. State judges in Alabama were enforcing laws against interracial marriage until 1970. In *United States v. Brittain*, the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Alabama ruled that all laws against interracial marriage in Alabama were in violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment and were, therefore, null and void.<sup>7</sup> In 2000, Alabama amended its constitution and removed all language pertaining to such laws.

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<sup>7</sup> In this case, the United States sued Probate Judge G. Clyde Brittain for denying a marriage license to an interracial couple.



## Writing an opera commission: Composer and librettist perspectives

Writing and commissioning an opera is a complex and collaborative process that brings together various artistic disciplines to create a cohesive and captivating piece. This process typically begins with the commissioning of a composer who, along with a librettist, crafts the music and libretto (or opera text) – both essential components of the opera. The journey involves intricate planning, from conceptualizing the storyline and developing characters to orchestrating the score and staging the production. Each phase of developing a new opera requires meticulous attention to detail and continued collaboration among the creative team (which includes the composer and the librettist, among others) and the commissioner(s) of the opera (in this case, Virginia Opera and the Richmond Symphony), thus ensuring that the final work resonates with audiences and stands as a testament to opera's rich traditions and innovative spirit.

Composer Damien Geter received the commission to write *Loving v. Virginia* in 2022. Virginia Opera outlined certain parameters that they already had in mind when envisioning *Loving v. Virginia*. Firstly, the Opera had already determined how many characters and instrumentalists were within the budget designated for *Loving v. Virginia* as well as which characters needed to be included. The Opera wanted not only the Lovings but members from their community as well – such as the Sherriff, close friends, and family members – among the cast of characters. In addition to the characters, the 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 was permitted to choose the librettist, Jessica Murphy Moo. Geter and Murphy Moo had worked together previously – he was a singer in a workshop for one of her operas which allowed him to experience the power and subtlety of her writing directly. “I really love her energy,” Geter affirms, “and when *Loving v. Virginia* came along, I thought it would be perfect for us.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</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 immediately directed her energy to gathering research about the Lovings and their case. In addition to the wealth of publicly accessible resources on the *Loving v. Virginia* court case, Murphy Moo also sought out hands-on experiences and outside expertise to learn more about the Lovings:

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 identified the big “plot points” of the Lovings’ story. Though the team had plenty of research and knowledge at their disposal, they also wrestled with how to present the story 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 confirmed that he and Murphy Moo had to “fabricate” conversations among Richard, Mildred, and their family members. Some of Richard and Mildred’s lines in the opera, however, are direct quotes from extant sources – Mildred’s letter to the ACLU and Richard’s message to his attorneys, for example, are pieces of gathered research from which Geter and Murphy Moo were able to draw.

Given the parameters that Virginia Opera provided them and the research that Murphy Moo had compiled, Geter and Murphy Moo worked collaboratively to outline the story, the pacing, and the overall tone. Within the two acts, how many scenes would there be? What should the music sound like during key moments of action? Which portions should be a duet, an aria, or a chorus piece? How should Virginia as “home” sound distinct from the “noise” of Washington, D.C.?

Once Geter and Murphy Moo agreed on these elements, Murphy Moo wrote the first draft of the libretto. When writing the libretto, Murphy Moo was careful to not be influenced, consciously or unconsciously, by other fictionalized accounts of the Lovings’ story.<sup>9</sup> Instead, she read a lot of poetry – this type of writing helps, Murphy Moo explains, because it is both concise and emotionally impactful. Brevity and gravitas are stylistic tools used to express the intended purpose of the work to audiences. Writing a libretto is also complex because, as Murphy Moo describes, the text is only one of the interconnected art forms that tell one story in opera:

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 writing (of both music and words) of *Loving v. Virginia*, Geter and Murphy Moo attended new operas together. It was a fun and informative exercise in getting to know how the other thinks, which stylistic elements each prefers, and

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<sup>9</sup> Accounts such as: the 1996 film, *Mr. and Mrs. Loving* (directed by Richard Friedenberg) and the 2016 film, *Loving* (directed by Jeff Nichols).

what message each is trying to get across in their respective roles in the project. It also helped, as Murphy Moo remembered, identify which elements of other operas worked and, equally important, which did *not* work. These experiences gave both Geter and Murphy Moo an idea of the operatic and cultural soundscape their work would eventually be a part of and helped them identify how their creative output and the Lovings' story would fit into such a soundscape.

Murphy Moo and Geter continued to work together closely through several drafts. Virginia Opera also hosted a few libretto workshops which produced suggestions for revisions other than Geter's. Following the revisions made after these processes, Geter began to write the music.

Much like Murphy Moo, Geter drew from multiple sources to inform the music he wrote for *Loving v. Virginia*. Richard Loving enjoyed playing bluegrass music and Mildred enjoyed listening to it as well – it was a key part of their soundscape in Bowling Green, Virginia. Geter wrote “moments” of bluegrass-, rock-, and blues-inspired music to reflect this aspect of the Lovings' sound world. As a contemporary American composer, Geter reflected on how writing an opera about an event in recent American history affected the music:

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>10</sup>

Though Geter was clearly influenced by both popular and classical music, he was careful to let his own music speak for itself. He notes that he does not typically listen to music while he is writing because it can muddle his own clarity about the music he is writing. As Murphy Moo intended, Geter instead found bottomless inspiration in her text as well as in the Lovings' story: “I never had a moment where I thought, ‘I can't think of anything to write today.’” As an experienced composer of several operas and vocal works, Geter also said that he typically works within a formula when writing music: “once you set all the motifs and musical themes, eventually they all come back together.”

Through this brief explanation of how *Loving v. Virginia* was both commissioned and written, it is clear that writing an opera is a complex creative process with a lot of

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<sup>10</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).

moving parts. As Murphy Moo opines, “making an opera is hard work, but it’s also so much fun.” Geter’s and Murphy Moo’s insights also show how composers and librettists are illustrating the vitality and capaciousness of opera as an art form and as a method of storytelling. To continue to revolutionize and diversify opera, we need new composers and librettists who are excited to tell the stories of their pasts and presents. Geter and Murphy Moo have advice for those aspiring to be part of the next generation of composers and librettists.

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 represents a vibrant and diverse landscape within the classical music world. Though American opera began to emerge in the opera mainstream in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it has roots that go back to the 1700s. This art form continues to evolve, blending traditional operatic elements with modern themes, innovative compositional techniques, and often unconventional staging. American composers such as: Philip Glass, Gregory Spears, Du Yun, and Damien Geter have pushed the boundaries of the genre, addressing current social issues, historical events, and personal stories through their works.<sup>11</sup> These operas frequently incorporate a wide range of musical styles, from minimalism to jazz influences, and often feature English libretti, making them more accessible to American audiences. The result is a dynamic and engaging form of musical storytelling that continues to captivate both seasoned opera-goers and newcomers to the art form.

Though drawn from and influenced by European opera, American opera has developed as an art form distinct from its European counterpart. As musicologist Elise Kirk argues, opera on American soil was already removed from European opera upon its arrival in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>12</sup> Opera in the not-quite-yet United States was less serious and more comic than European opera because its creators had more freedom to newly develop – rather than bearing the weight of centuries of European tradition, creators were able to develop what would become American opera on their own terms.

The form of American opera during this time was borrowed from ballad opera and other British genres. These genres often told a story by interspersing popular tunes that had either new or original text and spoken dialogue. American opera creators made this format their own by incorporating localized plots, tunes, politics, and parodies. The creators of these early American operas were tuned in to the tastes and politics of the common man because they themselves were the common man. Many of these creators were not composers, librettists, or orchestrators by trade; they had other day jobs and collaboratively produced operas for public consumption. This method is similar to the way that contemporary American operas (like *Loving v. Virginia*) are created – a team of creatives creates an opera through collaboration and invites feedback via workshops in order to get to a final

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<sup>11</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).

<sup>12</sup> Elise Kirk, *American Opera* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 11-12.

product. The result is a dynamic piece of art that incorporates multiple viewpoints to tell a story.

During the last half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, opera also provided the European colonizers with the perceived legitimacy of their right to the land. Operas and other theater pieces give glimpses into early concepts of American nationalism and patriotism. Works such as Susanna Haswell Rowson's (1762-1824) *Slaves in Algiers, or A Struggle for Freedom* (premiered in 1794 in Philadelphia) and Ann Julia Hatton's (1764-1838) *Tammany: The Indian Chief* (premiered in 1794 in New York) illustrate the use of opera and music theatre to define and encourage the adoption of a common American Protestant ethics. These works both romanticize the relationship between white Europeans and the landscape of what would become the United States in order to imagine the Colonies as the predestined home of European colonizers. Further, these works feature fictionalized narratives of Indigenous Americans and enslaved Africans in sacrificial roles as a means to justify the colonizers' treatment of these peoples.

While the trend of these pastoral, patriotic operas continued into the twentieth century, there was also an influx of new American idioms from across the cultural gamut. The Metropolitan Opera (more commonly known as 'the Met'), founded in 1880 in New York, was crucial in the continued development of opera - the Met both staged and commissioned new American operas in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1920s and 1930s, Black-owned theaters that produced both canonic and new works hired Black opera singers. These diverse opera institutions, singers, and composers helped to usher in a particular American opera distinct from European opera. Use of popular American idioms such as jazz, gospel, and marches were just some of the Americana influences that allowed opera from the U.S. to emerge as its own idiom on the international stage. With the advent of TV and radio, opera was then available to audiences outside of the opera house. During this time, there was also an influx of music programs at universities, giving composers the opportunity to write small, chamber operas for university students. Because these operas featured smaller casts, as well as minimal sets, scenery, and costuming, these works were also produced by small, young opera companies with fewer resources at their disposal.

While early twentieth-century operas featured more lighthearted plots and emphasized the musical diversity and particularity of the United States, postwar operas were more somber in both plot and music, likely as a reflection of the emotional and financial difficulties Americans were facing during this period.



Tragedies increased in popularity as did elements of horror.<sup>13</sup> The orchestra also expanded and was given a more prominent role in operas – composers began to use instrumental color to enact shifts in mood, for characterization, and other qualities of scene-setting.



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.

Local regional opera companies continued to open across the country. These companies, like New York City Opera, tended to prioritize new compositions while larger and more well-established companies, like the Met or the Lyric Opera of Chicago (founded in 1954), prioritized the European canon. Despite the decrease in original American opera being produced by large opera companies, the 1960s saw new funding to keep American opera alive. The President at the time, Dwight D. Eisenhower, founded the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) which provided opera companies of all sizes with necessary funding. The founding of the NEA also

<sup>13</sup> Operas such as Kurt Weill's (music), Langston Hughes's (lyrics), and Elmer Rice's (book) *Street Scene* (1947) and Samuel Barber's (composer) and Gian Carlo Menotti's (librettist) *Vanessa* (1958).

created a network of private funders available to opera houses. Beginning under Eisenhower's administration, operas were periodically put on in the White House, encouraging decades of donorship from influential people.

New developments in technology ushered in new compositional techniques in the 1970s and 1980s. Electronic and aleatoric (music composed by various chance methods) became the new trend in American operas.<sup>14</sup> While intellectually stimulating, several of these operas did not have mass audience appeal and were, therefore, primarily performed by small opera companies and at universities where the composers in question were employed.

The 1990s and 2000s saw a compositional shift that brought in more mass audience appeal. Opera topics shifted from esoteric or melodramatic themes and returned to historical and political figures as protagonists. Musically, opera composers were writing in a more minimalist style. This musical style was much more appealing to broader audiences because it was tonal and sometimes meditative in its repetition and simplicity. Composers also engaged in nostalgia, looking back at and borrowing from Baroque idioms. At the same time, composers also focused on social and political issues in recent American history like John Adams's (composer) and Peter Sellars's (librettist) *Doctor Atomic* (2005).

Though Eisenhower's installation of the NEA certainly helped opera companies with much-needed funds, one organization is not able to provide enough funding for all opera companies. The new millennium saw the rise of non-profits and other charitable foundations to fund new operas. Opera companies also became increasingly more collaborative. Today, opera companies often team up on co-productions to cut costs – Virginia Opera partnered with the Richmond Symphony to co-commission *Loving v. Virginia* and co-produced it with Minnesota Opera. Such collaborations allow for more new operas to be created and performed – companies not only split composer and librettist fees, they also split the costs of costumes, sets, wigs, and all of the other elements that go into an opera production.

Organizations such as Opera America, founded in the 1970s, furnished a renewed interest in American operas. They provide professional grants for librettists, composers, directors, and other creatives to ensure that the pool of available people to create new, innovative operas stays active and supported. Such funding has increased the diversity of opera composers and librettists and, by extension, the topics of new operas.

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<sup>14</sup> Operas such as John Eaton's (composer) and Patrick Creagh's (librettist) *Danton and Robespierre* (1978) and Alice Shield's (composer/co-librettist) and Edward Barrett's (co-librettist) *Shaman* (1987).



Just as colonial-era American operas thrived in collaborative settings, so do contemporary composers and librettists engage in collaborative opera workshops when writing short operas or chamber operas. The Washington National Opera's annual American Opera Initiative (AOI) features three 20-minute operas written by three different composer/librettist teams. Some of these operas are developed into full-length operas after their AOI debut, but the primary advantage of such an initiative is that it gives composers and librettists the ability to both produce their art on a national opera stage as it also gives them the ability to workshop their opera in real time.<sup>15</sup> These smaller one-act operas and chamber operas, created both in and outside of the Washington National Opera, are also cheaper to produce. This increases the likelihood that such operas will be revived.

The revival of new operas is a consistent issue with contemporary American operas. Even if a new opera is smaller in the sense that its duration is under three hours and it has a smaller cast and orchestra than is typical, many new operas have creative uses of projections and other technology. While engaging and additive to the overall storytelling atmosphere of an opera, such uses of tech are expensive and require hiring additional members of an opera's creative team and, depending on the company, also require the rental or purchase of new materials or equipment. Additionally, opera companies have to measure the other risks that come with producing a recent opera or commissioning a wholly new one. Audiences may not be receptive to new works and, if the new work is their first foray into opera, they risk some audience members not returning. While there is now a wealth of funding sources for opera companies and for the creation of new operas in the United States, the funding is not always guaranteed, so opera companies must always be mindful of how their programming decisions effect their audience and donor bases.

At the same time, large national institutions like the Metropolitan Opera are centering new productions as part of their strategy to rebuild audiences that they lost during the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2023, the Met announced its plan to program seventeen new or recent operas – of these seventeen, five would be commissions.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, the Met is setting a model for the ways in which American opera companies can balance the classics and new operas.

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<sup>15</sup> Damien Geter's (composer) and Lila Palmer's (librettist) *American Apollo* was initially an AOI commission, as was Missy Mazzoli's (composer) and Royce Vavrek's (librettist) *The Listeners*. The full-length versions both premiered in 2024 at Des Moines Metro Opera and at Opera Philadelphia, respectively.

<sup>16</sup> Francisco Salazar, "Metropolitan Opera to Present 17 Contemporary Works in Next Five Seasons," *OperaWire*, 18 April 2023, <https://operawire.com/metropolitan-opera-to-present-17-contemporary-works-in-next-five-seasons/>. The Met's recent operas for the current 2024–2025 season are: Osvaldo Golijov's (composer) and David Henry Hwang's (librettist) *Ainadamar* (2003) and Jake Heggie's (composer) and Gene Scheer's (librettist) *Moby-Dick* (2010). Its commissions include: John Adams's (composer and librettist) *Antony and Cleopatra* (2022) and Jeanine Tesori's (composer) and George Brant's (librettist) *Grounded* (2024).

Although new operas may initially be off-putting to seasoned opera goers who crave seeing their favorite canonic operas, they can be attractive to opera newcomers who might find the grandiosity and foreign languages in opera a bit daunting. New American operas are typically in English and also tend to be shorter – more like the length of a movie rather than a three-hour or more saga. Opera companies in the United States also often host post-show talkbacks, where people get to engage in a Q&A with cast members and, at times, members of an opera’s creative team such as directors, conductors, and composers. It is exciting for new audiences to see premieres and to get the opportunity to listen to the artists’ interpretation of these productions, especially if the opera was on a familiar topic or piece of literature. Such elements allow audience members to build personal connections with these operas.

Like the Met, the Virginia Opera has also developed a strategy to to balance the classics with new operas. Since the appointment of its current Artistic Director, Adam Turner in 2018, Virginia Opera has paired its three classic operas with a new opera, leading up to the current world premiere of *Loving v. Virginia*. Prior to the present 2024-2025 season, Virginia Opera, under Turner’s artistic direction, has produced: Paul Moravec’s (composer) and Mark Campbell’s (librettist) *Sanctuary Road* (2017), Gregory Spears’ (composer) and Greg Pierce’s (librettist) *Fellow Travelers* (2016), and Jake Heggie’s (composer) and Gene Scheer’s (librettist) *Three Decembers* (2008). All of these works are in English and two feature plots based on key moments in American history (*Sanctuary Road* and *Fellow Travelers*) while the other is based on an American play (*Three Decembers*).

Off of the mainstage, the Civic Engagement department, in tandem with the Artistic and Production departments, produces and tours works for adults and children. The annual Pride in Black Voices series, inaugurated in 2023, features music by Black composers. The second annual Pride in Black Voices program featured Damien Geter’s song cycle, *Cotton* (2022). Virginia Opera also tours productions of short children’s operas, such as: Joe Illick’s (composer) and Mark Campbell’s (librettist) *Frida Kahlo and the Bravest Girl in the World* (2019) and Frances Pollock’s (composer) and Jessica Murphy Moo’s (librettist) *Earth to Kenzie* (2019).



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's arrival in what would become the United States in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, opera has served, for better or for worse, as a barometer of the country's political and social temperature. It has also provided the opportunity to numerous and diverse musicians to incorporate their own idioms, cultures, and histories into the soundscape of American opera. As musicologist Naomi André argues, the capaciousness of the opera genre itself makes it an ideal medium through which to preserve and remember historical moments as well as to innovate new viewpoints and musical idioms. Along with the many creative musicians behind the production of new operas, opera audiences, young and old, new and returning, help cultivate the distinctness, longevity, and beauty of American opera.

## Discussion questions

1. Compare the attitudes toward interracial couples in the time of the opera *Loving v. Virginia* with today. Have attitudes toward such relationships changed? How?
2. Consider how opera is used as an instrument of storytelling. Is opera an effective medium to tell the Lovings' story? Why or why not? What advantages does opera provide the story and what limitations does it have?
3. Consider how Geter's music and Murphy Moo's libretto work together to tell the story. For example, when the Lovings are expressing their stress about the court case to each other, what does the music sound like? Pick two plot points from the opera and explain how the music and libretto illustrate the action happening onstage.
4. Mildred and Richard Loving risked imprisonment to return to Virginia – despite their banishment, Virginia was still their home. How does the theme of “home” permeate this opera? Consider both the libretto and the music.
5. *Loving v. Virginia*, like many contemporary American operas, tells a real historical story. Do you think this trend should continue? Do the arts have a responsibility to educate audiences?