

American Original

Singer/songwriter **Rhiannon Giddens** is a classically trained soprano who left the classical world to explore folk music, learning banjo and fiddle and gaining notice as co-founder and lead singer of the string band Carolina Chocolate Drops. The North Carolina native won a MacArthur “Genius” grant in 2017, performs in an all-female strings-and-banjo quartet called Our Native Daughters, and played an ongoing character for two seasons of the TV drama *Nashville*. These days, she is becoming more visible in the classical world. Her recent and upcoming performances include the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, Cincinnati Pops, Richmond Symphony Orchestra, and she is host of the WQXR/Metropolitan Opera podcast *Aria Code*. This May, she and her band will join the Boston Pops for two concerts of folk, blues, country, hot string jazz, and Caribbean music, led by Keith Lockhart. She will also curate two evenings with the Boston Pops, vocalist Darius de Haas, and pianist Lara Downes, featuring African American composers including Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Eubie Blake, and Florence Price.

Here, Giddens talks about moving between folk and classical music, singing with orchestras, and rediscovering overlooked music by black American composers.

One of my passions is ignoring the artificial boundaries of American music—to emphasize that the great thing about our music is that it is made up of so many different cultural influences. Last year, I performed with the Boston Pops as part of a wonderfully diverse July 4 concert, and this year they invited me back to curate a series of concerts with them on that theme. We will also be shining a light on artistically significant figures who have been ignored or forgotten, particularly black composers. For example, we’ll be performing Billy Strayhorn, who has been hidden behind Duke Ellington; we will celebrate Florence Price, who was very well known in her day as a pioneering black composer but fell into obscurity; and we will show off Afro-English composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, whose *Hiawatha’s Wedding* was performed as much as if not more than the *Messiah* at one time.

I have recently had the good fortune of performing more and more with wonderful orchestras like the Pops; and I am reminded what an incredible experience it is. I had only sung with pit orchestras while I was at Conservatory, and my first



The Boston Pops and Rhiannon Giddens perform at the Pops’ annual Fireworks Spectacular at the Hatch Shell, July 4, 2018, led by conductor Keith Lockhart.

experience singing with an orchestra on stage—wow! What a wall of sound that washes over you—I am enchanted anew every time, and I never tire of it. I will admit there is a bit of stress performing with the natural inflexibility of an orchestra. When you run your own show, you can stop in the middle of a song and start over, or do it a little faster the next night. With a symphony, you are part of a larger organism; there are so many people are working in tandem overseen by the conductor. But what it produces



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is well worth it. Pieces that are explosive when I’m with just my band become even bigger and at the end it’s just like, oh my God. Gabe Wichter, who plays

with the Punch Brothers, does my orchestrations, and what I love about them is that it could be the loveliest, tiniest orchestra in Brittany or the mighty San Francisco Symphony, and the players will say, “We love these.”

Another obsession I have had since my Oberlin Conservatory days is, what about all the ordinary people who don’t go to operas and symphonies who would love this music? With the Richmond Sym-

phony last year, I did my usual stuff but I also sang “Mein Herr Marquis” [Adele’s “laughing song” from *Die Fledermaus*]. Here I am, outside in Richmond in front of this enormous crowd that has just been listening to a brass band, dancing, and drinking beer all day, and I explained a little of “Mein Herr.” I was like, “I’m about to sing in German. Here’s the story.” And they freakin’ loved it! You just present it like a song, without talking down to the audience. There are so many different ways of doing that. **S**