

THE SWANN

A New Chamber Opera in Four Acts by Tamar-kali | Currently in Development

This contemporary chamber opera is inspired by the life and times of William Dorsey Swann, a formerly enslaved gender bending denizen of our nation's capital.

Swann was the first known person to dub himself a "queen of drag" and the first American on record to pursue legal and political action to defend the LGBTQIA+ community's right to gather.

Set during his detention and conviction in 1896 for 'keeping a disorderly house', a criminal charge often levied against those who ran brothels, SWANN reminisces on better days.

Words and music ground and guide us as we explore the intricate web of challenges that beset a free citizen when society and identity collide and inquest, analysis and detainment begin to take their toll.

PHOTO: "SWANN" CATAPULT OPERA, DIGITAL SHORT

CAST:

William Dorsey Swann, BASS
Daniel Swann, TENOR
Arresting Officer, COUNTERTENOR
Oshun, MEZZO SOPRANO
Judge Kimball, BARITONE
Pierce Lafayette, BARITONE

The Trio: [House of Swann / Court of Law]
COUNTERTENOR, TENOR, BASS

The Neighborhood [local DC community]
SATB from cast including 6 dancers

Mother Mary, SPOKEN
Dr. Rose, SPOKEN - pre recorded
Dr. Hamilton, SPOKEN - pre recorded

INSTRUMENTATION:

Piano
Viola
Contrabass
Pre-recorded Spoken Word

CURRENT CREATIVE TEAM:

Tamar-kali, *Composer*
Carl Hancock Rux, *Librettist*
James Blaszkowski, *Stage Director*
Adam Rothenberg, *Conductor*
Tislarm Bouie, *Choreographer*
Samantha Rei, *Costume Designer*
Matthew Principe, *Creative Producer*

DURATION:

Approx. 110 minutes, no intermission



FROM THE COMPOSER

In 2021 when conceiving and composing the work for my LA Opera commission *We Hold These Truths*, I came across Journalist and Queer Culture Consultant, Channing Gerard Joseph's research on William Dorsey Swann.

Having just developed work centered around the New Negro Movement of the early 20th Century; I began to draw a line of connection and understand these histories as part of a continuum.

The first wave of the Civil Rights Movement in America emerged in the late 1800s and it is in this same world of Paul Laurence Dunbar's "We Wear the Mask", Langston Hughes' "I too" and Claude Mc Kay's "If We Must Die" that William Dorsey Swann exists and resists.

It was a natural progression and an irresistible opportunity to represent the spectrum of humanity present in Black life in America during this period.

Shining a light on our forebears is essential to honoring their resilience and continuing the traditions of innovation and bold expression they so fearlessly exemplified. My hope in bringing this work to the stage is to grant audiences an opportunity to take away an appreciation for the varied and eclectic realities and experiences of African Americans throughout history in this nation. Our long standing presence and contributions have been an integral part of the American story.

It is also my hope that the uncanny parallels between the late 1800s and our present-day political climate would provide a wider frame of context for the generations of LGBTQ+ Americans who have continually fought for their rights as citizens.

Stories of bold creative resistance inspire and can feed our imaginations to envision a future beyond this moment.

-Tamar-kali

ABOUT THE CREATORS

Tamar-kali: Composer

Tamar-kali is an award-winning composer, musician, and performer whose artistic practice extends from alt rock to orchestral and cinematic music with radical depth and emotional precision.

Her debut original score for Dee Rees' Oscar-nominated "Mudbound" was classified by Indiewire as one of the 25 Best Film Scores of the 21st Century.

The soundtrack for her score to Josephine Decker's 'SHIRLEY' was named The Guardian's Contemporary Album of the month.

Her original score for history-making cinematographer Rachel Morrison's directorial debut "The Fire Inside" made 2025's Oscar Shortlist.

She has collaborated with visionaries including Steve McQueen, Bill T. Jones and Julie Dash.

As a performer, her work has graced world-class stages.

Commissioned works include the song cycle *Melancholy Ghosts and Other Mothers* for Beth Morrison Projects, the LA Opera digital short "We Hold These Truths" directed by Peabody award winner dream hampton, and a solo cello work, *Little Bear Awakens* for acclaimed cellist Matt Haimovitz.

2026 will herald new works for multidisciplinary artist and cellist Jeff Ziegler as well as a vocal and quartet piece for Grammy award-winning soprano Karen Slack and Miro Quartet.

Carl Hancock Rux: Libretto

Carl Hancock Rux is an Alpert Award-winning multidisciplinary artist, historian, and social activist. His published works include the *Village Voice* Literary Prize-winning collection of poetry *Pagan Operetta* (Semiotext), the novel *Asphalt* (Simon & Schuster), and the OBIE award-winning play *Talk* (TCG).

He is also a musician, having recorded several albums, singles, and mixed tapes since the release of his debut album *Rux Revue* (Sony Music). Additionally, he is the librettist for several operas, including *The Blackamoor Angel*, composed by Deidre Murray, *Mycenean*,

composed by Yosvany Terry, *Why Don't Girls Wear Pearls Anymore?* composed by Tamar Muskal, as well as *Steel Hammer*, composed by Julia Wolfe (2010 Pulitzer Prize finalist).

Rux is Co-Artistic Director of Mabou Mines, Associate Artistic Director/Artist in Residence at Harlem Stage The Gate House, Resident Artist at Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, Multidisciplinary Editor at *The Massachusetts Review*, and the former Head of the MFA Writing for Performance Program at CalArts, where he continues to teach.

VIDEO



[Watch the opera short, commissioned by Catapult Opera](#)



[Listen to an excerpt from the Opera](#)



PHOTO: WORK IN PROGRESS CONCERT HARLEMSTAGE, MAY 2024

CONTACT:

Fritz Myers

fritz@pastfutureconsultants.com

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THE SWANN

A Chamber Opera in Four Acts

Duration: Approx. 110 minutes

About

The Swann chronicles the life of William Dorsey Swann (March 1860 – circa December 23, 1925) a formerly enslaved African American activist and the first person known to identify themselves as a 'queen of drag'. In the 1880s and 1890s, Swann took the initiative to organize a series of drag balls in Washington, D.C., which showcased exaggerated femininity and diverse gender expressions for entertainment.

These exclusive, invitation-only gatherings were attended by both black and white men of varying economic tiers and social status and typically involved cross-dressing, live music, dancing, nudity and the consumption of alcohol.

Swann faced multiple arrests during police raids, for female impersonation. Notably, on April 12, 1888 he chose to resist arrest, marking one of the earliest known acts of civil disobedience in the pursuit of civil rights for LGBTQIA+ citizens.

In 1896, Swann was arrested again and convicted of "keeping a disorderly house," a term that referred to operating a brothel, resulting in a 10-month jail sentence. Following his conviction, Swann sought a pardon from President Grover Cleveland arguing that he was a respectable individual with a consistent employment history, that the punishment was disproportionate to the offense and that he would lead a lawful life if released.

His petition garnered support from thirty friends and allies, likely members of the drag or queer community. Although his request was ultimately denied, Swann stands as the first documented individual in the United States to take legal and political action in defense of the LGBTQIA+ community's right to assemble.

SYNOPSIS

ACT 1

Scene 1 (1896 - *Split Scene: Swann's Victorian era Washington DC townhouse*), summer evening / Courtroom, the next morning)

Swann emerges from a bath, sits before his vanity, and meticulously applies his makeup. His brother Daniel, a seamster, finishes the final touches on an exquisite silk ballgown embellished with crystals. Swann's best friend Pierce, prepares the house for a party, converting the interior of their humble townhouse into an elaborate dream of feathers, and draped fabric. In a courtroom, a chorus of witnesses rebuke and indict Swann to Judge Kimball.

Scene 2 (*Chez Swann Party, summer evening*)

A decadent party ensues. Men, both black and white, intermingle with heavily made-up men dressed in beautiful gowns and wigs. They dance the cakewalk and drink champagne. Swann and his entourage engage in a well-ordered procession, revealing Swann as the Queen of the Ball. Pierce arranges the entrance of a huge birthday cake for Swann. Just as the candles are extinguished, a thunderous knock is heard. The police break into the house, disrupting the party. Swann's dress is torn, the birthday cake ruined, the decorations of the room destroyed. The police arrest everyone in sight, including Swann.

Scene 3 (*Swann's jail cell, later that evening*)

Swann is interrogated by the Arresting Officer about his party. The Arresting Officer accuses Swann of "running a disorderly brothel and crimes against nature." Swann ponders the meaning of the term "crimes against nature," as Swann's patron saint, Yoruban deity Oshun, appears in a column of light. She reminds Swann that love and the declaration of self-identity are the elements of nature and without crime.

ACT 2

Scene 1 (*A liminal space*)

Two 19th century cultural theorists engage in psychobabble/minstrelsy that pathologizes homosexuality as a degenerative disorder. Dancers embody the discourse.

Scene 2 (*A church*)

Voices of the DC colored community raise concerns in anticipation of Swann's trial. They resolve that in order to be perceived as good law abiding God fearing negroes, they must attend his trial and prove they are not in support of Swann's "evil ways."

Scene 3 (*Chez Swann*)

Pierce and Daniel tour the wreckage of the beautifully decorated room, pondering what could have prompted such a brutal intrusion by the police. They plan to show up at Swann's upcoming trial and support his civil rights.

ACT 3

Scene 1 (*Swann's jail cell / The shimmer of a dream*)

Swann navigates his dreamscape as a boy of twelve and a young man of twenty. The boy runs through the tall grass of a former plantation in Maryland, and the young man stands at a gate toward Washington D.C. Swann's Mother declines his invitation to leave Maryland, but encourages him to go to D.C, recognizing the need for every man to be free.

Scene 2 (*Swann's jail cell*)

Swann is visited again by Oshun, who encourages him to remake his torn dress, not out of fabric, but out of the substance of his inner-strength, illustrating that "putting on the armor of God" is clothing oneself in an invincibility. Freedom, she says, is not something anyone is given, but something everyone must grant themselves.

ACT 4

Scene 1 (*Split scene; Swann's jail cell / Chez Swann*)

Over a passage of time, Swann petitions the President of the United States for a pardon, Daniel begins to construct another dress for Swann, and Pierce begins to decorate Chez Swann for another party. The local DC community continues to express disdain, as Swann's community rallies around him and signs the petition in support of his pardon.

Scene 2 (*Swann's jail cell, four months later*)

Oshun appears to Swann, who is disillusioned after his pardon was rejected. She reminds him that every fight does not result in an immediate victory, and dresses him in a gown that transcends time. The walls and gates of the prison cell fall away, as drag queens from all over the world dance in Swann costumes as Queens of the Ball.



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