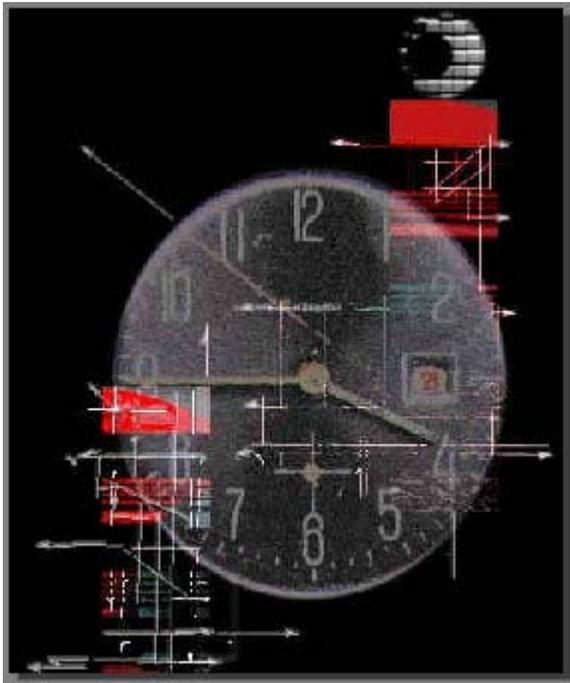




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A Conversation With LA Opera's James Conlon About His New Position, His Music and His Mission to Revive Lost Music

By Carol Jean Delmar
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When Patti LuPone was asked what made James Conlon such a vibrant conductor, she answered: "His passion." And she should know because the two have been friends and artistic colleagues since their student days at Juilliard.

"He was just one of the happiest human beings that I ever met, and he supported the Drama Division of the Juilliard School when not very many other students did," she said

from her home in Connecticut. “Many of us became friends with Jimmy because he was very enthusiastic about the Drama Division and us as actors.”

Conlon, 56, will conduct LuPone in Los Angeles Opera’s new production of Kurt Weill’s “Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny” in February and March.

“I’ve always thought I should do Brecht-Weill,” continued LuPone. “I thought I was a perfect candidate for that style of music and acting, and it will certainly challenge me as a musician. It will be risky; it will be edgy; it will be challenging; and it will be everything that one expects from a theatrical experience. This will be my second full opera, so I’m freaking out.”



The production will also star Audra McDonald and Anthony Dean Griffey and will mark Conlon’s third assignment this season as Los Angeles Opera’s new music director. He will conduct “Tannhäuser” almost concurrently.

Becoming the company’s new music director was the farthest thing from his mind a few years ago. Although he first conducted the New York Philharmonic in 1974 and debuted at the Met in 1976, he lived and conducted mostly in Europe for 20 years as music director of the Rotterdam Philharmonic, general music director of the city of Cologne, and principal conductor of the Paris Opera. But then he decided to move back to the U.S. with his wife so that their children could be educated in America. That’s when LA Opera’s general director, Plácido Domingo, persuaded him to do more than just freelance. Domingo realized how significant Conlon’s presence in LA might be.

“Opera News” recently named him one of the 25 most powerful names in US opera and one of the four most influential conductors in the US today. “His ability to reach out and connect to an audience with a single piece of music is extraordinary,” said “Opera News” editor-in-chief F. Paul Driscoll from his office in New York. “Los Angeles is a town that thrives on that kind of excitement.”

When I sat down to chat with Conlon in the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion recently, I was immediately struck by his intensity. He looked me squarely in the eyes and told me what he believed. He was wearing a casual black shirt and pants, seemed rushed and on overdrive, but was eager to talk about his wider goals. We discussed his new position as music director, the upcoming productions of “Mahagonny” and “Tannhäuser,” and about his mission to revive the music of composers who were persecuted during the Nazi era.

ON HIS NEW POSITION AS MUSIC DIRECTOR

When first asked to explain the difference between being a conductor and music director, Conlon observed that as a conductor, he is able to perform and interpret music all over the world and experience a different chemistry with each orchestra. Some experiences are better than others, he said. “As a music director, you marry yourself to that theater or orchestra and develop it,” he said, adding that he has seen symphonic conductors who “drop in on an opera” and think that all they have to do is direct the orchestra. “This is completely inadequate as a music director,” he elaborated. “You have to know the basic repertory, all of the Italian tradition right through ‘bel canto,’ right through Verdi and Puccini, right through all the ‘verismo’ operas. You have to know Mozart and the German repertoire -- Wagner, Strauss, Weber. You have to see where Wagner came from and where he was leaving. You have to have knowledge of Baroque opera. You have to know the human voice and all its potential. You have to be able to coach singers. You have to love theater and text. In my opinion, you have to plunge and immerse yourself into the languages of those operas that you’re doing. If you do not have a full grasp of the entire phenomenon -- the music, drama, theater, text, poetry and language -- you are not fully equipped to be the music director of an opera company.”

Although at this moment he only has a three-year contract with LA Opera, he hopes to see the company climb to the No. 2 spot right under the Met, which is probable and possible, he said, if the Los Angeles community continues its ongoing support and commitment to the company.

“I think that LA Opera is a very exciting place to be right now because it’s the fastest growing company in the country,” he continued. “I believe that you can be innovative here because there is an openness to doing the standard repertory in a special way, and there is an openness to doing the works of composers that are rarely heard.”

CONTINUING THE THOUGHT: DIFFERENT OPERAS – SIMILAR THEMES

Clearly, he is very excited about conducting both Kurt Weill’s “Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny” and Wagner’s “Tannhäuser.” “The great thing about these masterpieces and wonderful music is that it is all terribly relevant now,” he said. “They are about two different subjects, but in some respects they have something to say that is similar.”

“Mahagonny,” he explained, which premiered in 1930 with a libretto by Bertolt Brecht, is about an imaginary town where the inhabitants neglect the societal pressures that determine right from wrong, and they break the rules. Mahagonny, the town, is described in LA Opera’s promotional brochure as “the city of loose women and ex-cons where pleasure is king, greed wins the day, and the only crime is to run out of cash.” But of course, the city is doomed.

In “Tannhäuser,” Wagner explores man’s desire to break the rules again. ““Tannhäuser” is the most extraordinary expression of the Faustian concept that two spirits burn in my breast – the spiritual and the physical,” Conlon said.

“It goes back to that understanding of humankind as split between the physical being and spiritual being -- the mystery and discomfort that was inherent in the Romantic era for the male vision of love, where sexuality on the one hand was compelling but suspect, and purity on the other hand was attractive and yet somehow unattainable. In ‘Tannhäuser,’ you have Venus as a representative of erotic love and Elisabeth as a pure expression of generous spiritual love divorced of sensuality. . . . Tannhäuser is torn from one side to the other.”

Conlon digressed briefly to discuss “Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg,” which also explores the nature of man and is set to be performed by LA Opera in the near future.

“There is another important theme in ‘Tannhäuser’ that will be revisited again very importantly in ‘Meistersinger,’ which is the old art [of song] vs. the new,” he continued. Both story lines include song contests.

“Tannhäuser comes in and wrecks society with his revolutionary song. Why is he privileged to have this new music in him?” Conlon asked rhetorically, then answered: “Because he has gone outside of society to experience Venusberg, and he comes back with this extraordinary, powerful message, but it doesn’t fit into the rules and so he is punished. He is cast out of society because he has brought this into his art. Now later on in ‘Meistersinger,’ we will have Beckmesser who will be the protector of the rules, and Hans Sachs, who knew the rules but is the visionary, the father who has the generous view toward the future and will give way to the new music that comes out of the mouth of the young Walther, and Walther is, of course, the young Wagner.”

All three operas are about man’s desire to find peace within the world through exploration. They are about mankind’s struggle to adhere to the rules, and about that side of man’s nature that is interested in the rules but doesn’t understand the spirit.

“I’m sure that in viewing ‘Mahagonny,’ people will draw many conclusions, maybe contradictory ones, and that’s what makes it a great work. It poses more questions than it answers,” said Conlon. “You don’t leave ‘Mahagonny’ feeling that you have all the answers, but you do feel that you have been able to take a very careful look at humanity and many of its behavioral patterns and excesses, and you come away certainly challenged, if not wiser from it.

“Kurt Weill was able to take the remnants of the tradition of classical Viennese music with all the elegance and grace and sentimentality of the turn of the century Viennese music and put it in a political context and theatrical context that was anything but that, and I find the combination absolutely on the level of genius,” he said.

CONLON’S MISSION: REVIVING THE LOST MUSIC

Kurt Weill’s “Mahagonny” is the first work Conlon is performing for LA Opera by a composer who was forced to flee his native Germany during the Nazi era. Categorized as “Entartete” or “degenerate” music, Conlon is on a mission to revive the lost music of composers who were not as fortunate as Weill and immigrants like Arnold Schoenberg

and Erich Wolfgang Korngold who became famous in the United States after the war. Some of the forgotten composers perished in concentration camps, while the luckier ones escaped to America but had to reinvent themselves and find new professions to survive. Conlon is attempting to ensure that their silenced Holocaust music finds its place in classical music history.

It all started when he discovered Alexander von Zemlinsky. “I fell in love,” he said. “I had the means with which to perform and record [his music]. I didn’t know when I started performing Zemlinsky that I was going to end up recording all of his works. This fulfills for me one of the definitions of classical music, which is that you can go back to it over-and-over again and find it richer on each repetition; so for me, that’s enough. It belongs in the repertoire.”

Conlon has made nine recordings of Zemlinsky’s works and said that along the way, he became interested in and recorded the music of other mostly Jewish composers of that era, including Viktor Ullmann, who was sent to the Terezin concentration camp and later died in Auschwitz; Erwin Schulhoff, who died in a camp in Wülzburg, Bavaria; Franz Schreker, who died in Berlin in 1934; Czech composer Bohuslav Martinu; and Karl Amadeus Hartmann, an anti-fascist Catholic who refused to allow his music to be performed in Germany while the Nazis were in power, but attempted to rebuild musical life in Munich after the war. Conlon also plans to focus on the music of Walter Braunfels, Hans Krása, Pavel Haas, Gideon Klein, Ernst Krenek and the pre-1940 operas of Korngold. He is performing these composers’ works all over the world and is now concentrating his efforts in the United States, specifically in the summer Ravinia Festival, where he is music director, and at LA Opera.

But it’s not all about being a moral person that drives Conlon. “You don’t have to be Jewish to be horrified by the atrocities of the Holocaust,” he said. “I’m not doing this because of a religious conviction,” although he added that if he could reverse the injustices done to these composers, he would.

The artistic value of their music is his primary concern. “It carries with it what the Germans call ‘Zeitgeist,’ which is the feeling or spirit of the time, and that spirit of the time is necessary to be heard,” he said. “If somebody found 5,000 paintings from a particular era of history, I cannot imagine that museums would not be interested in putting them out as representations of that time. Music is different because you can’t put it in a museum – you have to play it.”

Historically, these silenced composers either died or fled from countries including Germany, Austria and the former Czechoslovakia, thus leaving a creative void. Their music was never revisited in those countries, and no one in the composers’ new homes was interested either. Serial and then electronic music took over, and their music was wiped out of classical music history. “These composers were murdered twice, first during their lifetime and a second time in the postwar period,” Conlon said. “The Nazis ruptured a tradition which is one of the greatest cultural accomplishments in Western civilization, which was the uninterrupted flow of the development of Western classical music.”

Various musicologists, composers and conductors in Europe have performed or written about this lost music, which has only served to spur Conlon on. "There comes a time suddenly when there is a confluence of influences that make people interested and open to this, and that time is now," he said. "It [the trend] is coming to America, and I'm pushing it here because I think that curiosity and awareness will bring great benefits."

"My take on it is that the problem a lot of these composers had was that there was no champion for them," said E. Randol Schoenberg, the grandson of composer Arnold Schoenberg and former chairman of the now defunct Orpheus Trust, which documented information about these persecuted composers. "Now they have a champion," he said.

Conlon is planning two concerts in March which are part of the Los Angeles Opera's new "Recovered Voices" project, initiated by a \$3.25 million gift from philanthropist Marilyn Ziering to expose the music of these forgotten composers, plus \$750,000 from other donors. He will conduct Zemlinsky's "A Florentine Tragedy," a one-act opera based on Oscar Wilde's play on a love triangle between a merchant, his wife and her lover. He will also conduct excerpts from Ullmann's opera, "The Emperor of Atlantis," which was composed in the Terezin concentration camp and mirrors much of the tension and hopelessness therein; Schulhoff's "Flames," a musical tragicomedy about Don Juan; Schreker's "The Stigmatized," about a deformed nobleman who decides to give a paradisiacal part (Elysium) to the people of Genoa; Krenek's jazz opera, "Jonny spielt auf"; Korngold's "Die Tote Stadt," which depicts the inner turmoil of a man who is mourning the death of his wife in a decaying city; and Braunfels' spiritual escapist opera, "The Birds."

This spring, Conlon is set to conduct "Simon Boccanegra" at the Paris Opera and "Falstaff" in Bologna in June. He will retain his duties as music director of the Cincinnati May Festival, and then this summer, it's off to Ravinia.

"My dreams are to see the works of Zemlinsky, Ullmann, Schreker, Schulhoff, Korngold and others become a regular part of the operatic repertory," he said. "'Recovered Voices' and 'Mahagonny' are a first step in that direction."