Orchestrating Opera’s Emotions

Conductor Sara Jobin highlights the intimate stories within grand productions.

by STEPHANIE GARLOCK

T was Francis Poulenc’s La Voix Humaine—fittingly, “the human voice”—that convinced conductor Sara Jobin ’92 to make her career in opera. As she took the podium to conduct her first full dress rehearsal as an assistant at Opera San Jose, she was overcome by how the emotions—of depression, and lost love—were conveyed by the timbre of the soprano’s voice alone. “For me, it was like the voice was riding on this velvet cushion of sound,” she says. “I knew I was hooked for life.”

Though Jobin calls opera something she “fell into,” her résumé reads as if built for this rich musical form. As a teenager, she studied piano at Tanglewood’s summer music program, but soon found herself distracted by the chance to watch the Boston Symphony Orchestra rehearse, especially under the guidance of Leonard Bernstein ’39, D.Mus. ’67. It taught her the power of good conducting: “He had music running through his veins,” she remembers. “When Bernstein was up there, it was like they were playing their souls for him.”

She entered Harvard at 16, originally to study Russian—a skill that later earned Jobin her first opera job: helping Opera San Jose singers pronounce their lines for Tchaikovsky’s Eugene Onegin. After a year off, she returned to concentrate in women’s studies, with a minor in music. She wrote a senior thesis about five women conductors, in effect “studying what my life would be like if I chose this as a profession.” By the time Jobin arrived at the Pierre Monteux School in Maine to study conducting, those reading her application “said it looked like I’d bathed in music.”

The techniques Jobin picked up there are simple and traditional, she says: “to try to be clear, and sing the music from inside.” To prepare for a performance, she...
spends most of her time at the piano, getting to know the music well enough to earn musicians’ trust. Conducting also requires what she calls an “x factor”—an ability “to communicate the music physically” that can’t be taught.

She learned to translate these symphonic-conducting skills to opera through apprentice-style tutelage at Opera San Jose and the San Francisco Opera. Given opera’s many moving parts, Jobin reflects, “There’s a lot more that can go wrong.” She must manage soloists, several dozen chorus members, and an orchestra of 50 to 75 instrumentalists, often with little or no rehearsal. The action on stage means the audience won’t be looking her way—but neither will the singers. When everything goes well, especially in big operas by Wagner or Strauss, she feels like “the captain, at the helm of a huge ship.” Despite the massive scale of such productions, she says the connections she creates with the orchestra and singers are intense. “What we’re doing actually is very intimate, to create the sound that’s going to touch someone.”

The emotions of those big, Wagnerian productions are what attracted Jobin to opera, but she’s had trouble with their plots, full of weak female characters, tragic homosexuality, and racist portrayals of minorities. “I love all this old music,” she reflects. “But the stories about the damsel in distress? We’re so over that.”

In response, she champions contemporary opera. Since 2011, she’s served as the chief conductor for the Center for Contemporary Opera in New York, helping develop younger composers and using music to tell stories that feel relevant to today’s opera audiences. In 2008, Jobin founded the Different Voices Opera Project with psychologist Carol Gilligan, Ph.D. ’64, RI ’83 (formerly Graham professor of gender studies at Harvard), and together they have worked to develop Pearl, a version of The Scarlet Letter told from the perspective of Hester Prynne’s daughter, and A Thousand Splendid Suns, based on Khaled Hosseini’s novel about the lives of two Afghan women.

Issues of gender and performance have been major touchstones for Jobin’s own life and career. In 2004, she became the first woman to conduct a main-stage, subscription performance at the San Francisco Opera, leading Puccini’s Tosca. Offstage, she has excelled in judo, which she began studying during her year off from Harvard. In 1998 and 2006, she won national championships for Ju-no-Kata, the arm of the sport in which pairs perform choreographed kata—sets of forms. In kata, the partners are “throwing the energy back and forth, just like you do in music,” Jobin says, “and you’re expressing it through your body.”

More recently, she’s found an outlet in her commitment to climate justice as well. Though she lives in the rural Berkshires, Jobin owns no car, preferring to get around, even through the long winter, on a well-outfitted bicycle. Her connections to the environment have played out professionally in the world premiere of Purchase of Manhattan, an opera by Mohican composer Brent Michael Davids about the first encounter between Dutch settlers and the Lenape Indians. The work incorporates a group of native singers and a native flute, and Jobin conducted the first performance this past November.

One of her favorite moments comes near the beginning, as Peter Minuit, the tenor, arrives on the island singing a waltz, gleeful about the land’s potential value. Below him in the duet, the steady, drum-like Lenape baritone sings about his love for the land’s maternal bounty. As Jobin conducted, she felt the power of opera to help “access emotions that there aren’t necessarily words for. That story is so deep, you can’t even articulate it.” Even without words, opera, and the music of emotion, let you try.

---

**His Own “Decisive Moment”**

*Photographer Tim Carlson focuses on athletes in nature.*

**by STEVE POTTER**

As a newly minted Harvard Crimson photographer, Timothy G. Carlson ’71 made his way into University Hall on April 9, 1969, during its occupation by student protesters. Four of his almost elegiac black-and-white photographs from that day, of the protesters meeting in a sunlit hall and of the violent nighttime police bust that ended the occupation, appeared in Life magazine, a pair of them as two-page spreads.

That portfolio gained Carlson admission to Harvard’s visual and environmental studies department, where his senior thesis was a photo essay on his hometown, Daytona Beach, Florida. The work of legendary photojournalists like Henri Cartier-Bresson,