REVIEW · BLUES

At the Purchaser's Option | Rhiannon Giddens

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Before the melody there is a commercial formula. Then, inside those few words, a mother and a child appear. The language of the market is **cold, dry, impersonal, bureaucratic and cruel**; the scene it conjures burns like a room with no exit, like an archive page that keeps the chill and lets the fire seep through.

Rhiannon Giddens trained as an opera singer at Oberlin Conservatory, but her work also turned to the old-time traditions and the Black string bands of North Carolina. With the Carolina Chocolate Drops she brought those stories back to centre stage; historical research has stayed with her ever since, all the way to the opera *Omar*, composed with Michael Abels and awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

Giddens has said she came across a sale notice for an enslaved young woman. She had a nine-month-old child. Whether the child was included in the sale

depended on the buyer's choice. The song's title keeps the coldness of that formula intact: *At the Purchaser's Option*.

The document records a transaction. The song tries to imagine the person the document does not describe. The notice leaves almost no room for the woman; Giddens brings her voice closer, without pretending she can fill every gap in the archive. The song becomes a torch aimed at a historical trace: it lights what the document leaves in shadow, like a candle that does not cancel the night but shows who was left in the dark.

Giddens has explained that she did not want the story to stop at the violence. Against material dispossession stands an inner capacity to resist. Resistance does not make what happens any less cruel; it stops cruelty from being the only frame in which the woman can be seen. It is a thread, **thin, tenacious, fragile, resilient and invisible**, stretched between the document and the imagination, like a rope bridge hung over a historical void.

> ***What can a singer do before an archive that kept the price of a person, but not her voice?***

LISTEN

At the Purchaser's Option — Rhiannon Giddens — is in our playlist Acoustic Blues, Roots & Dust.

Rhiannon Giddens. Updated every Friday. Selected by ear.

LISTEN FIRST. SELECT SECOND.