
Kelley
O'CONNOR
"Richly expressive."
-Los Angeles Times

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Kelley O'Connor, mezzo-soprano
2026-2027 Biography

The Grammy® Award-winning mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor is one of the most compelling vocal artists of her generation. She is known for a commanding intensity on stage, a velvet vocal tone, and the ability to create sheer magic in her interpretations. O'Connor performs and inhabits a broad selection of repertoire, from Beethoven, Mahler and Brahms to Dessner, Corigliano and Adams; she is sought after by many of today's most accomplished composers. She performs with leading orchestras and conductors around the world, with preeminent artists in recitals and chamber music, and with highly acclaimed opera companies in the U.S. and abroad.

In the 2026–2027 season, O'Connor gives the world premiere of a new song cycle by Gonzalo Grau with the New York Philharmonic under the baton of Gustavo Dudamel. She sings Beethoven 9 with the Aspen Festival Orchestra and Baltimore and Pacific Symphonies. Other highlights include Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* with the Kalamazoo Symphony; Handel's *Messiah* with the New Jersey Symphony; Bernstein's *Songfest* with the Kansas City Symphony; Mahler's *Songs of a Wayfarer* with the Fort Worth Symphony; John Adams' *El Niño* with Gulbenkian Orchestra; and two performances of Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder* in Spain with Orquesta Sinfónica del Principado de Asturias, conducted by Giancarlo Guerrero. Chamber and recital highlights include performances at Chamber Music Napa, Chamber Music in the Chilterns, and Garth Newel.

Recently, O'Connor premiered an extended version of Thomas Adès's *America (A Prophecy)* in her debut with the Gewandhausorchester under Andris Nelsons; gave the world premiere of Christopher Theofanidis's *Siddhartha, She* at the Aspen Music Festival; performed Mahler's Second Symphony with the Kansas City Symphony Orchestra and his Third Symphony with the San Francisco Symphony; John Adams's *El Niño* with the Houston Symphony; and a gala performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with the New York Philharmonic to celebrate the opening of the newly renovated David Geffen Hall at Lincoln Center.

In demand by many of the most heralded composers of the modern day, Kelley O'Connor has recently premiered works by John Corigliano, Kareem Roustom, Joby Talbot, and Bryce Dessner. John Adams wrote the title role of *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* for O'Connor and she has performed the work, both in concert and in the Peter Sellars fully staged

production, under the batons of John Adams, Gustavo Dudamel, Grant Gershon, Gianandrea Noseda, Sir Simon Rattle, and David Robertson. She continues to be the eminent living interpreter of Peter Lieberson's *Neruda Songs*, having performed this moving set of songs with orchestras around the world. She also created the role of Federico García Lorca in Osvaldo Golijov's *Ainadamar*, for which she has received unanimous critical acclaim.

Operatic highlights include her Seattle Opera debut as Anna in a concert version of Berlioz's *Les Troyens*, the title role of Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* presented by Boston Lyric Opera in a new production by Broadway theater director Sarna Lapine, *Carmen* with Los Angeles Opera, Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, *Madama Butterfly* in a new production by Lillian Groag at the Boston Lyric Opera and at the Cincinnati Opera, Berlioz's *Béatrice et Bénédict* at Opera Boston, *Falstaff* with the Santa Fe Opera, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Lyric Opera of Chicago and the Canadian Opera Company.

For her debut with the Atlanta Symphony in *Ainadamar,* Kelley O'Connor joined Robert Spano for performances and a Grammy® Award-winning Deutsche Grammophon recording. Her recording catalogue also includes Mahler's Third Symphony with Jaap van Zweden and the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Lieberson's *Neruda Songs* and Michael Kurth's *Everything Lasts Forever* with Robert Spano and the Atlanta Symphony, Adams' *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* with Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, and Beethoven's Ninth Symphony with Franz Welser-Möst and the Cleveland Orchestra. O'Connor's newest recording, a collaboration with pianist and composer Robert Spano, is "Songs of Orpheus," a series of song cycles by Edvard Grieg, Claude Debussy, George Crumb, and Spano himself, on Sono Luminus (August 2025).

JUNE 2026. AT THE REQUEST OF THE ARTIST – PLEASE DO NOT ALTER THIS BIOGRAPHY

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Kelley O'Connor
Critical Acclaim

"Richly Expressive."

Los Angeles Times

"Kelley O'Connor's Lucretia was the emotional center of the opera. Her poised mezzo shone, especially when singing of her longing for her husband, and in the convincing power of her lower register in her stern rebuff of Tarquinius's advances. The quiet dignity with which she greeted Collatinus after her rape was devastating."

Opera News

""Her rich, caramel-colored voice has portrayed everyone from poet Federico Garcia Lorca (in Osvaldo Golijov's 2003 opera Ainadamar) to the naughty brother in Hansel and Gretel and much in between. Thursday she was in splendid form and "O that tellest good tidings to Zion," gorgeously delivered, was one of the evening's hold-your-breath moments."

Arts ATL

"Enter mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor. Dressed in an elegant, sparkling gown that evoked the paintings of Klimt (Mahler's contemporary in turn-of-the-century Vienna) O'Connor's rich, dark-hued voice galvanized both the audience and the orchestra alike. Her first line is "O Man, take heed!" Everyone in the hall did. She articulated Nietzsche's German text expertly and sang the plaintive passages with an artful modesty that called to mind former Vienna master Christa Ludwig."

NJ.com

"Mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor was wan and sensitive in 'Der Einsame im Herbst,' and her closing 'Der Abschied' was simply breathtaking, and mesmerising in its intensity. It showcased not only O'Connor's remarkable richness and darkness of tone, but also her sheer range and suppleness of expression."

The Scotsman

"The most breathtaking moment arrived with the 'Urlicht' ('Primeval Light'), a solo for mezzo-soprano performed by O'Connor with exquisite control, expressive beauty and a voice of sheer gold."

Cincinnati Business Courier

"Kelley O'Connor's brief appearance as Erda was something of a miracle. A natural stage presence, she walked on stage and all eyes were on her as she warned Wotan of the ring's danger. O'Connor's instrument is immense and imposing and she sang with a dark tone. O'Connor lengthened the line holding each note and emphasizing the text. It almost felt like there was no need to read the subtitles because her timbre expressed the foreboding destruction."

Opera Wire

"The matched set of concluding movements was inaugurated by a breathtakingly fine account of "Urlicht" by mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor, singing with ravishingly velvet vocal tone and an astonishing ability to sustain the song's long, ardent phrases. Not since the late Lorraine Hunt Lieberson's recorded performance with the orchestra in 2002 has this music been rendered with such physical presence or shimmery grace."

San Francisco Chronicle

Kelley O'CONNOR

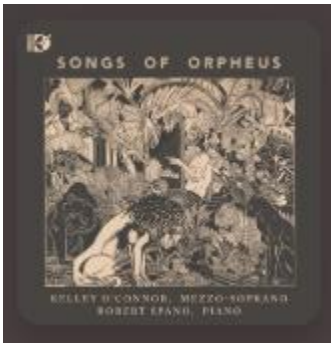
The New York Times

August 22, 2025

5 Classical Music Albums You Can Listen to Right Now

"Songs of Orpheus"

Kelley O'Connor, mezzo-soprano; Robert Spano, piano (Sono Luminus)



The American mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor has long made Debussy's "Trois Chansons de Bilitis," set to Pierre Louÿs's pseudo-antique verses masquerading as Sappho, a calling card on the recital stage. Her voluptuous mezzo suits their playful eroticism, her tone by turns airy and sumptuous. Here she records them for the first time, placing their languid sensuality in dialogue with songs spanning 150 years: Robert Spano's recent "Sonnets to Orpheus," George Crumb's youthful "Three Early Songs" and Edvard Grieg's "Haugtussa." The result is a searching meditation on nature and love refracted through the lens of myth.

In Spano's affectionate settings of Rilke, her inky low register comes into its own, even as her German diction is sometimes distractingly accented. Her dramatic conviction animates the shimmering ambiguities of Rilke's metaphysical riddles, especially in "Breath, you invisible poem," in which radiant stillness gives way to ecstatic rhythmic excitement. Grieg's song cycle "Haugtussa," about the visions and heartbreak of an infatuated young girl, comes alive with rustic warmth in O'Connor's tender reading. Crumb's three early songs, written when he was a teenager, are rendered with hypnotic simplicity. Throughout, Spano proves an alert partner at the piano, shaping textures that shimmer, sigh and sustain O'Connor's eloquent artistry.

CORINNA da FONSECA-WOLLHEIM

Kelley O'CONNOR

OPERAWIRE

FEB 11, 2025

Q & A: Kelley O'Connor on Performing Thomas Adès' 'America: A Prophecy'

By Matt Costello

Acclaimed mezzo-soprano recently debuted an expanded version of Thomas Adès' "America: A Prophecy" with The Gewandhaus Orchestra under Andris Nelsons. Her other performances this season include Verdi's "Requiem"and Anna in Berlioz's monumental "Les Troyens". OperaWire was glad for this opportunity to discuss with the mezzo-soprano both the modern and the classical roles in her repertoire.

OperaWire: Hi Kelley — and thank you so much for making time for this OperaWire interview. To start, can you share with us the ways that Thomas Adès' "America: A Prophecy" has been extended? What did you find new, or even challenging, with the expanded work?

Kelley O'Connor: Originally, the work was two movements, but Adés has added a third movement which is for mezzo and full chorus. The challenging part for me in this third movement was that it is much more tranquil. After the prophetic and chaotic first two movements it was hard to slow my heart down and sing with grace! I embraced the choice for some straight tone in the first two movements to convey the message. I really leaned into the drama with an acquisitory, pointed tone. It is always good to challenge oneself, and I really leaned into exploring the extremes of my range and technique.

OW: Were there moments in performing it that you felt that the tone and message of the piece has changed, perhaps even grown more powerful?

O'Connor: Yes, I do believe that it is important to give that feeling of hope at the end of a piece to leave the audience feeling motivated. We should explore our mistakes, but truly hope we can move on from the

past. This gives the feeling of eternal renewal and not just the end of time.

OW: As you perform this new version, do you see the piece balancing both the 'prophecy' of dire events and yet, somehow – always – hope?

O'Connor: Now with the third movement, there is a feeling that maybe we can begin again. We can't forget the past, but we can move past it. Life goes on, and we must as well.

OW: And you have, of course, performed other major, modern works…such as "The Gospel According to the Other Mary," written for you by John Adams. How do you find creating a role for a modern premiere adds to the excitement of singing a major work?

O'Connor: For me, it is the most liberating form of music-making. There are sometimes known interpretations of a piece that can hinder your own creative ideas, but with new pieces you don't have that issue. You are free to be in the moment and make choices without the pressure of what has come before.

OW: You have also sung in many of the most – for me – richly expressive and gripping pieces in the traditional repertoire, such as Mahler's "2nd Symphony", Verdi's "Requiem" (not to mention his final gem, "Falstaff") and of course Beethoven's "9th Symphony." In addition to reflecting your remarkable range, what is it like for you – emotionally and personally – to sing in such powerful pieces? And do they each have their own unique musical and performance demands for you?

O'Connor: Each of these pieces has its own fulfilling moments. Mahler is my guy. I feel like he truly embraced the alto voice, and explored the many nuances and colors that come with that range. It is difficult to capture the hope for humanity in five minutes, but he is able to do that in the transformative "Urlicht" in Mahler 2. I performed my first Verdi "Requiem" this season, and it is one of the most fulfilling pieces I have done. Very challenging, but completely rewarding. Beethoven 9 has been in my life the longest, and is always a joy to perform. It never ceases to bring the audience hope, and that is irreplaceable in the times we live in.

OW: With such a range of roles and performances, an impossible question perhaps: what are a few of your own favorite opera roles or favorite choral/vocal pieces?

O'Connor: As I said, Mahler is my mainstay. I love all of his works, from song cycles to symphonies, and they really fit my personality and voice. An opera role I truly treasured was Lucretia in "The Rape of Lucretia." She is such a beautifully loyal and true woman who has to decide how to live once she is brutally taken advantage of. It is a trying journey, but one I truly loved working for.

OW: I also noted that you will sing Anna in Berlioz's "Les Troyens," a massive, even monumental opera – and a true rarity. Have you started working on that… and how are you enjoying and exploring that key role and its integral part in so much of the masterpiece?

O'Connor: This is a pleasure to work on as this huge work is rarely done. The cast is exquisite, and the music is a joy to sing. I enjoy playing the roles of supportive characters who really contribute to the drama as Anna does. Her relationship with Didon is, in a way, more telling than hers with Aeneas. And J'nai Bridges is a wonderful colleague.

OW: And speaking of Berlioz…in a very different vein – with you having sung in "Beatrice et Benedict," with its amazing duet – do you find emotional similarities with, for example, the duet Anna has with Dido in Act Three of "Les Troyens"?

O'Connor: I sang Ursule with Opera Boston. The two have similarities, but in "Beatrice et Benedict" the duet is a true moment of stillness in an otherwise very busy opera. Hero and her maid Ursule are relishing in

the beauty of the night. It is a memorable moment in the opera. Our duet in "Les Troyens" is full of drama as I am trying to encourage Didon to embrace love again after the death of her husband. She is very reluctant, but under my encouragement she does open her heart – only for it to be her demise.

OW: And a few last questions about "America: A Prophecy." With the piece now expanded and performed in various locations in the musical world, do you feel that today's audiences are more open to new music, often with strong messages and relevant stories to tell?

O'Connor: Now is the time. It is incredible that this piece could have had such a strong message 20 years ago, but it was still timely then. The world seems so polarized now. The "other" is scary and not embraced. Sometimes reflection on our own errors can help us move forward in a different direction.

OW: Lastly, what do you hope the audience took away from your performances of the newly expanded piece?

O'Connor: I hope there is a feeling that no matter what place we come to in life, there is always a chance for a new beginning. The cycle of life continues.

And thank you so much!

Kelley O'CONNOR

The Dallas Morning News

April 25,2026

Fort Worth Symphony adds projected paintings to a semi-Spanish program

By Scott Cantrell

Are orchestra concerts too visually boring for our hyper-stimulated age? Some say so, and some orchestras have essayed various visual additions to performances. Whether they're enhancements or distractions can be argued.

The Fort Worth Symphony has added costumed actors and dancers to some concerts and presented semi-staged operas — even Wagner's complete *Flying Dutchman*. Friday night's concert at Bass Performance Hall, billed as "Spanish Masters: An Evening of Music and Art," included a performance of Manuel de Falla's *Three Cornered Hat* (*El sombrero de tres picos*) with over-the-stage projections of Spanish paintings from the Kimbell Art Museum.

That was the only wholly Spanish item on the program, which opened with the *Rapsodie espagnole* of French composer Maurice Ravel. *Neruda Songs*, by American composer Peter Lieberson (1946-2011), set love poems — in Spanish — by the Chilean writer Pablo Neruda.

Lieberson's cycle was a five-part love song to his wife, mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, who in a too-short career developed almost a cult following. Already being treated for

cancer, she died only a year after premiering the cycle in 2005.

The poems range from the symbolist imagery of the opening “If your eyes were not the color of the moon” to clear-eyed contemplations of mortality. The orchestra writing represents latter-day impressionism, adding extra tang and ambiguity to passing harmonies, with brighter sonic splashes here and there.

Kelley O’Connor has been a frequent performer of the cycle, and her experience told in vividly personalized and projected singing, with just enough metal to her mezzo.

As in the Ravel and Falla, the orchestra played splendidly for music director Robert Spano. The Falla had a particularly huge dynamic range, appropriately so, with bright flashes of color, but both it and the Ravel evinced great care with nuances of rhythm, volume and color.

For the Falla, the orchestra played from stand lights, with lighting effects projected on the stage shell by Krista Billings. O'Connor also sang a couple of brief items from a box on the side of the stage. Alas, shifting, panning images projected by designer Jamie Milligan on that huge screen over the stage — ranging from a medieval altarpiece to paintings by Velázquez, El Greco, Ribera, Murillo, Picasso and Miró — had nothing to do with the music.

The score was prepared, after all, for a 1919 ballet about a miller, his wife and a lecherous magistrate, with sets and costumes by Picasso. The projected paintings’ religious figures and dour and scowling faces were often utterly at odds with the musical goings-on.

That projections *can* dramatically enhance an orchestra concert was demonstrated last November in a St. Louis Symphony performance of Stravinsky’s *Firebird*. With illustrations from the original Ballets Russes production, the projections supplied play-by-play accounts of the ballet’s action — who was doing what and when — occasionally pointing out details in the orchestrations. The FWSO’s presentation showed no comparable thought.

Kelley O'CONNOR

South Florida CLASSICAL REVIEW

March 8, 2026

Denève leads New World in radiant song-cycle and brilliant Ravel at Arsht

By Lawrence Budmen

Impressionistic magic was the order of the evening on Saturday as Stéphane Denève led the New World Symphony in an important 21st-century song cycle and a rarely heard version of a famous score at the Arsht Center. The splendid mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor added glamour and luster to the proceedings.

Neruda Songs by American composer Peter Lieberson has its own tragic history. Lieberson wrote the five-movement work for his wife Lorraine Hunt Lieberson who sang the premiere in 2005. She would die of breast cancer the following year. Five years later, the composer himself passed away from complication of lymphoma.

Lieberson's creation is nothing short of a masterpiece. His setting of five love poems by Pablo Neruda brims with beautiful invention, beguiling vocal writing and vivid instrumental effects. Touches of Andalusian color infuse the orchestral sonorities of "If your eyes were not the color of the moon," the opening song. O'Connor's radiant middle register fully commanded the song's joy while her high notes soared above the instrumental forces. Denève highlighted every tint and hue of the orchestral fabric.

O'Connor attacked the agitated phrases of "Love, love, the clouds went up the tower of the sky" with dramatically expressive fervor. "Don't go far off, not ever for a day" represents the cycle at its most passionate and the mezzo's vocal strength, beauty of timbre and romantic ardor fully encapsulated Lieberson's declaration of enduring devotion

A deep well of string tone formed the prelude to "And now your mind, Rest with your dream in my dream." With O'Connor's declamation bold and incisive. "My love, if I die and you don't" treats death with a sense of calm and flowing grace. O'Connor's formidable interpretive gifts were fully on display, imbuing this farewell with poignancy. Her voice blended with the winds to hypnotic and memorable effect.

O'Connor and Denève received an enthusiastic ovation, many audience members standing at the piece's quiet conclusion. The conductor held up the score and pointed to the composer's name on the front page, drawing cheers. Indeed, the work is an inspired mix of poetry and music and was fully served in this superb performance.

Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* was the first commission by impresario Serge Diaghilev for his Ballets Russes by a composer outside his Russian circle. While the second suite from the 1912 opus has become a repertoire staple, the full composition is infrequently programmed. That original version includes a prominent choral part. Denève presented the full 55-minute ballet score as Ravel conceived it.

Occupying the Arsht's choral risers above the orchestra, the Master Chorale of South Florida once again demonstrated what a terrific job director Brett Karlin has done in honing the group into a tightly unified,

responsive ensemble. After the opening silvery flute solo and luminous string figurations, the chorus' entrance emerged full and balanced, clearly heard over the full orchestral panoply.

Denève brought out every nuance of Ravel's panoramic sound pictures while maintaining forward thrust. His unerring sense of balance and control aided in blending the singers with the orchestra, and bringing out the chorus's precision. The music really gains greatly in impact when heard with the full vocal context.

The "Danse génerale" section was conveyed in crisp and nimble rhythms. "Danse grotesque de Dorcon" and "Danse guerriè" illustrate just how original and modern Ravel's score was at the time of its premiere. More than a suggestion of Kastchei's infernal dance from Stravinsky's *The Firebird* (written two years previously) crests through these movements and the clipped phrases were assayed with appropriately harsh, raucous abandon. Amid the outstanding ensemble effort, two harps provided undercurrent to the glistening soundscape while a wind machine added atmosphere and the burnished violas' tonal glow stood out. First chair solos were consistently excellent across the board with special honors for the sweet and vivid violin interludes.

Part III of the ballet comprises the familiar, oft played suite but there was nothing hackneyed or routine in Denève's reading. Emphasizing individual timbres and textures that often go obscured in less studious iterations, his leadership was both exciting and insightful. Taking a brisk tempo for the concluding "Bacchanale," Denève's propulsion brought an exciting climax to a well-rehearsed and conceived performance. The chorus' final outburst put an exclamation point on a special opportunity to hear an impressionist classic in its original form.

Kelley O'CONNOR

ARTS ATL

December 15, 2023

ASO rings in the season with the potent hymns of Handel's 'Messiah'

By Pierre Ruhe

Way back in 1818, Boston's Handel and Haydn Society — devoted to music of the old masters — gave the U.S. premiere of Handel's *Messiah*. Although the three-hour oratorio was meant for the Easter season when it premiered in 1842 and remained a fixture of Britain's Holy Week throughout the 18th century and beyond, Boston first heard it at Christmastime, where it's remained firmly planted ever since.

Handel was a practical composer, and, as with most of his music, he revised *Messiah* each time it was performed in his lifetime, tailoring it to the available singers and instrumental forces. That there's no "definitive" version, perhaps contributed to its plasticity. As Britain's empire and wealth grew, so too did *Messiah*. Victorian-era productions swelled to elephantine proportions in gigantic spaces, with a thousand performers blasting away on the oratorio's three-part commentary on the Nativity, Passion, Resurrection and Ascension. As a critic once observed, the work transformed from Handel's ideal of a sublime "musical entertainment" to a "religious and patriotic totem."

But *Messiah*, like *A Christmas Carol* or *The Nutcracker*, is high art of the season, an all-but-indestructible evergreen. These works are also, to use the vulgar term, a "cash cow" — a work so popular and festive that arts organizations, perpetually strapped for cash and looking to keep costs low, can come to perform them almost by rote.

If you think about it, once you (and your audience) are committed to *Messiah* at Christmas, performing the complete work with all that non-Christmassy stuff doesn't really make sense. So you cut two-thirds of the score, tack on the built-in standing ovation "Hallelujah," and it's a win-win: marketing is a snap; the evening is shorter; less rehearsal time is needed; there's no overtime costs for the orchestra; the audience, forgetting what the full score sounds like, is satisfied; rinse and repeat.

Perhaps the only meaningful tradition that keeps this model afloat is that it does good box office.

Thursday in Symphony Hall, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra returned to its own performance traditions for *Messiah*. Since its abbreviated Handel lasts just an hour, the concert's first half was J.S. Bach's Christmas Oratorio — or, more precisely, just the first cantata of Bach's three-part work.

For many years, this show has been conducted by ASO Choral Director Norman Mackenzie, who slims down the ensemble to sort-of Baroque proportions. He gets most of the string players to use vibrato sparingly and use the bow more lightly, and gets the woodwinds to add zest and brilliance to their phrasing.

They were quick to warm up. The opening orchestral sinfonia was a bit chunky and hesitant until, in the nimble fugal section, the musicians loosened up and listened to each other as much as watched their conductor's baton. Mackenzie has gravitas as a conductor, and he gave this little overture a sense of direction and purpose,

carrying the weight of the ideas and images that were to come.

Last time I heard Mackenzie in this music, a few years ago, his reading of act 1 — called "Part the First" in the score — was rather fussy and distracted by mannerisms. This year, he's streamlined his approach, with high spirits and minimal shaping, letting the music and the expression unfold organically. Each of the celebrated choruses and arias flowed, mostly, although, as he approached the end of each movement, he tended to slow way down and drag the harmony to its resolution with unnecessary grandeur. Then he'd leave a small but unwelcome silence before jumping with vigor and vim into the next section.

Yet there's an odd tension in Mackenzie's interpretation. On the one hand, he's interested in treating *Messiah* properly, in Handel's style of Baroque opera, which runs straight through without gaps and — this is key — where the music's dance rhythms are at the fore. On the other hand, he likely has a lifetime of experience conducting Bach and Handel as church music, in all its sobriety and solemnity. The struggle was audible and led to conflicting musical priorities.

Perhaps unique in Handel's vast opera and oratorio output, the vocal soloists in *Messiah* are assigned no names and have no roles to play. Finnish-American tenor Miles Mykkanen, with a blossoming international career, sang "Comfort ye" with operatic drama and charisma. On the line, "The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness," he almost shrieked "wilderness" — a wonderfully raw and utterly theatrical delivery. Later in his lone aria — the tenor gets just one in this abbreviated version — Mykkanen's rapid runs were beautifully controlled, his high notes clear and almost boyishly charming.

Lawson Anderson, a booming bass, was a big discovery at these ASO holiday concerts a few years ago, and he's now more polished, more commanding. His word painting was thrilling when he sang "I will *shake* the heavens," repeating that key word with the jarring force of an earthquake. He was at once beautifully lyrical and a little menacing for the aria "The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light."

The soprano listed in the program, Maria Valdes, an Atlanta favorite, was ill. There was no program insert to announce her replacement, Adelaide Boedecker, with a clear and light soprano. She's local, too, a staff singer at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Midtown, among other high-flying activities. Her pretty voice had a pastoral freshness and simplicity, perfectly reflecting text like "There were shepherds abiding in the field" followed by a radiant "And suddenly, there was with the angel." You believed her wide-eyed wonder at this Nativity scene.

Alto Kelley O'Connor is perhaps the starry singer we hear most often in Symphony Hall: Her rich, caramel-colored voice has portrayed everyone from poet Federico Garcia Lorca (in Osvaldo Golijov's 2003 opera *Ainadamar*) to the naughty brother in *Hansel and Gretel* and much in between. Thursday she was in splendid form and "O that tellest good tidings to Zion," gorgeously delivered, was one of the evening's hold-your-breath moments.

But, as always, when the ASO Chamber Chorus sings — some 45 voices strong — they somehow become the stars of the show. "And He shall purify" and "For unto us a Child is born" and "Glory to God in the highest" — these are the potent hymns that keep us coming back, century after century, to *Messiah*.

The program repeats tonight, December 15, at 8 p.m.

March 6, 2023

N.J. Symphony is radiant in monstrous Mahler undertaking, breaking new ground

By James C. Taylor

"The world is deep."

So says Friedrich Nietzsche in his book, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." This line is also quoted and sung aloud in the fourth movement of Gustave Mahler's massive Third Symphony, which was performed by the New Jersey Symphony this weekend in Newark.

The world is indeed deep—and so is Mahler 3, the composer's longest work and one of the longest symphonies in the classical repertoire. And so are Xian Zhang's musical instincts, as she displayed at New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark Friday night. This is not an easy—or inexpensive—symphony to perform. Its length requires more rehearsal, and its depth (or size) requires extra musicians. A whopping 104 musicians were on the stage of Prudential Hall—with not one, but two harps—not to mention 101 members of two different choruses waiting in the wings.

Zhang has said this is her favorite symphony—and she's been pushing the orchestra to perform it since she arrived. (It has only been programed three times before in the New Jersey Symphony's 100 years.)

The piece begins with a fanfare of big, brash horns. The brass played with an assured, alpine crispness and in the long, 30-minute opening movement, Zhang and the orchestra captured the unique Austro-Hungarian sound of Mahler's early symphonies.

Part Two began with a nimble menuetto, followed by the transformative third movement. It begins with a lively dance, but by the end of its 17 minutes we're taken through a dissonant descent into darkness. Here the woodwinds impressed with their delivery of Mahler's twisting melodies, followed by an extended horn solo, played off-stage with soulful elegance by Anderson Romero. It's in this scherzo section that the symphony approaches the one-hour mark (some conductors take advantage of an intermission—not Zhang) and you could start to feel a slight weariness on the orchestra creep in at this point.

Enter mezzo-soprano Kelley O'Connor. Dressed in an elegant, sparkling gown that evoked the paintings of Klimt (Mahler's contemporary in turn-of-the-century Vienna) O'Connor's rich, dark-hued voice galvanized both the audience and the orchestra alike. Her first line is "O Man, take heed!" Everyone in the hall did. She articulated Nietzsche's German text expertly and sang the plaintive passages with an artful modesty that called to mind former Vienna master Christa Ludwig.

Then as O'Connor took her seat, the fifth movement began with the celestial sound of

children singing from on high. Heads spun to figure out where it was coming from. Way up in the third balcony of the hall, the 38-strong Starry Arts Group Children's chorus sang the words to an 19th Century German poem about three angels—soon joined by 63 female voices from the Montclair State University Prima Voce chorus. The sonic effect was dazzling.

At this point, the symphony was rolling into its 70th minute; but Zhang focused the players and delivered a sixth movement finale that was simply radiant. Were there a few errant notes? Sure. But Zhang kept the tempo firm and didn't let the music's tension dissipate. The musical phrasing never got lost and the deep feelings in Mahler's score were palpable. This may be the high point of Zhang's tenure here in New Jersey—arguably even more impressive than her ambitious Wagner program of three years ago.

To test this claim, I went to see the Vienna Philharmonic (the orchestra Mahler himself once led) at Carnegie Hall on Sunday to compare. And while there's no doubting the refined, golden Vienna sound (the New Jersey Symphony is celebrating their centenary this season, but Vienna is closer to their second centenary) hearing both orchestras play sprawling Austrian works this weekend, it was clear just how strong the New Jersey Symphony is right now under Zhang's baton. It's been 11 years since the Jersey band performed at Carnegie Hall. It is about time they return—and no program would be a better showcase for them than Mahler's Third Symphony.

Kelley O'CONNOR

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

March 16, 2019

"To Harness Song to Human Tragedy"

By Cashman Kerr Prince

This season, Boston explores the story of Lucretia, from the Gardner Museum's programming centered around reunited paintings of Lucretia and Virginia (a mythological doublet), to this week's Boston Lyric Opera production of *The Rape of Lucretia* by Britten/Duncan. The tale is eviscerating, the art harrowing, Britten's music fascinating and this production amazing. It is well worth braving the uncomfortable seats to see this production.

At its core, this chamber opera is a story of three entangled lives and has ancient roots. The story of Lucretia is told in book I, chapters 57-58 of Livy's history of Rome, *Ab Urbe Condita* (The City from Its Founding), written in the time of Caesar Augustus. The story of Tarquinius Superbus (Tarquin the Proud), Etruscan King of Rome, and his rape of Collatinus' chaste wife, Lucretia, leads to turmoil domestic and political. This act of domestic violence leads to the overthrow of the monarchy and the foundation of the Roman republic. In this version of the tale, there is a fellow Roman soldier, Junius, who is by turns a drunken carouser and an ambitious politician. (It would seem this Junius is an iteration of Livy's Lucius Junius Brutus, who is usually known by his cognomen.) The personal is political; it is also historical.

Britten sets a libretto by Ronald Duncan (with substantial input, it would seem, from Britten himself), after André Obey's 1931 play, *Le viol de Lucrèce*. In addition to Lucretia, Tarquin, and Collatinus, there is Junius and two servants of Lucretia—Bianca and Lucia. There are also the additional parts of Male Chorus and Female Chorus, each sung by one person. The Chorus discuss Christ and love (as in Act I, Scene 1: "We'll view these human passions and these years /through eyes which once have wept with / Christ's own tears."). These two roles represent Britten's contemporaries responding to early Roman history and also the meaning of Rome to a Britain in 1946 still reeling from World War II, still seeing Italy as an axis power, all while living through ongoing rationing. Britten recasts ancient history as modern trauma. While many read this libretto as a confusing and unsuccessful mash-up of time and theme, I read this in a different context. I see Britten in *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946) grappling with the aftermath of war, the destruction of lives and governments, the tipping of love into jealousy and hate—all themes that will find more nuanced and magisterial expression in *War Requiem* (1961), among other works.

In this production the Chorus are dressed in 1940s British fashion. The soldiers Tarquinius, Collatinus, and Junius wear pants and jackets over bare chests (perhaps more inspired by Mad Max than sword and sandal epics); Bianca and Lucia wear linen servant costumes (Bianca especially would look at home in a Pre-Raphaelite painting), and Lucretia is in a similar flowing linen dress, then a white shift. Tarquinius, Etruscan Prince and heir to the Roman throne, is distinguished only by the gaudy colors on his jacket and a metal baldric or girdle slung over a should and dangling down his chest. Sometimes the markers of power are subtle, sometimes meaningless. A cast of eight; a story that resonates across millennia, and the costuming decisions of Robert Perdziola reflect this.

The staging (Sarna Lapine) takes advantage of the modern/industrial space at Artists for Humanity EpiCenter in Fort Point. This is a production in the round with audience surrounding most of the raised platform stage. As in Broadway productions of recent years, the orchestra is no longer in a pit; here they performed on a mezzanine behind a scrim. Video screens around the space projected David Angus (conducting from the piano keyboard in his loft, where the chamber ensemble of instrumentalists were gathered). For much of the work, this is a portrait of a divided world: men encamped outside Rome, and women at home in the city. The bet that activates the narrative (Roman soldiers checking up on the fidelity of the women back home) focuses on the men's unhappiness. Drunken carousing in the camp (Act I, Scene 1) is offset by women spinning at home (Act I, Scene 2). When Tarquinius invades Lucretia's domicile (Act II), the gender-segregated world collapses and so too does societal order. Matrona Lucretia is broken to the anger and jealousy of Tarquinius, who both tires of and mentally enrolls her in his "barren bevy of listless whores." Boundaries are crossed, destruction ensues. Again, this is not distant history, but viscerally present manifestations of destruction.

Sixty-three years after the première of *The Rape of Lucretia* the story acquires additional resonances. Political jabs at "Tarquinius Superbus, the Proud" could be ripped from today's newspaper headlines. The violation of Lucretia reads differently in the #MeToo moment. Shame motivating Lucretia's suicide has always bothered me since I first read this passage in Livy; although I understand it, I still want her to stab her rapist rather than Lucretia. BLO made bold to program this opera today; I applaud their decision to engage with these topics in the world of opera, and also to partner with Boston Area Rape Crisis Center and Casa Myrna. Awareness and education can lead to sure and certain hopes for a better future, and that, at least, comes through in Livy's narrative, and in Britten and Duncan's.

The opera begins with tenor Jesse Darden (Male Chorus) and soprano Antonia Tamer (Female Chorus), setting the narrative and offering commentary. Here acting is minimal; this is more in the style of oratorio. Both sang with clear and expressive voice, bringing us into the action. Collatinus, husband of Lucretia, found insightful and powerful expression in bass-baritone Brandon Cedel. This role calls for a wide emotional range as well as a wealth of vocal expression, often subdued; Cedel delivered. Baritone David McFerrin sang the tricky role of Junius with style, verve, and grace. As written, this is a disjointed role, lurching between personal emotion and political ambition; McFerrin brought this conflict to life in his performance. Baritone Duncan Rock gave us a Tarquinius who was well sung and reprehensible as a character: highly trained singing combined with strong acting chops combined to give us a despicable figure prowling upon the stage. Soprano Sara Womble made the most of a minor role in her Lucia, capturing the innocence and naïveté of this young woman; I cringed for her fawning on the prince. Mezzo-soprano Margaret Lattimore endowed Bianca with strength, wisdom, and compassion. Finally, the titular role of Lucretia found impassioned voice in Kelley

O'Connor. In under two hours (performed here without intermission) this role moves swiftly from sunny happiness to darkest despair. O'Connor inhabited this shift with verve, where others might have faltered in the face of vertigo. Lucretia's appearance in Act I, Scene 2 is, in O'Connor's take, endued with the poise and power of Carrie Fisher's Princess Leia. In Act II, Scene 2, O'Connor delivered a mad scene harkening back to Bellini's Lucia. Her performance brought tears to the eyes of audience members.

David Angus conducted a tight and moving performance. Britten's musical motifs came through and were connected across the whole of the opera, thanks to an insightful handling of balance and voice. All of the musicians (by my count, 13) delivered a clearly articulated, widely expressive, and beautifully moving reading of the score. The hard surfaces of the venue make for particular acoustic challenges. In one or two small spots the singing seemed thin and the orchestra muddied but on the whole I commend all the musicians for surmounting the obstacles of a warehouse space with ease.

In ways so subtle as almost to be missed, there are cautious intimations of hope for the future in this opera. At the end of Act II, Scene 1, the Chorus comment on Tarquinius' rape of Lucretia:

Nothing impure survives,
all passion perishes,
virtue has one desire
to let its blood flow
back to the wounds of Christ.

Troubling theology, and we certainly are more suspect today after more recent, and ongoing, revelations, about the linkages between virtue and Church (although Britten himself is rather damning on this topic in *Billy Budd* when he addresses innocence, evil, and power). But I think this is a hopeful plea from Britten, almost an article of faith, as he wishes and wills into existence the demise of that which is impure.

I wish I shared Britten's hope. This powerful and moving production reaffirms a faith in the positive and healing powers of music. I want that to be enough to counter the world outside the performance.

Kelley O'CONNOR

South Florida CLASSICAL REVIEW

October 9, 2016

Kelley O'Connor opens New World chamber season with a tour de force

By Lawrence Budmen

Luciano Berio was one of the leading creative voices of the musical avant garde in the second half of the twentieth century. While he was best known for his pathbreaking electronic and experimental scores, Berio also had a more traditional side to his palette, making adaptations and completions of scores by Boccherini, Schubert and Puccini.

One of his best known works is *Folk Songs,* an eleven-movement song cycle written in 1964 for his first wife Cathy Berberian. This wonderful vocal work was the centerpiece of "Folk Fantasies," the New World Symphony's first chamber music concert of the season Sunday afternoon.

In addition to folk material, the score includes two songs by American composer John Jacob Niles, two original songs that Berio composed in 1947 while still a student, and two from Joseph Canteloube's collection *Songs of the Auvergne.* Some of the songs are presented in their original form with spiky instrumental dressing as seasoning. Others are considerably altered in melody and style. Berberian, a contemporary music specialist, was a mezzo-soprano with an extended vocal range. The challenge for any singer who attempts the score is to encompass the vocal acrobatics, linguistic variety and stylistic diversity of the songs.

Kelley O'Connor met all those requirements and more. From the moment she took the stage at the New World Center in Miami Beach, O'Connor demonstrated her versatility and empathy for the score's shifting moods and accents. Niles' "Black is the Color" and "I Wonder as I Wander" were rendered in a gutsy vernacular manner rather than in formal operatic tones. Caroline Gilbert's viola took on the aura of country fiddling while Julia Coronelli's arpeggiated harp chords provided support to the vocal lines.

O'Connor's warm timbre came to the fore in a soaring version of "The Moon Has Risen,"

an Armenian melody. She enacted childlike wonder in a French ditty about a nightingale and belted the Sicilian song "May the Lord Send Fine Weather" in a pop-diva manner that would not be out of place at the San Remo Song Festival.

Berio's two songs sound more contemporary and are replete with technically demanding writing for the vocalist. Even at that early stage of his creative life, Berio was challenging his performers. O'Connor sailed through the vocal gymnastics while delivering the two sections at a hard-driving pace. The aching sadness of a Sardinian song emerged almost bluesy. Two Canteloube tunes spotlighted O'Connor's richness of sonority and charm.

With a strong beat from percussionists Michael Jarrett and Bradley Loudis, the "Azerbaijan Love Song" concluded the group in a rousing manner. Among the excellent chamber ensemble, special kudos to flutist Masha Popova for consistently agile playing in the instrument's highest reaches. New World conducting fellow Dean Whiteside gave O'Connor finely proportioned support and balanced the instrumental timbres adroitly.

If the remainder of the concert seemed anticlimactic after O'Connor's tour de force, it was not because the performances were lacking in skill or conviction. The program opened with a highly polished reading of Leoš Janácek's *Youth*. This gem of a wind sextet mixes Czech folk themes with harmonic twists and surprising instrumental flourishes. Russell Rybicki's strong horn sounded the march-like calls resolutely. Flutist Elizabeth Lu and oboist James Riggs navigated the whirling melodic patterns with aplomb, well seconded by Ron Kampel, clarinet, Zach Manzi, bass clarinet and Brenton Foster, bassoon.

Witold Lutoslawski's *Mini Overture* for Brass Quintet was a three-minute fanfare that served as a musical palate-cleanser. Jarrett McCourt offered sturdy tone and heft in the prominent tuba part.

Dvorák's Piano Quartet No. 2 in E-flat Major is replete with high-spirited thematic invention that recalls the verve of the Slavonic Dances. The well-balanced ensemble of pianist John Wilson, violinist Maya Cohon, violist Hannah Nicholas and cellist Alexa Ciciretti took an aggressive, take-no-prisoners approach to the outer movements. This was Dvorák with an edge but it was undeniably exciting. Wilson lightened his touch for the lyricism of the Lento and Cohon's elegantly turned phrasing and Ciciretti's and Nicholas' spacious line and beautiful sonority infused the waltzes of the third movement with Bohemian lilt.