

OPERA AT RIDERWOOD

ENCORE OPERA NOTES

FEBRUARY 20, 2026

CHAMPION

NEXT WEEK IN ENCORE

February 27, 2026

ARMIDA

Giacomo Rossini

Composer: Terence Blanchard; Lyricist: Michael Cristofer

In English with Subtitles – 2 hours and 46 minutes

Notes compiled by John Szabo

For the first time, Opera at Riderwood is excited to stream a recorded live broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera. For this month celebrating African-American artists, we selected the April 29, 2023, Met production of Terence Blanchard's acclaimed opera "Champion," a moving, powerful story about the real-life boxer Emile Griffith. Blanchard made history in 2021, when his "Fire Shut Up in My Bones" became the first opera by a Black composer to be presented by the Met. This opera was so well received at Riderwood two years ago, that we showed it again last year. The overwhelming success of that Met production brought the Grammy Award-winning composer and jazz trumpeter back the following season for the premiere of "Champion." Bass-baritone Ryan Speedo Green stars as the young prizefighter, who battles demons in and out of the ring, while bass-baritone Eric Owens portrays Griffith's older self, haunted by a pivotal moment from his past. Music Director Yannick Nezet-Seguin conducts a knockout new production by James Robinson, which also features Eric Greene, Latonia Moore, Paul Groves, Howie Albert, and Stephanie Blythe.

Cast

Ryan Speedo Green – young Emile Griffith

Eric Greene – Benny 'Kid' Paret

Paul Groves - Howie Albert

Eric Owens – older Emile Griffith

Latonia Moore – Emelda Griffith

Stephanie Blythe – Kathy Hagen

Yannick Nezet-Seguin – Conductor

Synopsis

Act 1

Act 1 begins in Emile Griffith's apartment in Hempstead, Long Island, where he is struggling to dress himself. Suffering from dementia, he is confused and haunted by his past, which the opera presents in flashback. Luis, his adopted son and caretaker, reminds him to be ready for an

important meeting with Benny Paret, Jr. -
Late 1950s: Emile is a young man in St. Thomas, the US Virgin Islands. He wants to find his mother, Emelda, and make his fortune in America as a singer, a baseball player, and a hat designer. Emile moves to New York.

When he finds his mother, she is confused, not sure which of her seven abandoned children he is but is overjoyed. Hoping to find work for Emile, she takes him to meet Howie Albert, a hat manufacturer. Howie sees an opportunity, in that Emile is physically like a boxer, not a hat-maker. Howie decides to train Emile for prizefighting. Giving up his other dreams, Emile quickly develops into a talented welterweight. Lonely and confused by his success, Emile finds his way to a gay bar in Manhattan, whose owner, Kathy Hagan, welcomes him to a frightening and also attractive world. Emile confides in Kathy, revealing some demons from his past. As a boy, his fundamentalist cousin Blanche forced him to hold cinderblocks above his head as punishment for 'having the devil inside him', which gave him his great physical strength.

1962: Emile meets Benny Paret at a weigh-in for their upcoming fight. Paret taunts Emile with the term 'maricón', a disparaging Spanish word for a homosexual. Alone with Howie, Emile tries to talk to him frankly about why this word hurts him so deeply, but for Howie this is something that no one in the fight business wants to talk about. Howie leaves him, and Emile wonders what it means to be a man. Emile and Paret prepare for the big fight. Paret continues to taunt Emile, who ultimately delivers seventeen blows in less than seven seconds, which puts Paret into a coma.

Act 2

Back in Emile's bedroom in the present, Emile is haunted by the ghost of Kid Paret who still questions his old opponent.

Mid- to late 1960s: Emile is enjoying a strong winning streak all over the world.

Titles, trophies, and money roll in, but he remains disturbed by the death of Kid Paret. He tries living it up, and, denying his own identity, he takes a young bride, Sadie, although everyone, including his mother Emelda, who remembers her own childhood back in the Islands, warns him against it.

Early 1970s: After the wedding, Emile's luck has changed. He's now on a long losing streak of matches and begins to exhibit signs of "boxer's brain" or trauma-related dementia. Howie realizes that Emile's days are numbered and tries to console him. However, Emile rejects Howie, as well as his wife and his mother. Instead, he looks for comfort back at Kathy's bar. Outside in the street, a group of thugs taunt him and beat him violently, exacerbating his brain injuries.

Back in the present, Emile relives the nightmare of the attack. Luis tries to comfort him ("That was long ago"). In a New York City park, Emile asks for forgiveness from Benny Jr. Luis tells Benny that since that evening, Emile has struggled to find peace with what he's done and who he truly is. Back at home, the voices and memories subside.

NEXT WEEK



