

# Alta

## The Sound of the World

### Rhiannon Giddens erases borders at the Ojai Music Festival

By Catherine Womack June 8, 2023



Getty Images

If you're on your way to Ojai today—or if you're reading this while already there, glass of wine and concert tickets in hand—lucky you. A riveting sonic voyage around the globe and across time awaits.

The Ojai Music Festival, which begins today and closes Sunday (June 8–11), is an annual pilgrimage for the musically open-minded. The nearly 80-year-old event, held in the valley city of Ojai in the mountains east of Santa Barbara, has proved chameleonlike, adopting a new tone every year thanks to its tradition of selecting a new music director annually. What remains consistent, however, is the dedication to experimental, boundary-pushing art that challenges listeners' ears and minds.

This year, the festival is led and curated by 46-year-old musical polyglot Rhiannon Giddens. As music director, she will bring to Ojai's stages her distinctive and powerful voice (literally and figuratively), a torrent of talent, a storyteller's knack for programming, and more than a few of her closest collaborators from around the globe.

The diversity of the musicians joining Giddens in Ojai reflects her musical virtuosity and dexterity as well as her worldview, which is historically informed and intently focused on abolishing borders and arbitrary categories of every kind.

"The first Ojai concert is called 'Liquid Borders,' and that reflects this idea that my team conceived of [for the festival] of resetting our notions," Giddens says. Speaking from Knoxville, Tennessee, where she was performing at a sold-out show, the Ireland-based musician and mother of two said she is excited to present Ojai's attendees with a borderless, category-flouting experience. "Look at the globe from Australia's point of view. Everything looks familiar and unfamiliar. Sometimes shifting perspective is all you need to do," she says.

While Ojai has a long history of innovative, forward-thinking music directors, like Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky, Pierre Boulez, Esa-Pekka Salonen, and John Adams, it has also followed in the classical tradition of viewing music primarily through a white, male, Eurocentric lens. In recent years, this has started to shift with the appointment of music directors like Vijay Iyer, an American jazz musician of South Asian heritage who led the festival in 2017, and now Giddens, who grew up in North Carolina and is of mixed race.

Giddens's long list of Ojai collaborators offers a snapshot of the breadth of her remarkable career as a classically trained vocalist, banjo-playing folk singer-songwriter, and Pulitzer Prize-winning composer.

In addition to singing onstage with friends she's known since her college days studying opera at Oberlin College & Conservatory in Ohio, Giddens will reunite with fiddler and vocalist Justin Robinson for Sunday's finale. Robinson is from Gastonia, North Carolina, not far from where Giddens grew up in Greensboro, and was one of Giddens's first significant musical collaborators; both are disciples of the late Black American fiddler Joe Thompson, who died in 2012.

In their 20s, Robinson and Giddens were founding members of the old-time string band the Carolina Chocolate Drops. The group won a Grammy in 2010 for its album *Genuine Negro Jig* and dedicated itself to carrying on the traditions of Black American string bands. At Ojai, expect to hear some toe-tapping Joe Thompson tunes as well as music from Nigeria that reflects Robinson's current musical endeavors.

Also performing this weekend is Wu Man, a master of the pipa, a pear-shaped, four-stringed Chinese lute. She is a founding member of the global collective Silkroad Ensemble, which was once led by Yo-Yo Ma and is now helmed by Giddens. Kayhan Kalhor, another founding member of the Silkroad Ensemble performing in Ojai, will showcase the hypnotic sounds of the kamancheh, a Persian bowed string instrument.

Another highlight of this year's festival will occur on Saturday night on Ojai's main stage, the Libbey Bowl, a breezy outdoor venue nestled in a centrally located downtown park. The concert, which is sold-out, will showcase Giddens's recent operatic collaboration with Michael Abels, an American composer perhaps best known for contributing the score to Jordan Peele's Oscar-winning film, *Get Out*.

Abels and Giddens cowrote the 2022 opera *Omar*, which premiered in Charleston, South Carolina, last spring and tells the story of a Muslim African man enslaved in the Carolinas. The much-lauded opera, which had its West Coast premiere at LA Opera last fall and will open at San Francisco Opera this November, was recently awarded the 2023 Pulitzer Prize in music. This weekend, Abels and Giddens will premiere a paired-down version for chamber ensemble and singers, with Giddens singing the role of Julie for the first time.

During a recent conversation, Abels described how he and Giddens incorporated musical traditions from the Carolinas and from Senegal, Omar's home country, into the opera's score. To approximate the sound of the Senegalese kora, Abels used a flute and a harp. "But in Ojai, our Senegalese cred will be sky-high," he says. "Seckou Keita, possibly the preeminent kora player in the world, will be sitting in on our Senegalese-inspired piece. It's going to be pretty incredible."

Playing on Friday is multi-instrumentalist Francesco Turrisi, who, Abels says, “plays more instruments than any other person I’ve met.” With a background in jazz piano and early classical music, Turrisi is one of Giddens’s most significant current musical collaborators—as well as her life partner.

When talking about the wide-ranging musical styles that will be on display this weekend, Giddens says she thinks that “the difference between so many types of musics is just words.” Gatekeepers worry about categories and labels, she says, because “then they keep their job of being a gatekeeper.”

Beyond these gatekeepers, “there is a world where the Iranian kamancheh and the Piedmont-style fiddle and the Western classical cello and the theorbo are just instruments being played by people,” Giddens says.

This weekend, among the orange blossoms of Ojai, that world exists.

*Livestreams of some Ojai Music Festival performances will be available. Check the official website for times.*

<https://www.altonline.com/dispatches/a44130130/the-sound-of-the-world/>

# Los Angeles Times

## Ojai Music Director Rhiannon Giddens Knows The 2023 Festival Program Sounds Risky — That's The Point

Tim Grieving | June 8, 2023 11:11 AM PT



Rhiannon Giddens. (Ebru Yildiz)

Rhiannon Giddens is maxed out. She recently spent a weekend in Knoxville, Tenn., performing a series of concerts with Yo-Yo Ma and Chris Thile. She has a new album, her first collection of all-original songs, coming out in August. She's music director of the Ojai Music Festival this weekend. And she just won a Pulitzer.

Giddens remembers meeting the late banjo player Mick Moloney several years ago, and his very first words to her were not "Hello," or "How are you," but — she says, imitating his Irish brogue — "Have you learned to say *no* yet?"

The Grammy-winning singer, songwriter, banjo player, children's author, actor, opera composer is, indeed, saying no to more and more potential opportunities these days, and she appreciates how good of a problem that is. But she also knows how being a journeyman musician in today's world makes saying no almost impossible.

"The way that we've set up freelance artists is ridiculous," Giddens says, "because to get anywhere, you have to say yes to everything. It's part of your psyche, and so you get to the point where you don't have to say yes to everything but you don't know how to stop."

Giddens is tireless in her work. A founding member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, for more than a decade she's been illuminating the unsung Black history of the banjo and bluegrass music — most recently as host of a 10-part educational series, "Banjo," for the streaming service Wondrium.

In 2020, she inherited Yo-Yo Ma's mantle as artistic director of Silkroad, a music project that smashes cultural and genre boundaries. Her upcoming album, "You're the One," is a manifestation of her belief that "borders and genres are ridiculous, because you've got a Patti Page kind of thing next to a doo-wop '60s thing."

Her opera "Omar" — which she composed with Michael Abels — is now a Pulitzer-winning work. Although she is a classically trained opera singer, Giddens has no formal composition training, and she wrote "Omar" with her banjo and voice, which Abels then arranged and enriched for orchestra. It's the first time a music Pulitzer has gone to a collaborative pair. For Giddens, the prize declared to the world that "this could be the future of opera. It doesn't have to be a little man in a garret, composing based on compositional techniques that have been taught in the academy. This *too* can be opera."

Giddens was at a house party in Ojai two years ago, where she was a visiting artist at the Ojai Music Festival, and "I was just talking about my love for blasting down genre walls and the early music I've been experimenting with my partner Francesco, and world music, and classical, and 'What does classical mean?'" Ara Guzelimian, the festival's artistic and executive director, was there and the next day he sent Giddens a text: "What do you think about coming back here in a couple years and actually putting this to the test?"

Working with her partner Francesco Turrisi, an Italian multi-instrumentalist, Giddens began assembling an international dream team for this year's festival that included members of Silkroad including Wu Man, the Chinese pipa virtuoso, and Kayhan Kalhor, a kamancheh player from Iran.

Wu saw Giddens perform at the Big Ears Festival in Knoxville a few years ago, and “it touched me very, very deeply,” she says. “It’s just amazing, like, where does the energy come from? ... It’s giant. And also the presence on the stage — very few artists are like that, to me.”

The opening-night program will feature the aptly titled “Liquid Borders” composed by Gabriela Ortiz, performed by the percussion quartet Red Fish Blue Fish. The rest of the weekend, between morning meditations and moon viewings — and all of the “liminal spaces” where Giddens says so much magic can happen — will include an eclectic brew of chamber works, solo improvisations, pipa tunes from the 7th century and ancient Persian music, and newer works by Chinese composers and several pieces by Iranian women, such as Aida Shirazi and Nina Barzegar.

A centerpiece is Tan Dun’s “Ghost Opera,” which Wu made famous with the Kronos Quartet in the 1990s and will perform here with the Attacca Quartet — accompanied by a dance choreographed by PeiJu Chien-Pott, a Martha Graham alumna from Taiwan.

Another highlight is a new 70-minute, chamber-sized concert adaptation of Giddens and Abels’ opera. In “Omar’s Journey,” Giddens herself will sing the important role of Julie.

The opera has now been staged in South Carolina, L.A. and Boston, with future productions scheduled in San Francisco and Chicago — but so far there has been no recording. When it won the Pulitzer, Giddens’ first thought was: “Maybe we can get the recording made now!”

The festival will culminate in an improvised concert where string players — including Giddens, Wu and Kalhor — will bring their respective instruments and just jam. Wu is excited: “Finally we get chance to ‘Let’s party together!’” she says. Kayhor sounds a tad more nervous. “That’s not usually what I do,” he says, laughing. “But I think this is one of the specialties of Ojai, and I welcome it.”

In her mission to erase old concepts and divisions, Giddens expects to make people just a little uncomfortable.

“There is an element of uncertainty about a program like this,” she says, “which is the point. There will be years where everything has been written out, and every concert has all pieces programmed, and they’ve been practiced and everything. This is not that year. ... I think everybody will have moments of, like, ‘I’m not sure what’s going to happen right now.’ But I think that’s powerful.”

Giddens is perpetually jet-lagged. She used to drag her kids around the world with her — “I was like 250 days a year with an infant,” she says, “I mean, *hardcore*” — but not so much now that they’re both in school. Though her daughter, who just started playing the cello, will join Giddens in Ojai as a gofer.

The 46-year-old says she would have quit the music industry years ago if it weren’t for what her ancestors went through, and she didn’t have that “flame to take care of.” But she’s also inspired by other tireless musicians including Ma and Dolly Parton, who parlay their fame into “trying to make the world a better place for as many people as they can.”

While flying around — and her flight ever higher in acclaim — Giddens is starting to ask herself bigger questions: “What is music for? How have we caged it and commodified it?”

“And it’s not to say that you can’t do both,” says Giddens, “but we’ve leached the everyday art out of our lives, and then packaged it up. What does that mean that you have writers and musicians, who are ostensibly doing the thing that humans have been needing for, like, millennia for their mental health, but they’re making kajillions of dollars? Whereas the vast group of people — journeymen — who are doing this as well are making peanuts? And then you have the majority of people in general who aren’t doing any of it. That seems like a balance that’s not right to me.”

So her mission continues.

Ojai Music Festival

Where: Events will take place throughout Ojai - check website for locations.

When: Thursday, June 8 - Sunday, June 11.

Info: [boxoffice@ojaifestival.org](mailto:boxoffice@ojaifestival.org), 805 646 2053

<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2023-06-08/rhiannon-giddens-ojai-music-festival-program-2023-pulitzer-omar-opera>

# The Ojai Music Festival will thrill, amaze and entertain audiences June 8-11

By Mike Nelson | Jun 8, 2023

Following the September 2021 Ojai Music Festival — the first following the COVID-19 pandemic that precluded live music for a good 18 months — guest artist Rhiannon Giddens was talking with OMF Executive and Artistic Director Ara Guzelimian about how much she enjoyed her first experience at the festival.

Not just talking, actually, but raving about the event, known for embracing an eclectic, high quality mix of musical artists and genres — a perfect fit for Giddens, known for her unique blend of folk, roots and Americana music that has earned two Grammys.

“Rhiannon told me that in Ojai she could be at home in any of the music she wanted to play,” recalls Guzelimian. “She said she didn’t have to choose which of her interests to play, that everything she did could be embraced at Ojai.

“So I asked her, ‘Would you be interested in coming back in a more centralized role?’ She said yes.”

Thus was Rhiannon Giddens named OMF music director for 2023, long before she, Guzelimian or anyone else knew that she and collaborator Michael Abels would receive the 2023 Pulitzer Prize in Music for their innovative and highly acclaimed opera, *Omar*.

The happy happenstance of having a newly-minted Pulitzer Prize recipient serving as music director for the 77th Ojai Music Festival (June 8-11) lends additional luster to this year’s event, whose highlights include the world premiere of *Omar’s Journey*, based on the opera.

This commissioned suite for voices and chamber ensemble — placed in the context of the journey of Omar Ibn Said, one of many African Muslims forcibly brought to and enslaved in America — features Giddens singing the role of Julie.

Scheduled June 10 (8 p.m. at Libbey Bowl, the major venue for OMF events), *Omar’s Journey* is one of several events in which Giddens will participate over the four days, testimony to her excitement at being selected music director.



“With Ojai,” Giddens says, “I am able to sit at the crossroads of all that I am artistically and feel fully supported by the festival team and by Ojai’s audiences.” The roster of artists — some new to OMF, some returning — further represents “a celebration of how we come together as humans” she adds, “despite boxes, boundaries and borders thrown up with the intent to keep us apart.”

### **Celebrating new discoveries**

Themes of “coming together,” “crossing boundaries” and “new discoveries” are abundant (again) in the 2023 festival program, says Guzelimian.

“One of the most wonderful things about Rhiannon Giddens,” he says, “is that she has as wide an embrace as any artist I’ve ever worked with, and easily moves among many musical cultures.”

Among the pieces that represent this philosophy and the festival particularly well, he says, are Gabriela Ortiz’s *Liquid Borders* (June 8, 8 p.m.), featuring the red fish blue fish percussion ensemble directed by Steven Schick, alongside the Attacca Quartet. Another is Carlos Simon’s *Between Worlds* (June 11, 2:30 p.m.), four solo string works inspired by Bill Traylor’s paintings of Black American life.

### **Other presentations include:**

- The world premiere of an OMF-commissioned work by Aida Shirazi, founding member of the Iranian Female Composers Association, for kamancheh and electronics.
- A reimagining of Tan Dun’s pioneering *Ghost Opera* for pipa and strings with Wu Man and Attacca Quartet.
- An acoustic concert with Rhiannon Giddens and Francesco Turrisi with music ranging from the Baroque to Appalachian ballads and traditional Black American songs.
- “Strings Attached,” the festive finale of string instruments from cultures across the Americas, Asia, Europe and the Middle East.

Collectively, these and other performances exemplify the OMF’s rich tradition of exploring and celebrating new musical territory — and encouraging its audiences to enjoy the ride.

“For some this festival will seem like a departure from the past,” Guzelimian says. “But the Ojai Music Festival has always been about adventure. It’s not a matter of thinking outside the box, it’s about embracing the bigger box.”

Free activities designed to welcome and engage the community include two early morning concerts and a reading/musical performance by Giddens of her new children’s book, *Build a House*. Also free are daily “Ojai Chats” in the Libbey Park Gazebo, featuring conversations with festival artists hosted by John Schaefer of WQXR’s *New Sound*.

## **Joy and challenge, collaboration and trust**

Among first-time artists appearing at Ojai this year is Michael Abels, Giddens' collaborator on Omar and a multi-award-winning composer of film scores, who enjoys composing music "that's a joy for musicians to sing and perform, music that feels worthy of a brilliant player's time and energy."

Abels' "Iconoclasm," his tribute to Leonard Bernstein originally written for Lara Downes, will be performed by pianist Leonard Hayes, as part of the June 9 "Vis-à-Vis" program, and his "Isolation Variation" will be part of the "Strings Attached" finale on June 11.

"I live in Los Angeles but I've never been to the Ojai Music Festival," notes Abels. "And I've heard nothing but wonderful things about it, so I am flattered to be included."

He also looks forward to the production of Omar's Journey, which he calls "a very intimate" chamber concert version of Omar with an array of top musicians and vocalists, including Giddens singing the soprano part of Julie.

"Rhiannon is an amazing artist," Abels says. "When she asked me to collaborate on Omar, I said yes before I knew the subject. And the collaboration worked very well. It's like anything else, really. You come up with your own ideas, and respond to those of another. It's important, most of all, to honor and trust in that relationship, and when you do your creativity can feed off one another, and the result can be amazing."

Collaboration is likewise key to putting together something as large and as forward-thinking as the Ojai Music Festival program.

"It's like a great tennis match," Guzelimian says. "We bounce ideas off each other, back and forth, and the program grows and takes shape. We talk about artists we admire and are interested in working with."

Giddens, for example, is now the artistic director of the Grammy-winning Silk Road Ensemble, whose cofounder is pipa virtuoso Wu Man.

"We settled immediately on including Wu Man in the festival," says Guzelimian. "She will play ancient Chinese classical music dating back at least a thousand years, as well as selections by contemporary composers. "Only in Ojai can you have both, that intersection of old and new," he adds, smiling. "That intersection of cultures and traditions is at the heart of our festival."

The Ojai Music Festival takes place June 8-11 at various venues in Ojai, including Libbey Bowl. For a complete schedule and ticket information, visit [OjaiFestival.org](https://www.vcreporter.com/features/the-ojai-music-festival-will-thrill-amaze-and-entertain-audiences-june-8-11/article_8a300eaa-063c-11ee-be16-af6248166130.html) or call 805-646-2053.

[https://www.vcreporter.com/features/the-ojai-music-festival-will-thrill-amaze-and-entertain-audiences-june-8-11/article\\_8a300eaa-063c-11ee-be16-af6248166130.html](https://www.vcreporter.com/features/the-ojai-music-festival-will-thrill-amaze-and-entertain-audiences-june-8-11/article_8a300eaa-063c-11ee-be16-af6248166130.html)



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## Ojai's Annual Makeover Will Be a Bit More Extreme This Year, Says Rhiannon Giddens

By Jim Farber, June 6, 2023

Anyone who has ever taken part in a major arts festival knows how the physical and mental pressure ratchets up exponentially as opening night draws near— moments of tranquility are to be treasured.

For both the music director of this year's [Ojai Music Festival](#), Rhiannon Giddens, and her musical collaborator, Francesco Turrisi, that means spending precious time at their respective homes in Ireland.

Having just garnered the Pulitzer Prize for Music (with composer Michael Abels) for her opera [Omar](#), Giddens has been the focus of a wave of press attention. But she and Turrisi still found time on Zoom to discuss the global assemblage of musicians that the Ojai Festival will bring together, including members of the world-music collective Silkroad, which Giddens heads, as well as the themes that will be explored in the programming.

Since its founding in 1947, the Ojai Festival has privileged the Western European classical tradition and European modernism in particular. And those roots will certainly be on display again next year when Ojai's 2024 music director, Mitsuko Uchida, leads a celebration around Arnold Schoenberg's 150th birthday.

World music has had an occasional presence at the festival. In 1983, Ravi Shankar was presented in a raga concert, which you can listen to [on YouTube](#). There are also those of us that can remember when the Sunday morning concerts were devoted to jazz. This year, however, will mark the first time world music and the role of improvisation will be a primary focus at Ojai.

The way Giddens puts it, "It's a question of framing and perspective, what we're told something is. For example, improvisation versus classical notation. Our work has a lot to do with decentering American perspectives about these different musical traditions, rather than fetishizing European art music. It raises the whole question of 'What is folk music?' and 'What is classical music?' We don't really believe in genres. They're just boxes created either to sell something or separate people.

“Music,” she continues, “is like language. The question becomes, ‘How can we communicate together? Where are our natural points of connection?’ You have your instrument, and I have mine. You have your tradition, and I have mine. When I first started to play with [Silkroad founding member] Wu Man, we discovered her instrument, the Chinese pipa, and my American banjo have three tuned strings in common. It was the beginning of a conversation. This whole festival is about crossroads and where those crossroads are. But it’s not just about throwing people together. These musicians have spent their lives developing their skills.”

Giddens and Turrisi often focus on how improvisation versus strict notation can affect a performance. The issue is particularly acute for Turrisi, who received his master’s degree in jazz piano and early music from the Royal Conservatory of The Hague — a seemingly incompatible mixture that he managed to blend together as a member of the far-from-traditional early-music ensemble L’Arpeggiata. As he loves to point out, improvisation played an enormous role in the popular songs and dances of the early Baroque era:

“We did a lot of crossover and mixed up a lot of things. It wasn’t straight-ahead Baroque music. Honestly, I’d be terribly bored going to a concert where I knew how everything was going to sound before it starts. It’s the problem I have playing classical music where you already know every note that’s going to be played. I love classical music. I grew up playing it. But I love to have moments when I don’t know where [the music is] going.”

Giddens chimes in: “Classical musicians want to rehearse everything to death. They want to control every detail of the performance. The jazz guys, they just want to show up and see where it goes, otherwise you’re spoiling the fun. I’ve found that with classically trained musicians, the type of playing we do can generate a degree of panic. It is nice to know what will happen at certain points. It’s a mixture. But if there aren’t special surprises, we haven’t done our job. I want people to be out of their comfort zone. I’m going to be out of mine,” she adds with a laugh.

Two years ago, when Giddens and Turrisi first appeared at Ojai, they were, as he puts it, “just doing our thing.” This time they’re pulling the strings, literally and figuratively.

“We’re not trying to turn the festival upside down,” says Giddens. “We’re looking to bring many musical threads together under the same umbrella.”

“The element of surprise is part of the Ojai Festival’s identity,” says Artistic and Executive Director Ara Guzelimian. “Just when you think you know what we’re about, just wait. That’s the reason I asked Rhiannon [after her first Ojai Festival appearance in 2021] if she would be interested in coming back in 2023 as music director. She’s an artist with such a wide-ranging style and determination not to be categorized.”

If there’s a unifying theme to this year’s festival, it’s exploring the connections between musical traditions all over the world, whether it’s showcasing Senegalese kora player Seckou Keita, the bravery of the Iranian Female Composers Association, or the cultural/musical explorations of American folklorist Justin Robinson. It’s an approach summed up in the title of Gabriela Ortiz’s 2014 composition *Liquid*

*Borders*, which will be performed by the UC San Diego-based percussion ensemble red fish blue fish on Thursday night, June 8. For the second half of that concert, the Attacca Quartet will play works ranging from Joseph Haydn to Philip Glass to Squarepusher and Giddens.

“The whole festival,” says Guzelimian, “raises the question of ‘What does classical music mean?’”

Some of the highly anticipated programs include two performances of Tan Dun’s *Ghost Opera* (June 9 and 10), featuring the Attacca Quartet, Wu Man, and dancer and choreographer PeiJu Chien-Pott. On Friday night, Turrisi and Giddens present a wide-ranging recital. Sunday morning’s 10 a.m. concert of early music programed by Turrisi is described as “ranging from thousand-year-old works for solo pipa to Renaissance consort music, from ancient Persian melodies to modal jazz improvisations.”

And then there’s *Omar*.

When Guzelimian invited Giddens to become music director, he proposed that she and Abels create a concert version of their opera. They agreed. But speaking just a week before Saturday’s premiere, Giddens sounds like she wishes she’d never been asked.

“Michael and I have had to kill a lot of our children,” Giddens says, sounding a bit like Medea. “That’s hard. It’s not something I ever want to do again. Michael’s been producing the parts and the orchestration. My job will be more in the moment figuring out what works and what doesn’t.”

For those not familiar with the opera, it’s epic in scope, following the personally documented life story of a Muslim scholar who was abducted from his homeland in Senegal and forced to endure the horrors of the Middle Passage to the Carolinas, where he was auctioned and lived the rest of his life as a slave. His autobiography, which he wrote in Arabic, still exists and is the opera’s source material. Reducing the scope down to a single act is clearly driving Giddens crazy.

“We have five singers, four Black, one white. It’s really challenging, and they have to play multiple roles. The singer who plays Omar also has to be a member of the chorus. In the opera, Omar’s journey is spiritual, and there’s a framework for that. In a concert version we have to decide how much people need to know. Ara said, ‘Can we do it in 45 minutes?’ I said, ‘No. NO!’ We’re still negotiating. We really won’t know if it works until we do it.”

Just like improvisation.

<https://www.sfcv.org/articles/feature/ojais-annual-makeover-will-be-bit-more-extreme-year-says-rhiannon-giddens>

# **Santa Barbara** **Independent**

## **Of Roots and Forward Motion at the Ojai Music Festival**

**Legendary Ojai Music Festival Takes a Different Turn, with Rhiannon Giddens as Musical Director**

By Josef Woodard

Wed May 31, 2023 | 11:19am



*Folk-roots icon Rhiannon Giddens will be this year's musical director and key performer | Credit: Ebru Yildiz*

At the ripe age of 77, but with ample pluck in its DNA, the contemporary music-minded Ojai Music Festival is at once a long-established cultural fixture and a young-spirited enterprise open to change and chance-taking. For its Thursday-to-Sunday feast of music, the Ojai Festival routinely lands in a gap between the busy spring concert season and the summertime bounty of the Music Academy. The

scene—and scenery—is inviting, settled in the beautiful outdoor setting of Libbey Bowl, its surrounding park and around town, with free pop-up events, special 8 a.m. early bird concerts, and other treats tucked into the schedule.

This year's festival, June 8 to the 11, takes a surprise turn by featuring innovative folk-roots icon Rhiannon Giddens as musical director and key performer, contrasting the more strongly-connected classical music figures typically tapped for the directorial role. The program cooked up by Giddens and artistic director Ara Guzelimian promises to lure a different and broader audience to Ojai than usual.

Overall, the program turns its attentions to famed worldly artists—such as Chinese pipa master Wu Man, Iranian-born kamancheh player Kayhan Kalhor—and with a generous spotlight on women composers and performers. On the ensemble front, the weekend is in Saturday hands, with the Brooklyn-based Attacca Quartet (which recently had its Santa Barbara premiere, at Hahn Hall), members of the Silkroad Ensemble, and the eminent and hip percussion ensemble red fish blue fish, who, along with director Stephen Schick, have been featured regularly at the festival. One of the highlights of the program is the classic east-meets-west piece, *Ghost Opera*, written by Tan Dun for Wu Man and the Kronos Quartet in 1994, and done up in a fresh version by the Attacca, with Wu.

Much more than just a regional sensation, the Ojai festival makes a sound heard around the world and draws artists from far shores—both geographically and sometimes in terms of musical idioms (as with Giddens's menu in store). High profile press reports and reviews include the *New Yorker* and the *New YorkTimes*.

In trying to comprehend the importance of the festival, in the international scope of its influence, it's helpful to consult the glittery list of contemporary and modern luminaries who have passed through the ranks. The list includes such pillars of classical music from the past century as Stravinsky, Copland, Esa-Pekka Salonen and the master French modernist Pierre Boulez—whose several years as music director in Ojai were particularly strong and uncompromising. Away from classical music, as such, jazz-and-beyond musician Vijay Iyer has helmed the festival, as has choreographer Mark Morris and theater-music-theory wizard Peter Sellars.

John Adams has headed up the festival more than once, including a memorable and especially inspiring coming-out-of-COVID 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary festival in the fall of 2021. That program also marked the first time Giddens appeared at the festival, in both her usual roots-grounded mode and showing her wares as a partly opera-trained singer, on contemporary music turf.

In a statement, Giddens expressed her excitement about taking up the directorial charge of this venerable but naturally chance-taking festival. "With Ojai," she notes, "I am able to sit at the crossroads of all that I am artistically and feel fully supported by the festival team and by Ojai's audiences. With the artists that we're bringing out, the future is in celebration of how we come together as humans—despite boxes, boundaries, and borders thrown up with the intent to keep us apart."

In an interview a few years ago before another of her visits to the 805 (just after winning a MacArthur "Genius" Grant), Giddens talked about her own ongoing work exploring the varied root systems and

forgotten realities of American music. Her connections include neglected black folk music and advocating for the power of that presumably all-American but actually African-born instrument, the banjo.

“I’ve always loved the aspects of American music that are undefinable,” she said. “There are aspects of different kinds of American music, in all the genres, to me. The back and forth of the hillbilly and race records, or whatever, and country records—that back and forth has been there ever since the banjo was first put with the fiddle. It goes back hundreds of years.

“That, to me, is what’s beautiful about my country, so that’s what I like to celebrate and focus on, the commonalities and not the divisions. Building on that foundation is how I like to go forward.”

In Ojai, her role as performer includes a Friday night performance with her partner (in life and music) Francesco Turrisi, such as she presented in the 2021 Ojai fest, and more importantly, with the Saturday night special of *Omar’s Journey*. Commissioned by the Ojai Festival, the piece reworks material from last year’s opera *Omar*, for which Giddens recently won a Pulitzer Prize.

Doing the Ojai Fest is an ideal way to say “bring it on” to summer, with cultural intelligence and substance in the mix. No doubt, the Giddens model will fulfill the mission—in a new and different way.

<https://www.independent.com/2023/05/31/of-roots-and-forward-motion-at-the-ojai-music-festival/>





## Grammy nominee Wu Man, Pulitzer Prize winner Rhiannon Giddens set for Ojai Music Festival

[Wes Woods II](#)

Ventura County Star

Grammy-nominated musician Wu Man first performed at the Ojai Music Festival in 2015 and there's a reason she's coming back.

She remembers playing her Chinese stringed instrument as part of an ensemble during the nighttime performance.

"Beautiful lighting, birds singing in nature and a full house," she said. "I loved it. That atmosphere is very different when you play indoors at a concert hall."

The Ojai Music Festival, in its 77th year, starts Thursday and continues through June 11 at [the Libbey Bowl, Greenberg Center, Chaparral Auditorium](#) and other locations in Ojai. The festival took a two-year absence during the pandemic and resumed in 2021.

[This year's musical director is Rhiannon Giddens](#), who won the 2023 Pulitzer Prize for music with composer Michael Abels for their opera "Omar." Giddens also won a 2022 Grammy with multi-instrumentalist Francesco Turrisi for their folk album "They're Calling Me Home."

Giddens will perform multiple times at the festival, including a world premiere of "Omar's Journey," a version of the "Omar" opera.

"Michael Abels and Rhiannon have created a derived concert piece from an opera that won the Pulitzer," said Ara Guzelimian, artistic and executive director of the festival. "It tells the story of an enslaved man, Omar Ibn Said. The concert piece they've created tells the narrative of his life."

Giddens will also perform with Turrisi and Wu Man.

"She's somebody who is as wide-ranging as anybody I've ever met in their musical tastes," Guzelimian said. "She's somebody at ease in so many kinds of music."

The festival is known for experimentation. This year will feature traditional classical European music, traditional music from Senegal, Iran and China, as well as contemporary music, Guzelimian said.

Some concerts, including "Omar's Journey," are sold out but the opera and select concerts can be live-streamed for free.

The festival, which includes free community events, typically draws between 3,500 to 5,000 people, said Gina Gutierrez, the festival's managing director.

Wu said her instrument, the pipa, is thousands of years old dating back to the Han dynasty of China but goes back even further to Persia.

The instrument is similar to the mandolin, banjo or guitar, she said.

"It's all from the same string-plucking family," Wu said.

Thirty years ago, she said, nobody in the U.S. knew anything about Chinese music or the pipa.

"It's definitely developed and people are much more open-minded and interested," Wu said. "I think it's a great time to be playing this instrument in Ojai and surrounded by all kinds of instruments from different countries."

This year's festival might be the "greatest variety" of music Guzelimian has seen in terms of cultures, genres, traditions and eras.

"One of the things I love about Ojai and our audience is Ojai is a place that draws creative people and even spiritual seekers for generations," Guzelimian said. "I think our audience over the years has come to expect the unexpected. I love that sense of adventure and discovery."

For more information, including tickets, call 805-646-2053 or visit [OjaiFestival.org](http://OjaiFestival.org).



**June issue**

**By Karen Lindell**

Giddens — the daughter of a white father and Black mother, a North Carolina native who also lives in Ireland, a classically trained soprano who also plays banjo, a composer who writes arias based on slavery ballads — has always felt “neither/nor, but something more.”

She is drawn to “the edge, the points of connection, because that’s kind of where I’ve lived all my life,” she says. “I realized that ... all of the things that I am exist within me at the same time. I don’t have to choose. But that’s kind of a radical concept in a country that wants to put everything in a box and label it.”

Her philosophy about life, people, and music knows no boundaries or limitations.

That vision will be on full display at the 2023 Ojai Music Festival. Giddens serves as this year’s music director, and as such is given the creative freedom to curate four days of concerts, June 8-11, that reflect her musical ideas, interests, and collaborators.

A graduate of the Oberlin Conservatory of Music who trained as an opera singer, she’s also a founding member of the former Carolina Chocolate Drops, which played the music of old-time Black string bands. She serves as artistic director of the Silkroad Ensemble, founded by Yo-Yo Ma, and is a singer, songwriter, banjo player, composer, podcaster, and children’s book author.

She’s been nominated for eight Grammy Awards and won two in the folk album category: for *Genuine Negro Jig* in 2011 as a member of the Carolina Chocolate Drops, and for *They’re Calling Me Home* in 2022 with her partner Francesco Turrisi. In 2017 she was named a MacArthur Fellow for “reclaiming African American contributions to folk and country music and bringing to light new connections between music from the past and the present,” stated the Mac Arthur Foundation.

Ara Guzelimian, the Ojai Music Festival’s artistic and executive director, says he is “in awe of her range of musical curiosity and knowledge, coupled with a real social and cultural awareness. The range of music styles she embraces are, for her, a coherent part of the same world. It’s like show “where the peaks peak,” and how at the core they are all “coming from the same heart.”

From Jane Austen to Joe Thompson Giddens grew up in North Carolina, where she was exposed to all kinds of music — pop, 1960s folk, classical, bluegrass, alternative rock, country. At one point, she had a mixtape that included “Bohemian Rhapsody,” a Haydn cello concerto, and a Reba McEntire song. She also performed in youth choirs, learning traditional American folk songs and other choral repertoire. Giddens attended a math-science high school, but decided on music as a career at age 17 after attending a summer choral camp.

While at Oberlin, where she studied opera, Giddens also discovered contra dancing, which she originally thought was English country dancing like something from a Jane Austen novel, but learned instead was a form of American folk dancing.

After graduating from college, still active in North Carolina’s contra dance scene, she heard old-time Black music in Greensboro, and delved into scholarly study of the banjo. Contrary to popular opinion, she learned, the banjo is not an instrument with roots in “mythical white mountaineer history.”

“It was an African-American instrument,” she says. “Why don’t we know that?” Answering that has been driving me for the last 15 years.”

As Giddens said in a 2017 keynote speech at the IBMA (International Bluegrass Music Association) Conference about the history of not only the banjo, but also bluegrass music: “We need to move beyond the narratives we’ve inherited, beyond generalization that bluegrass is mostly derived from a Scots-Irish tradition, with ‘influences’ from Africa. It is actually a complex Creole music that comes from multiple cultures, African and European and Native – the full truth that is so much more interesting, and American.”

STORY BY MARK LEWIS



# ARRAS OJAI ENCORE

**AS** the Ojai Music Festival's artistic director for most of the 1990s, Ara Guzelimian presided over its 50th anniversary festival. More than two decades later, he returned to Ojai and presided over last year's 75th anniversary festival. Now, he's guiding this cherished Ojai institution through its latest self-reinvention.



JOHN ADAMS WITH ARA GUZELIMIAN IN OJAI IN 1993  
PHOTO BY BETTY FREEMAN

## ARA GUZELIMIAN

was sure he knew what the phone call was about.

The caller was Jerry Eberhardt, chairman of the Ojai Music Festival board of directors. It was October 2019, and the venerable organization had just unexpectedly lost its new artistic director, Chad Smith. Ara had remained involved with the Ojai Festival in various ways since his 1990s tour as artistic director, and he was very well-connected in the classical-music world, so he assumed that Eberhardt was calling to solicit his advice on whom the board might consider as Smith's successor. Unprompted, he began to offer that advice.

"Well, actually, we have a different idea," Eberhardt said, and offered Ara the job.

"I was absolutely flabbergasted," Ara said.

Spoiler alert: He said yes. Now, three years into his second tour as artistic director, this time with the additional title of executive director, Ara reflected upon the differences between the festival he led in the 1990s and the one he leads today. He also recounted some of the unlikely twists and turns of his life's journey, which keeps bringing him back to Ojai.

## THE STORY BEGINS

with one of history's horrors. Ara is of Armenian descent, and his ancestors lived in the Ottoman Empire. During World War I, the Ottoman Turks turned on the Armenians and began killing them. Many who survived the slaughter fled to other



JOHN AND ARA TAKE IN THE 2022 FESTIVAL

countries. Ara's great-grandparents joined the diaspora.

One branch of the family emigrated to America, sailing past the Statue of Liberty to Ellis Island and ending up in Boston. Ara's branch settled in Egypt, where he was born in Cairo during the rule of Gamal Abdul Nasser. But the family would not remain there.

**"No one generation of my family has lived their entire lives in one country for four generations," he said.**

Cairo in those barely post-colonial days was a very cosmopolitan city. "It was an incredible cultural stew," Ara said, and music, including European classical music, was a big part of the mix.

"It was always something I loved passionately," he said.

The city boasted the Royal Opera House, where Verdi's "Aida" had debuted decades earlier, after the completion of the Suez Canal. But after Nasser took power, he seized control of that canal, touching off the brief war known to history as the Suez Crisis. Then Nasser began nationalizing Egypt's businesses, including the one belonging to Ara's father. It was time for the Guzelimian family to move on.

"We left dramatically," Ara said. "One morning my brother and I were woken up and told we were leaving the country."

To get out of Egypt, the family joined a Coptic Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem. They ended up in Beirut, where 8-year-old

Ara began studying English. A year later, they joined their American relatives near Boston.

“We arrived as refugees,” Ara said.

The family soon moved on again — to Los Angeles, another multicultural stew, where Ara found that he fit right in.

“I felt very much at home from the moment I arrived there,” he said.

Music was part of the attraction. Ara’s older brother, an accomplished pianist, let Ara tag along with him to see Zubin Mehta conduct the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl and at the then-brand-new Music Center. There were also the Monday Evening Concerts, featuring cutting-edge classical music programmed by Lawrence Morton, the longtime artistic director of the Ojai Music Festival, and a future mentor of Ara’s.

“L.A. was an amazing place musically in the ‘60s and ‘70s,” Ara said.

**After graduating from Hollywood High School, he went on to UCLA with the idea of studying engineering or something along those lines — something practical that would lead to a career. But Ara took music classes too, just for fun, and he joined the university’s A Capella Choir, which in 1974 performed at the Ojai Music Festival under the direction of a young Michael Tilson-Thomas.**

Studying math and science paled in comparison. One day, while walking from a chemistry class to a seminar on Russian opera, Ara had an epiphany: “If this is what I love so much, why am I not doing it? So, I majored in music history.”

## IT TURNED OUT

that studying music history also could lead to a career. After graduating from UCLA in 1976, Ara started contributing music reviews and articles to *The Los Angeles Times*. This led to his being hired as program director at KUSC, the classical-music radio station. KUSC was associated with the L.A. Phil, which led to Ara’s longtime association with that orchestra, first as producer of its national radio broadcasts and later as its artistic administrator.

Meanwhile, he began his longtime association with the Ojai Music Festival, when Lawrence Morton in the early ‘80s recruit-



ed him to write program notes. It was Morton who had established Ojai’s reputation as a place to hear new and challenging music. Morton also had initiated the practice of bringing in a different musical director each year.

“Lawrence created the DNA of the festival,” Ara said.

But Morton died in 1987, and by 1990 the festival seemed to have lost its way. There was even talk that it might not survive to celebrate its 50th anniversary. Things began to turn around when Joan Kemper took over as executive director. During the same period, Ara was named artistic director.

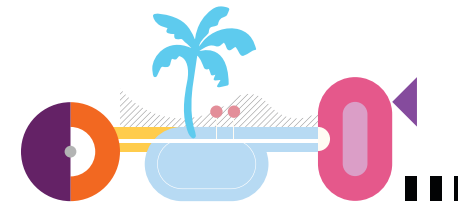
“Joan and I came in at the same time,” Ara said. “The festival in the early ‘90s had a lot of turnover, and it was really teetering on the brink. Joan, I think, really helped save the festival.”

Ara did his part by tending to the music. For openers, the 1992 festival brought back the acclaimed French composer and conductor Pierre Boulez as musical director, with Peter Sellars as stage director. (That was the year Sellars memorably reworked the staging of Igor Stravinsky’s “L’Histoire du Soldat” to reflect the recent Los Angeles riots.) The following year, Ara brought in the composer John Adams to program a festival that featured the Kronos Quartet among other performers. Other musical directors during Ara’s six-festival tenure included Tilson-Thomas and Kent Nagano.

(Not all the partnerships Ara forged were musical. On a whale-watching trip in Baja California, he met a nurse from Chicago named Jan, whom he married. They have a son, Alec.)

By 1997, the 50th anniversary year, the Music Festival was on solid ground again. Ara moved on after that year’s festival, landing in New York at Carnegie Hall, where he served as artistic advisor and senior director from 1998 to 2006. Next stop: the Julliard School, where he was provost and dean for 13 years. But Ara never severed ties completely with Ojai’s festival, where he served for a time as director of the Ojai Talks.

**In June 2019, Ara announced that he would be stepping down from the Julliard job. It was time, he had decided, to launch “the freelance part of my career,” working with a number of different organizations, including the Marlboro Music Festival and School in Vermont, and the Music Visiting Committee of the Morgan Library and Museum in New York.**



In Ojai, meanwhile, Thomas Morris that same month had concluded his distinguished 15-year tenure as artistic director. His already announced successor was Chad Smith, the Los Angeles Philharmonic’s chief operating officer. But only four months later, in October 2019, the orchestra’s CEO abruptly quit. Smith was promoted to the top job, which placed too many demands on his time to allow for a side-gig in Ojai. Suddenly, the Ojai Music Festival board had to find a new artistic director. Thus Jerry Eberhardt’s phone call to Ara, who unexpectedly found himself adding his old Ojai job to his new, post-Julliard portfolio.

## FOR THE FIRST

festival of his second tour in Ojai, Ara brought back John Adams as musical director in 2021, and Adams turned the spotlight from himself to shine it on six younger composers whose work was highlighted that year. Youthful energy and innovation were prominent again in 2022, when Ara brought in AMOC — American Modern Opera Company, an interdisciplinary and collaborative group of dancers, singers, musicians, writers, directors, composers, choreographers and producers — to serve collectively as musical director.



“Neither of these things would have happened in the ‘90s,” Ara said. “The times have changed. The great thing about the festival is that it can reinvent itself each year. We’re not stuck in the past — as illustrious as that past is.”

While the festival “remains rooted in classical music,” it is also defined by “a sense of adventure and discovery in music,” he said. This year’s festival (June 8–11) will crisscross many musical borders under the direction of Rhiannon Giddens, a remarkably eclectic musician who recently won a Grammy for best folk album, and also recently won a Pulitzer Prize for music for co-writing “Omar,” an opera commissioned by Spoleto Festival USA.

“She defies categorization,” Ara said. “She’s uncontainable in a genre.”

Giddens was a featured performer at the 2021 festival, after which Ara invited her to return to Ojai in 2023 as music director.

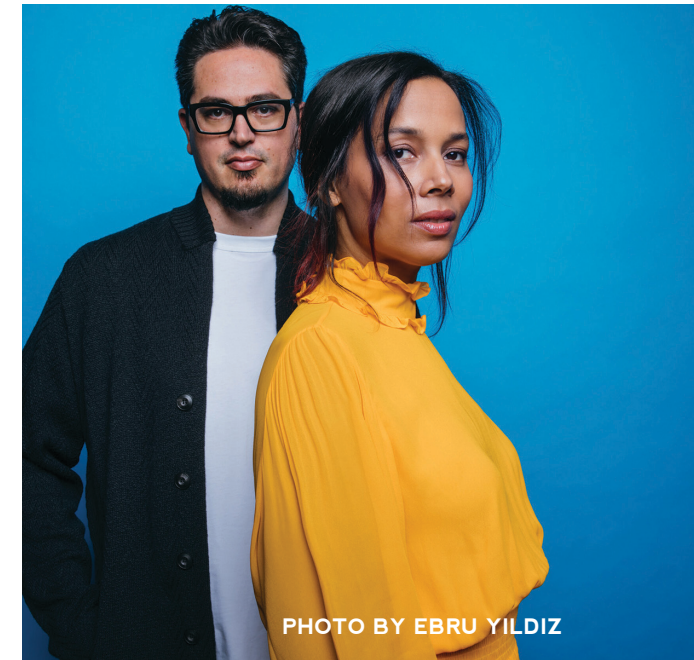


PHOTO BY EBRU YILDIZ

RHIANNON GIDDENS AND FRANCESCO TURRISI

**“And to our delight, she said yes. She felt at home here. Ojai allowed her to be all the musical things she is without having to pick and choose.”**

Ara feels at home here too, although he resides in Hastings-on-Hudson, an Ojai-sized village in New York’s bucolic Hudson Valley. Ara spends a lot of time in Southern California, and he is always delighted to return to Ojai. He even has an image of Matilija poppies as his iPhone and iPad homescreen.

“That’s my homing beacon,” he said. “The sense of connection runs very deep.”

Ara first visited Ojai as a teenager with his parents, and then (as noted earlier) performed in the 1974 festival with the UCLA choir. That performance was almost 50 years ago, and he keeps coming back.

“I’m not particularly of a mystical bent,” Ara said, “but I think there is something that creates an open and adventurous atmosphere in Ojai. Something in the air and in the community.”

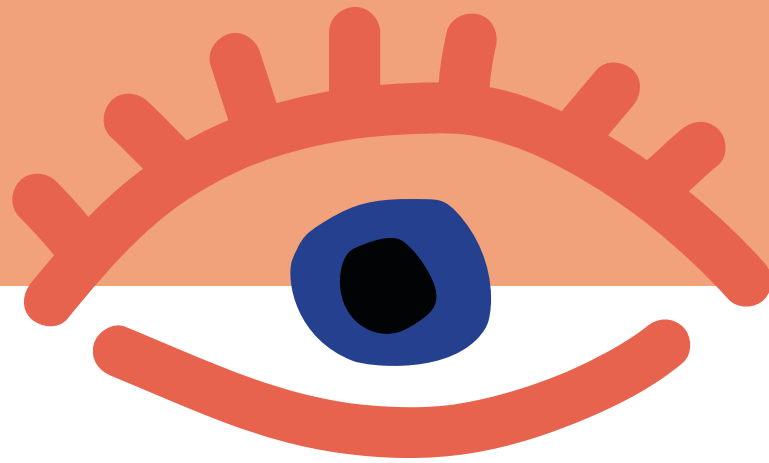
That “something” will again become audible this June in Libbey Bowl, where the magic happens every spring.

“The basic character of the Ojai Festival hasn’t changed,” Ara said. “Very serious art; freewheeling creativity and openness; an utterly informal and unpretentious atmosphere. That’s the formula. And I think it could only happen in Ojai.”



# OQ | OFF THE SHELF





STORY BY KIT STOLZ

# PULITZER PRIZE WINNER AND MUSIC FESTIVAL DIRECTOR TELLS A SALTY TALE

## RHIANNON GIDDENS,

**the musical innovator and MacArthur Award “genius,” who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize this May, and who will direct the Ojai Music Festival this June, spent most of the pandemic at home in Ireland with her family. Despite the isolation, far from the Piedmont in North Carolina where she grew up, and despite the cancellation of a planned musical tour, Giddens’ career developed in new and surprising ways while in isolation, including her writing a picture book for children, called “Build A House.”**

The book is based on an earthy folk song Giddens wrote early in the pandemic, expressing her frustration, both with her situation, and with racial politics back home in the U.S.

“I wrote the song out of frustration with being locked down in Ireland and watching the [George Floyd] protests and just thinking about my life’s work, which has been dealing with so many of these topics,” she said. “I got a bit salty, and I sat down

and asked — you brought me here to build your house. Why?”

“Build a House” is the African-American story told from the perspective of a young Black girl living in the South, who sees her parents working on a plantation, gathering cotton under the watchful eye of a distant white overseer in a suit, and doesn’t understand why.





ALL IMAGES SHOWING SAMPLE PAGES OUT OF RHIANNON GIDDENS BOOK "BUILD A HOUSE"

**"You brought me here - To build your house - and grow your garden fine," she sings, in the words of the song and of the book.**

**"I laid the brick - to build your house - and raised the plants so high. And then you had the house and land - the house and land - and then you told me: GO."**

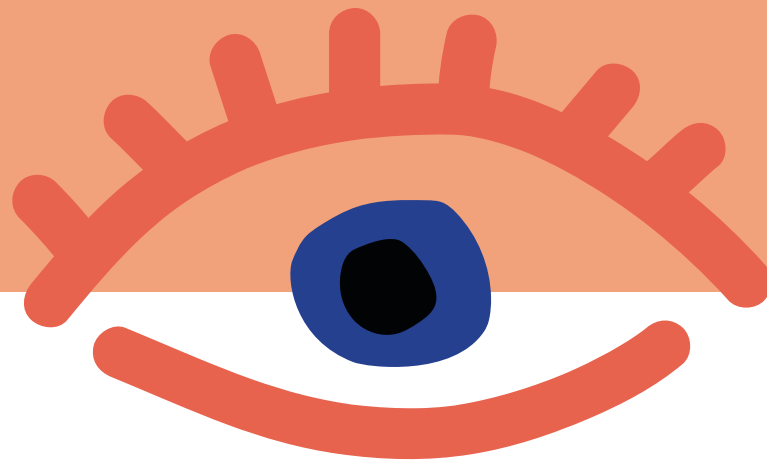
The book, beautifully and subtly illustrated by Monica Mikai for publisher Candlewick Press, uses the facial expressions of the characters to elicit without trauma or melodrama the emotion of the story. The young girl sees her parents working in the fields, sees them forced to leave their home and start over, but doesn't understand. Even as they sit in a horse-drawn wagon with their few possessions, her parents' faces clouded with worry as they head down the road to a dangerous future, the child gestures at the lights she sees in the darkening sky, her face lit up with delight. The unspoken contrast between her parents' fear and her joy brings a touching poignance to the tale.

Giddens, who has always delighted in collaboration and the contributors of fellow artists in the many forms of music she has fruitfully explored — from blues to opera, for which she won the Pulitzer — has nothing but admiration for the work of the artist Mikai who illustrated the picture book.

"It's just such an incredible thing to see another artist interpret what you have done and add her own contributions," she said. "I couldn't have asked for a better representation of my words. I think that's what makes a good picture book, is that it shows what kids look at, and those expressions that say so much. All [the little girl] knows is what's in front of her."

Giddens, who has won multiple Grammy awards, mostly recently for her album "They're Calling Me Home," recorded in six days in a home studio in Ireland with her multi-instrumentalist partner Francesco Turrisi, admits that she never expected to become a writer of books.

"I never knew I was going to become a writer, but I've always been obsessed with words," she said. "Quotes, poetry, the words



to Sondheim musicals — all that kind of stuff. And I've always been one to condense, so every word counts. That's a form that suits picture books, because basically you have two lines to a page, to represent everything you want to say."

**Although Giddens has not yet planned in detail her schedule, she expects to sing "Build A House" at the Music Festival.**

**"It's part of my set, and I play it in every show now, but when I'm introducing the song I don't tell the whole story anymore - I will just say "Here's 500 years of history in three and a half minutes. Which cuts to the chase, because that's kind of what it is."**

Written in simple, declarative sentences, using repetition reminiscent of the blues, "Build a House" has the purity of a folk song, a bit like the classic spiritual "I Shall Not Be Moved." That hallowed song Giddens learned from her mentor on the banjo, Joe Thompson, whom she met in North Carolina after graduating from Oberlin College with a musical degree

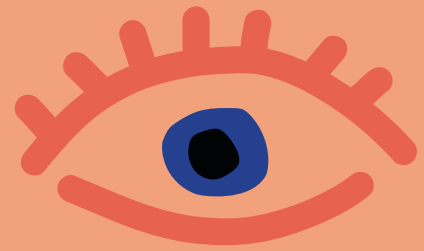
focused on opera.

"When I'm writing stuff that's close to my heart, and part of my mission, I default to the folk idiom, because I have a lot of pride in that form," she said. "I can write in other idioms, but I'm highly influenced by the work songs, the blues, and that whole musical family, including "I Shall Not Be Moved."

Because Giddens has found prominence and success in the music industry, she is often asked for advice by younger musicians.

"It's always a bit of a game of chess when it comes to the industry, but when it comes to art, there can't be any of that calculation," she said. "It has to be about how I make this creation. What is going to happen to it is what is going to happen to it. That's kind of how I have lived my life. What I have discovered is that without fail, sooner or later an opportunity comes along."

In the case of "Build a House," Giddens said that shortly after writing the song — which was released in June of 2020 for a Juneteenth celebration of Emancipation — she received a call



RHIANNON GIDDENS

from Yo-Yo Ma, who asked her if she had anything on which they could collaborate.

“He asked: Do you have anything you would want to do with me? And I said, well, I just wrote this song. So I sent him the song and he was like, yes, let’s do that. And so I made a video and he made a video and we put it out on our social media for Juneteenth. And I was like, well, I don’t know what that did, but it felt nice to have something out there. And then somebody said: Hey, this ought to be a kid’s book. And I thought that was a really interesting idea. I’ve always wanted to write kids’ books. And so we arranged some meetings with book publishers and Candlewick saw something in the ideas I had, and that’s how I ended up with a four-book deal to write children’s books.”

**The duo of musical stars performs in the background of a gently animated version of “Build a House” available online through a QR in the book.**

Despite enjoying the final result, Giddens remains focused on the tragic history of Black people in the Americas. In the children’s book she boldly includes a depiction of the loss of their innovative music — in particular the stringband music featuring the banjo — which in the 19th-century despite worldwide popularity was largely taken from the originators and bowdlerized by

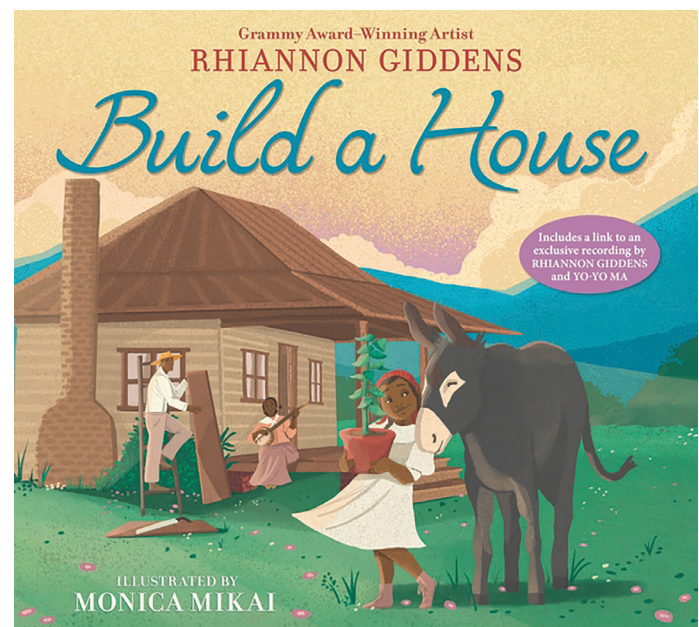
minstrelsy and blackface.

“I knew that including that theme might give me some opprobrium but I’ve always been an advocate for the cross-cultural working-class collaboration that is at the heart of American musical culture,” she said. “I’ve been talking about that for many years. So I felt I had to bank on people seeing that for what it was, which was a specific form of theft, and even worse, of erasure. So I had to dig into that, and keep after it, wherever that led, and ultimately that’s what we’re going to keep on doing because we (Black people) aren’t going anywhere.”



On the phone, Giddens laughed a little, surprised perhaps by her own fervor.

“So I’d say it’s a little salty,” she said. “I get that way sometimes.”



RHIANNON GIDDENS - BOOK COVER

**Find the animated version here:**  
<https://rhiannongiddens.com/build-a-house>