

# UNKNOWN



# UNKNOWN

Shawn Okpebholo, composer  
Marcus Amaker, poet

Commissioned by UrbanArias  
in honor of  
the 100th anniversary of the founding of  
The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier  
with  
the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts,  
Opera Colorado, Opera Birmingham,  
The Dallas Opera, and Minnesota Opera,  
with additional support provided by  
Stephen E. and Dorothy P. Bird

# Composer's Note

*unknown* is a five-movement song cycle for medium voice and chamber ensemble commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a memorial at Arlington Cemetery for unidentified soldiers who have succumbed to war. Poet Marcus Amaker penned the evocative text.

The first movement begins with an extended and solemn introduction. From the perspective of a soldier, it is an anthem expressing the realities of war, but also the pride for her country and the sacrifice she's willing to give for the place she calls home.

The second movement is a melancholic waltz from the perspective of the loved one of a soldier of war. With only letters and anxiety, there is still space for hope that his beloved will return home.

The third movement—ever so soulful, requiring the baritone voice to engage his falsetto—is an introspective lament from the viewpoint of an injured soldier who is mindful that he is about to die and transition to his eternal home.

From the perspectives of the guards who protect the tomb 24 hours a day, the fourth movement is a dignified march, sustained by an irregular-metered drum cadence: 21/8. The number 21 is significant because a soldier who guards the tomb marches 21 steps, rests for 21 seconds, and repeats this routine in all directions until the soldier's shift is over. I subtly quote *Taps*, the bugle call that happens during military funerals at, coincidentally, 21:00 hours. I also briefly quote *America the Beautiful* as an homage to the third verse, which says,

*Oh beautiful for heroes proved  
In liberating strife  
Who more than self, their country loved  
And mercy more than life.*

The final movement is a poetic *In Memoriam* for the unknowns, and in a way, serves as a reprise for the cycle. This contemplative setting brings back motives, harmonies, themes, and texts from the previous four movements, musically embodying the various aspects of what it means to go off to war.



**Marcus Amaker**

**Poet**

**Shawn Okpebholo**

**Composer**



# Director's Note

Over the course of my opera career, I've worked on many operas with military themes, both historical and contemporary. After all, the experience of soldiers, of warfare, of coming home again, and of the families left behind are some of our most essential human stories.

In *Unknown*, I wanted to take the audience on a journey through time, using the experience of three different soldiers at three points in American history to explore some of these ideas. It was important that we begin with Taylor Raven as a young Black woman about to deploy, in many ways the face of the modern military. We don't tell the stories of women who serve, and this was a small step towards filling that gap.

Mike Mayes and I have done many of these military stories together, and the role of soulful veteran struggling with his service and the loss of his comrades was an easy and natural fit. I've spoken to many Vietnam vets who feel like theirs is the forgotten war and that their service is often overlooked, so it was good to acknowledge them and that not all veterans have an easy time with homecoming.

The beautiful innocence of Schyler Vargas made the mortality of the soldier all too clear and moving. He - or someone very like him - is the Unknown, who will never return home but seeks peace after the terrible experience of war and bloodshed.

The singers and I began our journey with *Unknown* with a wreath laying at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and I know that experience permeates everything we have done to create this film and bring this amazing music and text to life.

Kristine McIntyre  
Director

Photo: Paul Peers





# Artistic Personnel

Click the buttons to view artists' social media.

Robert Wood, Conductor



Kristine McIntyre, Director



Shawn Marie Jeffery, Original Concept

Anne-Carolyn Bird, Producer

Michael Mayes, baritone



Taylor Raven, mezzo-soprano



Schyler Vargas, baritone





# Creatives & Production

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Mikael Manoukian, Camera Operator

Mollie Singer, Set and Props 

Heather C. Jackson, Costume and Make-up  

Paul Peers, Director of Production

Rebecca Talisman, Production Stage Manager





# Members of Inscape Chamber Orchestra

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Anne Donaldson, violin

Sandy Choi, violin

Rosanna Butterfield, cello

Michael Rittling, bass

Noah Getz, saxophone

Eric Plewinski, percussion

Wei-Han Wu, piano

Music Recorded Live at  
The Barns at Wolf Trap

Sound Engineer  
Gordon Nimmo-Smith





**Shawn Okpebholo**

**Composer**

Shawn E. Okpebholo is a widely sought-after and award-winning composer, described as "a beautiful artist ... who has enormous grace in his music, and fantasy and color." His music has met critical acclaim from the New York Times, The New Yorker, BBC, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, NPR's Morning Edition, and The Guardian. Most recently, the Academy of Arts and Letters awarded him The Walter Hinrichsen Award. Other awards include First Place Winner of the 2020 American Prize in Composition (professional/wind band division) and Second Place Winner in the 2017 American Prize in Composition (professional/orchestral division), First Prize Winner in the Flute New Music Consortium Composition Competition, Sound of Late Composition Contest, Accent06 International Composition Competition, and the Inaugural Awardee of the Leslie Adams-Robert Owens Composition Award.

His music has been performed on five continents, in over forty states, and in nearly every major U.S. city. He regularly receives commissions from noted soloists, chamber groups, and large ensembles — artists who have performed his works at some of the nation's most prestigious performance spaces, including Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center. He earned his master's and doctoral degrees in composition from the University of Cincinnati, College-Conservatory of Music, where he also studied music theory. In the fall of 2021, he begins a two-year residency as Chicago Opera Theater's newest Vanguard Emerging Opera Composer. He is Professor of Music Composition at Wheaton College-Conservatory of Music. For his complete bio and to experience and learn more about his music, visit [shawnokpebholo.com](http://shawnokpebholo.com)



# Marcus Amaker

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## Poet



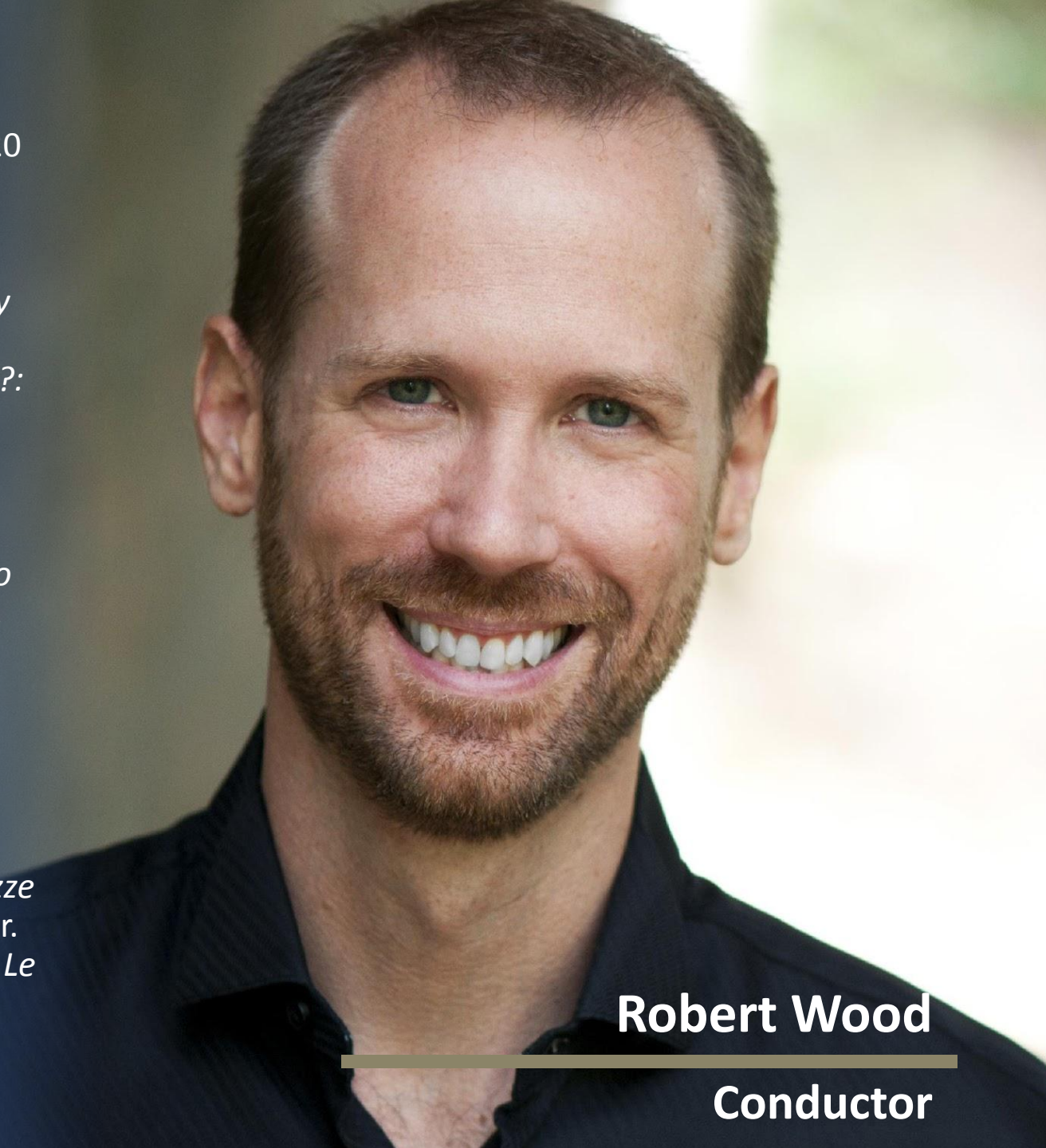
Marcus Amaker is a poet, recording artist, and mentor. He is the author of nine books of poetry, most recently *The Birth of All Things* (Free Verse Press, 2020) and the kids book *Black Music Is* (Free Verse Press, 2021). In addition to more than 30 albums of electronic music, Marcus has released three albums with Grammy Award winning drummer Quentin E. Baxter.

The first Poet Laureate of Charleston, South Carolina, Amaker's poetry has been interpreted for ballet, jazz, modern dance, opera and theater, and has been recognized by the Kennedy Center, The Washington National Opera, The Portland Opera, Button Poetry, NPR, and others. He is the winner of a South Carolina Governor's Award, and is the award-winning graphic designer of the national music journal *No Depression*. He is the 2019-2021 artist-in-residence of the Gaillard Center and the creator of the Free Verse poetry festival. In 2021, he received an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellowship. He lives in Charleston.

Robert Wood is UrbanArias' founder. Under his leadership the company has achieved national recognition and has given over 120 performances, including seven commissions and eleven world premieres.

Notable productions have included *After Life/Josephine*, and *Glory Denied* (Cipullo), *The Last American Hammer* and *Blue Viola* (Hilliard), *Paul's Case* (Spears), *Why Is Eartha Kitt Trying to Kill Me?: A Love Story* (Smith), *Independence Eve* (Boquiren), *As One* (Kaminsky), and *Three Decembers* (Heggie). Maestro Wood made his debut at the San Francisco Opera with Verdi's *La traviata* (starring Rolando Villazon), and has also conducted *L'italiana in Algeri* and several concerts there. He recently conducted *Rigoletto* at Austin Opera, *Silent Night* at the University of British Columbia, *As One* at Hawaii Opera Theatre and Lyric Opera of Kansas City, *Three Decembers* at Kentucky Opera, *Die Fledermaus* at Hawaii Opera Theater, and *Roméo et Juliette* and *Carmen* at Opera Colorado.

Mr. Wood was Conductor in Residence at the Minnesota Opera from 2006-2008, leading productions of *L'italiana in Algeri*, *Le nozze di Figaro*, *La donna del lago*, *Rusalka*, and *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. Mr. Wood has also conducted *L'italiana in Algeri* at Vancouver Opera, *Le Comte Ory* and *Die Zauberflöte* at Wolf Trap Opera, and *The Nutcracker* for San Francisco Ballet.



**Robert Wood**

**Conductor**



Kristine McIntyre (Director) has directed more than 90 operas across the U.S. with a focus on new, contemporary, and American works. Productions include Jake Heggie and Gene Scheer's *Moby Dick*; *Dead Man Walking*; the world premiers of Louis Karchin's *Jane Eyre* and Mark Lanz Weiser and Amy Punt's *The Place Where You Started* (Art Share, LA); new productions of *Wozzeck*, *Billy Budd* (regional Emmy award) and *Peter Grimes* as well as *As One* (Kaminsky/Campbell/Reed), *Glory Denied* and *Soldier Songs*, Jonathan Dove's *Flight*, Jake Heggie's *The End of the Affair* and *Three Decembers*; *Florencia en el Amazonas*, *Elmer Gantry*, *Of Mice and Men*, the world premiere of Kirke Mechem's *John Brown*.

Kristine began her career at the San Francisco Opera and then spent eight years on the directing staff of the Metropolitan Opera where she directed revivals of *La traviata*, *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, and *Luisa Miller*. Her recent bilingual adaptation of *The Barber of Seville* was produced to great acclaim at Atlanta Opera, Portland Opera, Fort Worth Opera, Houston Grand Opera/HGO CO and Chautauqua Opera. Upcoming projects include new productions of *Dead Man Walking*, *Sweeney Todd* and *Glory Denied*, an adaptation of *La Voix Humaine* and the world premiere of *Celka Ojakanga* and Amy Punt's *Mirror Game* (winner of an Opera America Female Composer Discovery Grant).



**Kristine McIntyre**

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**Director**



Mezzo-soprano Taylor Raven is a recent graduate of the Young Artist Program at the Los Angeles Opera. In the 2020-2021 season, she made debuts at Finger Lakes Opera in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Rosina) and Des Moines Metro Opera in *Pique Dame* (Pauline). While in the program at LA Opera she was seen in *La clemenza di Tito* (Annio), *Don Carlo* (Tebaldo), the Kosky production of *Die Zauberflöte* (Zweite Dame) conducted by James Colon, and *Hansel and Gretel* (Sandman). As a Filene Artist at Wolf Trap Opera she performed in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* (Rosina) and *L'heure espagnole* (Concepción). On the concert stage she made her Alice Tully Hall debut appearing with the American Symphony Orchestra for a concert of Bach arias conducted by Leon Botstein.

In 2018-2019 Taylor made her Los Angeles Philharmonic debut as a soloist in the Hollywood Bowl performance of Beethoven's Choral Fantasy with Bramwell Tovey. She appeared with the New West Symphony in Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* under Mikhail Agrest and made her Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra debut as a soloist in Mahler's *Das Klagende Lied* with James Conlon as a part of their May Festival. In 2017-18 Taylor performed with Wolf Trap Opera and the National Orchestral Institute Philharmonic, making a Naxos Classical recording of Bernstein's *Songfest* conducted by James Judd. She is a recipient of a 2017 Sara Tucker Study Grant from the Richard Tucker Music Foundation and won 1st prize in the 2018 Loren L. Zachary competition.



**Taylor Raven**

**Mezzo-Soprano**





**Michael Mayes**

**Baritone**

Baritone Michael Mayes enjoys a busy operatic career in both traditional and contemporary operatic roles with theaters throughout the United States and Europe. His critically acclaimed portrayal of Joseph De Rocher in Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* has been seen in multiple US theaters including Atlanta Opera and Washington National Opera and internationally with Teatro Real, New Israeli Opera and the Barbican in London. Mr. Mayes is known for his portrayals in other contemporary operas including Older Thompson in *Glory Denied*, Lawrence in *The Wreckers*, Adam in *The Cantic of the Black Madonna*, Kinesias in Mark Adamo's *Lysistrata*, Edward Gaines in Margaret Garner, and most recently Daddy in *Taking Up Serpents*.

Recent highlights include his debut with Staatsoper Stuttgart as the title role in *Nixon in China*, *Sweeney Todd* with the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra, *Rigoletto* with Houston Grand Opera, Tonio in *Pagliacci* with Boston Lyric Opera, Thoas in *Iphigénie en Tauride* with Staatsoper Stuttgart, Conte di Luna in *Il trovatore* with Seattle Opera, Doug in *Everest* with Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Starbuck in *Moby Dick* and Sharpless in *Madama Butterfly* with Pittsburgh Opera, Alfio/Tonio in *Cavalleria rusticana/Pagliacci* with Madison Opera, and *Wozzeck* with Des Moines Metro Opera.



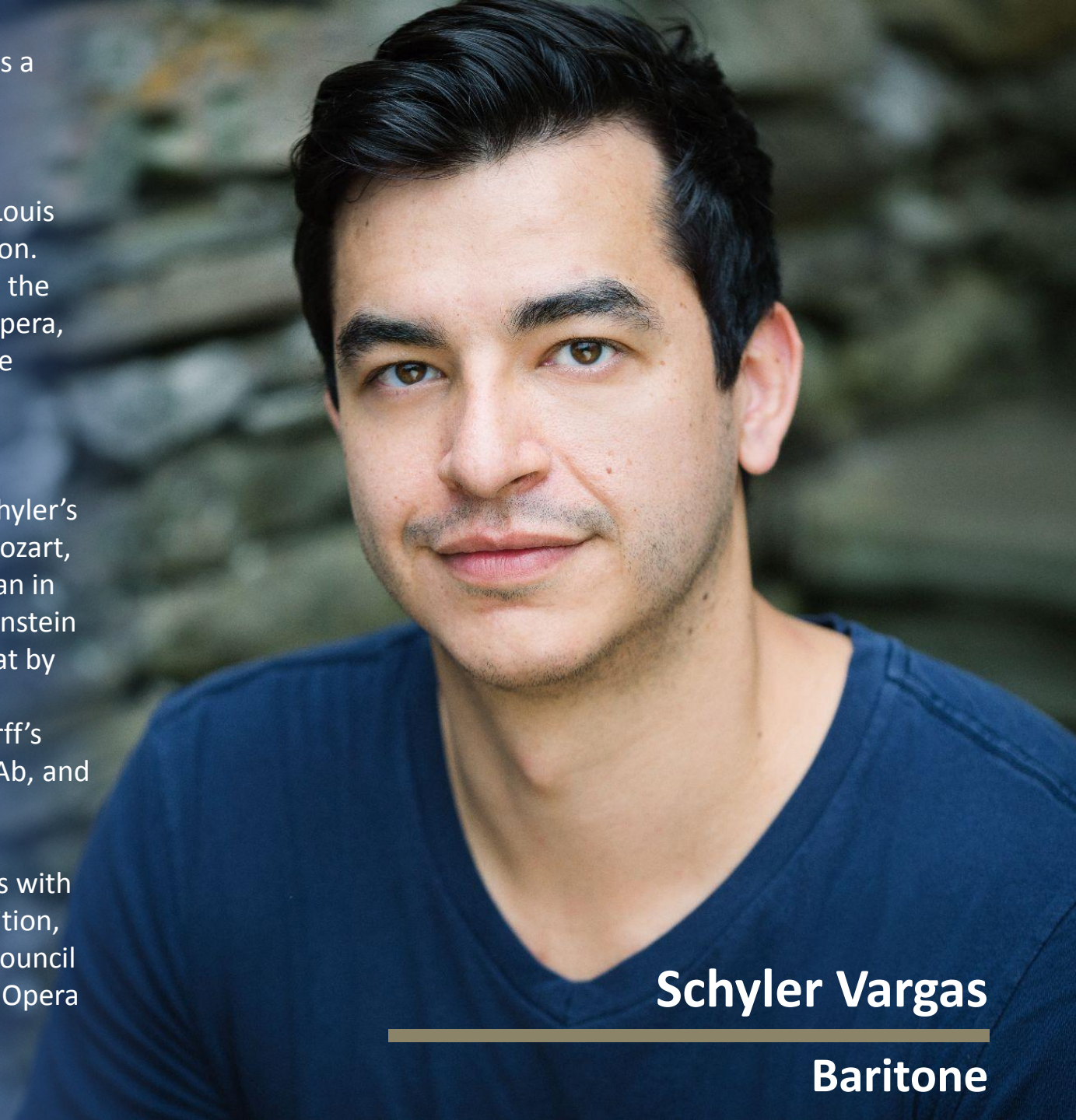
Schyler Vargas, a Mexican-American baritone, is establishing himself as a versatile young talent, bringing interdisciplinary performances to the operatic, theatrical, and concert stage.

In the summer of 2021, Schyler debuted with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and later joined Cincinnati Opera for their reimagined centennial season. Previously, he has been seen in main stage roles at The Atlanta Opera, the Lyric Opera of Kansas City, The Glimmerglass Opera Festival, Dayton Opera, and the Château de Versailles Spectacles in France. He was set to make house debuts with the Teatro Lirico di Cagliari in Italy and the Teatro Municipal de Santiago in Chile before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Capturing his vocal prowess, in addition to his physical capabilities, Schyler's notable roles include: Count Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro* by W. A. Mozart, Gabriel von Eisenstein in *Die Fledermaus* by Richard Strauss, Maximilian in *Candide*, and Riff, Diesel, and Chino in *West Side Story* by Leonard Bernstein with original Jerome Robbins choreography, Frank Schultz in *Show Boat* by Jerome Kern, among others.

On the concert stage, Schyler has performed the baritone solo's for Orff's *Carmina Burana*, Rossini's *Petite Messe Solenne*, Schubert's *Mass in Ab*, and Mark Hayes' *Requiem*.

An award winning performer, Schyler has seen success in competitions with notable awards including: 1st place in Tri-Cities Opera's Vocal Competition, Rocky Mountain District Winner in the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, 2nd place and Audience Favorite in the Harold Haugh Light Opera Competition, and 2nd place at the Denver Lyric Opera Guild Aria Competition.



**Schyler Vargas**

**Baritone**



# UNKNOWN

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## Poems by Marcus Amaker

1.  
As the morning rises  
with the clean air of summer,  
my mind is clouded  
in smoke.

Anxiety is ammunition  
for a duty  
that haunts  
my dreams:

A war that will  
take me away from home,  
a departure  
that digs deep  
within the battlefields  
of my soul.

I am one  
of many warriors  
willing to  
fight for a country  
that promises freedom,

a country  
that I am proud  
to call  
home.

2.  
Home is a hollow space  
when world-wide hostility  
takes ahold of its habitat.

Beneath this roof  
are memories  
of life without combat,

a breath before bloodshed,  
a love untouched by fear.

I am haunted  
more than I am happy.

Reading letters  
loaded with the tragedies  
of war,  
stories about future legends,  
soon-to-be ghosts who  
fought with honor,

and lost their lives  
without losing their faith.

# UNKNOWN

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## Poems by Marcus Amaker

3.  
If death has a sound,  
then I am now its echo.

Silence will soon  
pass through me

and I will remember  
that I was made  
to have an ending.

And war,  
with its infinite reverence,  
also has boundary.

I am far  
from my family,  
but I will soon  
be home.

4.  
With honor,  
I march.

21 steps  
in time  
for the timeless spirits  
of soldiers.

With service,  
I march.

21 seconds  
in rhythm  
for the breathless voices  
of the decorated  
and departed.

With commitment,  
I march.

24 hours  
in tempo  
to guard the ghosts  
who gave their lives  
for our country

so that we  
can safely call  
this land  
our home.

5.  
Layers of remembrance  
hover over us like clouds.

When it rains,  
we are wrapped  
in sorrow  
because we can't escape  
the memory of  
fallen heroes.

How many storms  
have gone unnoticed?

How many more  
downpours deserve  
our attention?

Our homes  
and hearts  
are enlivened  
by the recognition  
of generations  
who are gone,  
but never forgotten.



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Commissioning new works is probably the most exciting thing we do at UrbanArias: identifying talented authors, finding a compelling subject to write about, and participating in the birth of a new piece of music and theater. This season we premiere our 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> commissions, *Unknown* and *Why I Live at the P.O.*

The concept for *Unknown* was presented to us by Shawn Jeffery, a Senior VP with ADA Artist Management. She came to us, since we are based in Arlington, VA, with the idea of creating a tribute to the 100th anniversary of the dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery. We were immediately struck by the potential and power of the idea and began to think of ways to broaden the work's impact and reach. This is not just an Arlington story, or even a story for the Washington region. It is a national story, one that connects with every American who has served or known someone who has served in our armed forces.

In searching for authors, we were drawn to composer Shawn Okpebholo and poet Marcus Amaker because of their gorgeous and searing 2020 collaboration "Two Black Churches." Whether commissioning opera or songs, it is important to UrbanArias Founder and Artistic Director Robert Wood to work with artists who have a keen sense of drama, and who know how to use the musical resources at their disposal to their fullest to reach an audience and grip their emotions. Shawn and Marcus possess these talents in spades as individual artists and doubly so as a team, and we are grateful to them for creating *Unknown* this year.

In an effort to honor the national subject of *Unknown*, we formed a commissioning partnership with Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts, Opera Colorado, Minnesota Opera, and Opera Birmingham on this world premiere. Through generous support from our donors, especially Stephen E. and Dorothy P. Bird, the film will be available for free to all viewers. It is our hope that Americans of all walks of life will be able to experience the power and beauty of this work which honors the men and women whose sacrifices for our country will never be forgotten.



**Anne-Carolyn Bird**

**Executive Director**

**Robert Wood**

**Founder & Artistic Director**