PRESS INFORMATION

U.S. Superstar Rhiannon Giddens Takes Over Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie

»Reflektor« Festival featuring line-up of guest artists – from 25 to 29 November

Hamburg, 03.11.2026: Rhiannon Giddens is set to take the reins of the Elbphilharmonie for a whole five days: The singer, composer and multi-instrumentalist from North Carolina is curating a »Reflektor« Festival, to be held from 25 to 29 November 2026. Over the course of nine concerts, she brings together artists and musical traditions in constellations that cannot be experienced anywhere else in the world. Together with her long-time musical partner Francesco Turrisi, the Silkroad Ensemble founded by Yo-Yo Ma and musical contemporaries and peers including kora player Seckou Keita, pianist Lara Downes and cellist Karen Ouzounian, she offers up fresh perspectives on the diverse roots and cultural connections of American music. Long celebrated in the U.S. as an exceptional artist, Giddens has collaborated with Beyoncé, composed film scores and won the Pulitzer Prize for her opera »Omar«. Her music bridges folk and classical, past and present, Africa and America. In doing so, she brings to life influences and stories that have long been overlooked in American music history. The festival forms part of the Elbphilharmonie's »USA 250« series, which showcases diverse takes on the music of the United States during the renowned Hamburg concert hall's anniversary season. Shortly after the midterm elections, Rhiannon Giddens invites audiences to rediscover America's musical roots. The banjo, whose history stretches back to Africa, plays a particularly important role in her work, as she places the instrument's origins firmly in the spotlight. Tickets for all events are available at www.elbphilharmonie.de.

She is one of the defining voices of American folk music, played banjo on Beyoncé's Grammy-winning album »Cowboy Carter« and has enjoyed international success with her band, the Carolina Chocolate Drops. Rhiannon Giddens is an extraordinary artist who blends folk, country, soul, gospel and opera in her own distinctive way. Born in North Carolina in 1977 to an African American mother with Indigenous roots and a white father, she discovered her passion for American roots music while studying opera in Ohio. Anyone who listens to Giddens soon realises that she is not only an outstanding musician but also a passionate storyteller and researcher. She is set to open the »Reflektor« Festival with an intimate performance in the Recital Hall alongside multi-instrumentalist **Francesco Turrisi** (25 November). Their programme **»When I Am Laid in Earth«**, whose title references Henry Purcell's famous Baroque aria, builds a musical bridge between American and Italian folk traditions. Songs from the early Baroque period are juxtaposed with African American spirituals, while her own compositions sit alongside new interpretations of arias. In the process, the fluid transitions between classical and popular music become strikingly apparent.

Rhiannon Giddens traces the African roots and influences that continue to shape American music to this day. This is particularly evident in her principal instrument, the banjo. With her project **»Juba Zinga Jubilee – Bringing Early Banjo Music Back Home«** (26 November), Giddens takes the audience on a journey through the instrument's history. Together with Francesco Turrisi, Congolese guitarist **Niwel Tsumbu** and percussionist **Éamonn Cagney**, she frees the banjo from some common country music clichés and brings to life the diverse influences that have helped form its evolution. Rhiannon Giddens has also made a name for herself as a composer of opera and ballet. Along with members of the **Silkroad Ensemble**, of which she is artistic director, she is set to present excerpts from her Pulitzer Prize-winning opera **»Omar«** and the ballet **»Black Lucy and the Bard«** (27 November). »Omar« tells the story of the scholar Omar ibn Said, who was abducted from Senegal in the early 19th century and enslaved in the United States. Musically, the work combines bluegrass, gospel and spirituals with African and Arabic sounds. »Black Lucy and the Bard« is based on Caroline Randall Williams' poetry collection »Lucy Negro, Redux«, which reinterprets Shakespeare's sonnets from the perspective of a Black woman. Both works are being performed at the »Reflektor« Festival in new arrangements for piano quintet.

On the Saturday, two female artists take the stage in the Recital Hall: Cellist and composer **Karen Ouzounian**, also a member of the Silkroad Ensemble, presents her project **»Mayrig – Mutter«** together with pianist **Lembit Beecher** (28 November). The Armenian word for »mother« serves as the starting point for a deeply personal musical portrait exploring origins, loss and hope. Ouzounian combines recorded memories of her mother and grandmother with Armenian folk music and French chansons. The result is a multi-layered soundscape for cello, piano, electronics and vocals that connects individual family histories with collective experiences of migration, trauma and cultural identity. Pianist **Lara Downes** also explores the cultural diversity of American music. In her solo programme **»Finding Home«** (28 November), she traces a musical arc from the 20th century to the present day. In doing so, she deliberately shines a spotlight on forgotten and underrepresented composers and their works, opening up new ways of looking at American music history.

In **»The People Could Fly«** (28 November), Rhiannon Giddens and eight international guest artists explore the African roots of American music and the connections between musical traditions across continents. **Leyla McCalla** and Louis Michot continue this musical journey of discovery: Through French-language songs and dances, they weave together African, Creole, Cajun and Haitian influences with Louisiana's French heritage (29 November). Also taking the stage on 29 November is Senegalese kora virtuoso **Seckou Keita**. In a programme featuring music from his album »22 Strings«, he unfolds intricately woven, hypnotic compositions that shift between tranquil sound patterns, expressive vocals and funky, virtuosic rhythms. To close the »Reflektor« Festival, the **Silkroad Ensemble**, under the artistic direction of Rhiannon Giddens, performs its programme **»Sanctuary: The Power of Resonance and Ritual«** (29 November). Drawing on musical traditions from Italy, Morocco and the U.S., the musicians explore the unifying power of music as a source of comfort and community. At the heart of the programme are the hypnotic effects of repeated rhythms and the power of shared musical rituals to bring people together across cultural boundaries.

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