

For Immediate Release: October 5, 2023

[Cal Performances Press Room](#)



Images of Rhiannon Giddens and the Silkroad Ensemble are available for download from the Cal Performances [Press Room](#).

A video of the Silkroad Ensemble featuring Rhiannon Giddens performing Peter Gabriel's "Biko," arranged by Colin Jacobsen, can be found on [YouTube](#).

**CAL PERFORMANCES AT UC BERKELEY PRESENTS**  
**A FEATURED PERFORMANCE OF THE 2023–24 SEASON**  
***ILLUMINATIONS: "INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY" SERIES***

**SILKROAD ENSEMBLE WITH RHIANNON GIDDENS**  
***AMERICAN RAILROAD***  
**FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 17 AT 8PM**  
**AT ZELLERBACH HALL**

**Berkeley, October 5, 2023**— The Grammy Award-winning **Silkroad Ensemble** and 2023 Pulitzer Prize and Grammy winner, singer, and multi-instrumentalist **Rhiannon Giddens** perform music from their *American Railroad* project at Zellerbach Hall on Friday, November 17 at 8pm. The music of Silkroad Ensemble's *American Railroad* illuminates the impact of under-recognized voices in America's expansion west. The event is a featured presentation in Cal Performances' *Illuminations: "Individual and Community"* series this season, which explores the tensions that come into play while balancing the interests of the individual with the interest of the group.

**About *American Railroad***

After the completion of the American Transcontinental Railroad in 1869, a trip from coast to coast that used to take months was shortened to just under a week. The people who built the railroad and those who were most affected by it are the focus of Silkroad's *American Railroad* program— Indigenous and African Americans as well Irish, Chinese, Japanese, and other immigrant laborers whose contributions have been largely erased from history. This performance and project seek to

right these past wrongs by highlighting untold stories and amplifying unheard voices from these communities, painting a more accurate picture of the global diasporic origin of the American Empire.

In the Silkroad Ensemble's *American Railroad* performance, Chinese traditional instruments like the *suona* and *pipa* are contrasted with the fiddle and banjo of Black musical traditions and their Indigenous and Celtic counterparts. New works by ensemble members and commissions from renowned artists representing many backgrounds will weave the workers' disparate traditions together to retell the railroad's history from a more inclusive perspective. All these new works come from female-identifying or non-binary artists.

Grammy Award-winning vocalist and composer—and upcoming Cal Performances performer **Cécile McLorin Salvant** (who will appear at Zellerbach Hall on January 25) was inspired to fulfill her *American Railroad* commission with a work informed by stories shared with and collected by Silkroad artists. Oglala Lakota artist, composer, and academic **Suzanne Kite** will create a graphic score using the Lakota written language and based on dreams from members of the Silkroad Ensemble.

From the ensemble, *pipa* virtuoso **Wu Man** will create a new work for *American Railroad*, arranged by Chinese composer **Haihui Zhang**. Violinist **Mazz Swift**'s take on the African American spiritual "O Shout!" also features on the program; according to Swift, the spiritual acknowledges the Ghanaian concept of "sankofa," which roughly translates as going back into the past to retrieve something important. Rhiannon Giddens will provide a new arrangement, broken into vignettes interspersed throughout the program, inspired by "Swannanoa Tunnel," a work song from the African Americans forced to labor on the railroad in Giddens' home state of North Carolina—a tune that has long been associated with bluegrass and folk artists, its origins now forgotten. Silkroad artists **Haruka Fujii** and **Maeve Gilchrist** also contribute re-envisioned arrangements.

The November 17 concert at Cal Performances is part of the ensemble's first *American Railroad* tour, about which Rhiannon Giddens shared, "The *American Railroad* project has been years in the making, and the program we've created for our first tour is only the beginning. In it, we shed light on those who have been erased or overlooked throughout American history and merge with it Silkroad's unique ability to amplify voices from a multitude of backgrounds and cultures. The result is a tapestry of stories, traditions, and musics that have shaped our multifaceted cultural identity, and that must be heard and recognized. I hope audiences in the DC area and across California will leave these performances with a clearer sense of where we come from, how we got here, what it cost us—and that we collectively reflect on where we're headed."

## About Silkroad

Cellist **Yo-Yo Ma** famously conceived Silkroad in 1998, recognizing the historical Silk Road as a model for cultural collaboration—for the exchange of ideas, tradition, and innovation across borders. In a groundbreaking experiment, he brought together musicians from the lands of the Silk

Road to co-create a musical language founded in difference, thus creating the foundation of Silkroad: both a touring ensemble comprised of world-class musicians from all over the globe and a Boston-based nonprofit organization working to make a positive impact across borders through the arts.

In 2020, Rhiannon Giddens was appointed the Artistic Director of Silkroad, however, she has worked with the Silkroad Ensemble since 2016, when she was featured on their Grammy Award-winning album *Sing Me Home*. In collaboration, they have created a fusion of Americana, traditional folk, classical, and world music.

Cal Performances has presented the Silkroad Ensemble five times since the group's founding, including performances at the Greek Theatre and with the Mark Morris Dance Group for the world premiere performance of Mark Morris' *Layla and Majnun* in 2016. This concert marks Rhiannon Giddens' Cal Performances debut.

### **About Rhiannon Giddens**

A two-time Grammy Award and Pulitzer Prize winner, MacArthur "Genius" grant recipient, singer and instrumentalist, and composer of opera, ballet, and film, Rhiannon Giddens has centered her work around the mission of lifting up people whose contributions to American musical history have previously been overlooked or erased, and advocating for a more accurate understanding of the country's musical origins through art. Her third solo studio album, *You're The One*, was released this summer.

A panel discussion will take place in the mezzanine lobby of Zellerbach Hall at 6:30pm prior to the *American Railroad* performance, with a community conversation in the same location following. Both are free to all ticket holders.

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### **CALENDAR EDITORS PLEASE NOTE:**

**Friday, November 17, 8pm**

**Zellerbach Hall  
Bancroft Way at Dana Street,  
UC Berkeley campus**

#### ***American Railroad***

**Silkroad Ensemble with Rhiannon Giddens**

Rhiannon Giddens, *banjo and vocals*

Mazz Swift, *violin and vocals*

Wu Man, *pipa*

Sandeep Das, *tabla*

Haruka Fujii, *percussion*

Shawn Conley, *bass*

Karen Ouzounian, *cello and vocals*  
Kaoru Watanabe, *Japanese flutes and percussion*  
Michi Wiancko, *violin*  
Francesco Turrisi\*, *frame drums and accordion*  
Niwel Tsumbu\*, *guitar*  
Pura Fé Crescioni\*, *lap-steel guitar and voice*  
Yazhi Guo\*, *suona*

\*Guest artists

Projections by Camilla Tassi

**Program:** Under the leadership of 2023 Pulitzer Prize winner, multi-instrumentalist Rhiannon Giddens, the Grammy-winning Silkroad Ensemble illuminates the impact of under-recognized voices in America’s expansion west. The project explores the creation of the 19th-century Transcontinental Railroad through the contributions of African American, Chinese, Irish, Indigenous, and other communities, their cultures, and their music. Chinese traditional instruments like the *guzheng*, *pipa*, *erhu*, and *qin* are contrasted with the fiddle, bones, *tambo*, and banjo of Black musical traditions, and their Indigenous and Celtic counterparts. New compositions and commissions weave these disparate traditions together to retell the railroad’s history from a more inclusive perspective.

This concert is an [Illuminations: “Individual & Community”](#) event. A panel discussion will take place in the mezzanine lobby of Zellerbach Hall at 6:30pm prior to the *American Railroad* performance, with a community conversation in the same location following. Both are free to all ticket holders.

**Tickets:** \$38–\$90 (prices subject to change). UC Berkeley students can access exclusive discounts, including half-price tickets in all sections of the theater, as well as \$10 tickets for a limited number of prime seats (on sale at 12 noon on November 11) as part of Cal Performances’ [Golden Bear Circle program](#). More information about student tickets and discounts is available at [calperformances.org/ucb-students](https://calperformances.org/ucb-students).

Tickets are available at [calperformances.org](https://calperformances.org), by phone at (510) 642-9988, or in person at the Ticket Office at Zellerbach Hall, Tuesday–Friday, 12–5:30pm and Saturday–Sunday, 1–5 pm. For information about discounts, visit [calperformances.org/discounts](https://calperformances.org/discounts).

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