

Jennifer Johnson Cano

Mezzo Soprano

“Her voice seems to come out of a happy nexus of heart, soul and brain that lends an authoritative weight to every note.” — *The New York Times*





JENNIFER JOHNSON CANO

**Mezzo-Soprano
2026-2027 Biography**

Equally at home in operatic roles, orchestral performances, and chamber music, Jennifer Johnson Cano has collaborated with major conductors and composers throughout her career. Her recordings include composers ranging from Bach to Beethoven to Wagner to Bernstein.

Her 2026-2027 season includes engagements with the Dallas Symphony under Fabio Luisi singing Bach's *St. John's Passion*, with the Colorado Symphony and Gemma New in Mozart's *Requiem*, with the Charlotte Symphony and Ken-David Masur in Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis* and the Naples Philharmonic under Alexander Shelley in Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9*. She will sing the role of Die Amme in *Die Frau ohne Schatten* with Franz Welser-Möst in Cleveland to conclude his tenure as Music Director with the orchestra. Operatic engagements include her role debut as Herodias in *Salome* at the Seattle Opera, a return to Emilia in *Otello* at The Metropolitan Opera, and Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly* at Covent Garden in her Royal Opera House debut. Additionally, she will present the world premiere of a recital work, *Bartleby*, by Gregory Spears at the Tucson Desert Song Festival, with pianist Christopher Cano.

Ms. Cano's portrayal of Michele in the 2024 world premiere of Gregory Spears's *The Righteous* at Santa Fe Opera earned her accolades from *The New York Times*, noting how she "voluptuously captured" the pain and strength of her character; *Musical America* called her a "standout" and *The Wall Street Journal* described her as "riveting." *Opera Today* noted her "substantial, creamy mezzo-soprano" and called her arias in *The Righteous* "flawless combinations of radiant, poised, attractive singing invested with heartfelt delivery." *Opera News* has described her as a "matchless interpreter of contemporary opera."

Last season brought return engagements with the Chicago, San Francisco, Colorado and Seattle Symphonies, as well as The Santa Fe Opera and The Metropolitan Opera in her role debut as Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly*. She has appeared with The Apollo Orchestra in repertoire representing a wide variety of composers, and the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society presented her in recital with pianist Christopher Cano and violist Beth Guterman Chu. Tours included a Bach project with Simone Dinnerstein and her ensemble Baroklyn (following Ms. Cano's appearance on *Complicité*, Ms. Dinnerstein's 2025 Supertrain Records release), as well as a week with the National Symphony Orchestra of Taiwan.

Recent highlights include Hermia in Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Mrs. Grose in *The Turn of the Screw* with Santa Fe Opera and Mistress Quickly in *Falstaff* at Houston Grand Opera. Frequent collaborators include Franz Welser-Möst and the Cleveland Orchestra, Gustavo Dudamel and the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Yannick Nézet-Séguin in Philadelphia and with the Orchestre Métropolitain, and Riccardo Muti with the Chicago Symphony. She has also sung with the New York Philharmonic, Atlanta Symphony, and Dallas Symphony, among others. Ms. Cano continues to sing a diverse selection of roles, premiering new works each season that challenge her artistically while inspiring her to explore new vocal horizons.

Highlights of Cano's operatic career have included performing Donna Elvira, Carmen and Offred with Boston Lyric Opera; The Fox in *The Cunning Little Vixen* with The Cleveland Orchestra; the Mother, Dragonfly, and the Squirrel in *L'enfant et les sortilèges* with the San Francisco Symphony; performances of *El Niño* with John Adams and the London Symphony Orchestra; Carmen with New Orleans Opera; and Orphée with Des Moines Metro Opera and Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. She has appeared in more than 150 performances on The Metropolitan Opera stage since her debut in the 2009-2010 season. Cano debuted the role of Virginia Woolf in the world premiere of Kevin Puts's *The Hours* with The Philadelphia Orchestra, described by *The Philadelphia Inquirer* as, "Every word was clear both in content and intention, and her mezzo-soprano tone was deeply alluring."

A native of St. Louis, Cano earned degrees from Rice University and Webster University, where she was honored as a distinguished alumna and commencement speaker in May 2017. Her debut recital recording with pianist Christopher Cano, *Unaffected: Live from the Savannah Voice Festival*, was recorded live and unedited. She sings as a soloist on a live recording of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 with Manfred Honeck and the Pittsburgh Symphony and in Bernstein's Symphony No. 1 "Jeremiah" with Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. She also recorded Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* with St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble.

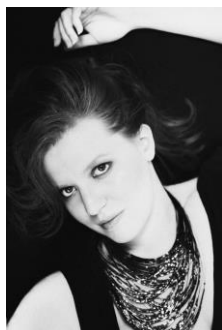
Ms. Cano joined the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program at The Metropolitan Opera after winning the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions. Among her honors are Winner of the Young Concert Artist International Auditions, a Sara Tucker Study Grant, a Richard Tucker Career Grant and a George London Award.

**JULY 2026—AT THE REQUEST OF THE ARTIST, PLEASE DO NOT ALTER
WITHOUT APPROVAL**

Jennifer Johnson Cano, mezzo-soprano

Critical Acclaim

Virginia Woolf in *The Hours* | Philadelphia Orchestra | Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conductor | March 2022



"With impressive tone and dead-on pitch throughout a wide range, and a fierce command of words, Jennifer Johnson Cano was mightily impressive as a moving, articulate Virginia Woolf. She's become a matchless interpreter of contemporary opera."

Opera News

"Cano sings with mellow sobriety — and, in Woolf's darkest moments, stricken intensity."

New York Times

"Cano's portrayal of Woolf was 100% there: Every word was clear both in content and intention, and her mezzo-soprano tone was deeply alluring."

Philadelphia Inquirer

"The stand-out singing came from mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, as Virginia Woolf, certainly the most theatrically and vocally challenging role in the opera, which Cano brought off with thoughtful phrasing and luminous tonality."

Broad Street Review

Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale* | Boston Lyric Opera | David Angus, conductor | May 2019

"Find joy, instead, in the towering account of Offred offered here by the mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano. Restless, powerful, profound, she is as formidable as this astonishingly demanding role deserves."

New York Times

"Through much of the opera, what we are observing — and marveling at — is the tour de force performance of mezzo soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano in the central part of Offred, seemingly a role she was born to inhabit. Offred is onstage for almost all of the opera's roughly 150 minutes, singing for much of that time."

Boston Globe

"The opera is...focused squarely on Offred, sung with passionate intensity by the rich-voiced mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, a consummate actress, who is onstage throughout."

Wall Street Journal

"Rare is the scene where Offred is not singing. She carries the opera on her back. Jennifer Johnson Cano's stamina and total commitment were exceptional. A probing singing-actress (her laugh closing Act 1 was chilling), she created a public and private self, her demeanor and expression reflecting the corseted, cooler music of her Gilead scenes and the freer, more high flying line when alone or lost in memory."

Bachtrack

Meg Page in *Falstaff* | Metropolitan Opera | Richard Farnes, conductor | February 2019

"Rich-toned mezzo-soprano"

New York Times

"Jennifer Johnson Cano's buttery voice had the showcase it deserves."

Broadway World

"Jennifer Johnson Cano delivered with a lush mezzo-soprano sound and her own fair share of fantastic comic timing."

Opera Wire

Bernstein “Jeremiah” | Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom | Vinay Parameswaran, conductor | August 2019

“The show mostly belonged to mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano. By turns stern and mournful according to the demands of the sacred text, Cano held the crowd in the palm of her hand as the orchestra faded behind her in a moment of descending pitch and volume. Her flawless final taper to silence seemed an inimitable moment of artistry, until Parameswaran conjured a conclusion of startling clarity from the orchestra.”

Cleveland Classical

“There could not have been a better choice for soloist than Jennifer Johnson Cano, whose dark and lustrous mezzo-soprano and emotive power held the audience spellbound. Her extensive operatic experience, most prominently with the Metropolitan Opera, allowed her to bring conviction to the text's range of emotion, from flashing anger to prayerful supplication.”

Plain Dealer

In recital with Matthew Polenzani & Julius Drake | Carnegie Hall | February 2019

“Cano was excellent, letting the music flow with a pure sound and just the slightest inflection, sounding like a woman who knows the power of her beauty and wields it with honesty and love.”

New York Classical Review

“The mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, fresh from her performance on Friday as Meg Page in Verdi’s ‘Falstaff’ at the Metropolitan Opera, brought rich sound and coolly seductive allure to the songs in which Zefka appears.”

New York Times

“The following number, “Three little roses in the row,” saw Cano launch into the pattering lyrics with enthusiasm and precision, skillfully handling the alternating, whimsical shifts in tempo and dynamic.”

Opera Wire

In recital with Anna Netrebko | Lyric Opera of Chicago | December 2018

“Cano was a well-match partner for the serene Lisa-Paulina Act I duet from Tchaikovsky’s Queen of Spades.”

American Record Guide

“The dulcet Lisa-Pauline duet from Tchaikovsky’s Pique Dame and the Barcarolle from Offenbach’s The Tales of Hoffmann were enhanced by the warmly sensitive contributions of mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano.”

Chicago Classical Review

“Self-effacing and full of musicality.”

Bachtrack

“Johnson-Cano’s luscious, rich mezzo voice was a marvelous blend with Netrebko’s magical soprano vocals.”

Splash Magazine

Emilia in Otello | Metropolitan Opera | Gustavo Dudamel, conductor | December 2018

“Mezzo Jennifer Johnson Cano was luxury casting as Iago's wife, Emilia, and made us wish that more of the role that was written by Shakespeare had made it into Arrigo Boito's first-rate libretto.”

Broadway World

“The Emilia of Jennifer Johnson Cano impressed.”

Bachtrack

Orfeo in *Orfeo and Euridice* | Opera Theatre of St. Louis | Pierre Vallet & Roberto Kalb, conductors | June 2018

“Johnson Cano delivers a vocally elegant Orfeo, deftly navigating her lines with appropriate color and showing no signs of strain. Clear-sounding and purposeful, she received ovation after ovation and none bigger than after her heartfelt ‘J’ai perdu mon Eurydice’ sung in English like every OTSL production over the loss of her lover.”

Opera Wire

“The opera is largely carried by its Orfeo, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, who brings a big, rich voice that’s flawlessly produced in both lyrical and fiendishly challenging coloratura passages. Dramatically, she was fully engaged, whether in mourning Euridice (she does a lot of that), charming the furies, or, finally, rejoicing. OTSL built its production around the St. Louis native, and it paid off.”

St. Louis Post-Dispatch

“Jennifer Johnson Cano seizes one of the most challenging arias in all of opera and she flies to glory with it. In an astonishing coloratura display she warbles like a skylark. She sprinkles showers of notes with laser-like precision. It’s a brilliant *tour-de-force*... Cano, a home town girl, totally owns this role, this show. She’s almost always on-stage singing her heart out. She makes this a truly glorious production.”

Broadway World

****El Niño* | London Symphony Orchestra in Paris & London | John Adams, conductor | December 2016***

“Some of the most deeply affecting passages are Adams’s settings of female Hispanic poets. The emotional temperature is at its highest in these and deep mezzo Jennifer Johnson Cano has the right vocal range and beauty of tone for them.”

Financial Times

“This concert performance conducted by the man himself allowed the five excellent soloists to occupy centre stage without distraction, with Davóne Tines’s lustrous bass-baritone playing off Jennifer Johnson Cano’s intimate mezzo and soprano Joëlle Harvey’s pure-voiced Mary.”

The Independent

“The soloists were also excellent, with Jennifer Johnson Cano standing out in particular.”

MusicOMH

“Jennifer Johnson Cano was magnificent.”

Bachtrack

****Emilia in Otello* | Metropolitan Opera | Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conductor | September—October 2015***

“Among the rest of the cast, the tenor Dimitri Pittas was an ardent, vulnerable Cassio, and the mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano a rich-voiced, sympathetic Emilia, Desdemona’s maidservant.”

New York Times

“Chad Shelton was a properly sulky Roderigo, and Jennifer Johnson Cano a supportive Emilia.”

Wall Street Journal

“The invaluable Jennifer Johnson Cano was a blue-chip Emilia.”

Opera News

“Jennifer Johnson Cano was a clarion Emilia.”

Washington Post

“Soloist Jennifer Johnson Cano’s performance Thursday was one of those instances where I almost sensed mouths dropping open in amazement. Her voice seemed to hold the packed house still for four and a half minutes.”

Atlanta Journal Constitution

“Dramatic intelligence and imagination suffused every note of Ms. Johnson Cano’s performance. Endowed with an attention-grabbing dark mezzo, its depths bracing like strong coffee, she seems to thrive in the role of a storyteller.”

The New York Times

“In a time that many young singers sound polished but somewhat monochromatic, no one seems to have told Jennifer Johnson Cano to play it safe. Ms. Cano’s highly individual Orphée was a star turn of significant proportions. Her burnished mezzo has it all: size, color, agility, evenness and individuality.”

Opera Today

"It is impossible to forget the sound of Jennifer Johnson Cano’s gorgeous mezzo-soprano voice. Her instrument rang with perfectly balanced chiaroscuro. Championing new music with precision while exhibiting prominence in traditional song repertoire, Johnson Cano’s performance was dynamic and exquisite."

Palm Beach Daily News

"(Cano) is now on my short list of singers to follow. Closely."

David Patrick Stearns, ***Philadelphia Inquirer***

“Her voice seems to come out of a happy nexus of heart, soul and brain that lends an authoritative weight to every note.”

The New York Times

“She moves her lines with purpose: each phrase builds on the last. “

Opera News

“Cano was excellent, letting the music flow with a pure sound and just the slightest inflection, sounding like a woman who knows the power of her beauty and wields it with honesty and love.”

New York Classical Review

“Her voice is radiant and intense, rich in the lower part of her range, bright and precise at the top, with astonishing evenness throughout. For such a commanding singer she also cuts a remarkably approachable persona on stage, and has an uncanny ability to discern and embody the character of each song.”

The Boston Globe

“Jennifer Johnson Cano was truly stellar. She, in fact, was the complete package, a voice agile and forceful, spacious and laden with emotion. Whether proclaiming "good tidings to Zion" or distilling the anguish of Christ's rejection, she was a poignant medium.”

The Plain Dealer

“She’s a voice, talent and temperament to be reckoned with.”

Seen and Heard International

“The finale benefited from the riveting contributions of soloist Jennifer Johnson Cano. Her deep, velvety mezzo and impassioned phrasing gave Jeremiah's warnings such startling immediacy that I wouldn't have been surprised to see people in the hall ducking under their seats.”

The Baltimore Sun

“Cano’s lovely mezzo timbre, affinity for Baroque style and emotional projection of the text were a real luxury.”

South Florida Classical Review

“Emotion suffused every moment of her eloquent, impassioned New York debut recital. She met with elegance and confidence all the challenges of a varied program... (She) has it: an honesty and assurance so impressive that you want to call it bravery. Hers is better than a good voice; it’s an interesting one.”

The New York Times

“She was all fire and passion.”

Arts Fuse

“Her fresh, fruity tone was a pleasure to hear; so was her effervescent phrasing. She rather gilded the lily with her “joyful” deportment in the Laudamus Te movement: the smile in her voice so completely expressed the sentiment that no special gestural emphasis was needed.”

Opera News

“With the first notes of Porpora’s ultra-baroque homage to Jove, it was obvious that Cano has a voluminous voice with remarkable agility in her higher range and a molten contralto quality lower down, gliding between these registers with seeming ease.”

The Washington Post

“She moved from temptress to shy maiden with aplomb, her warm, freely-produced voice always hinting that there is much more power in reserve, should the occasion warrant it. Carmen, Amneris—watch out for this mezzo!”

San Diego Story

“Jennifer Johnson Cano brought a fresh, appealing mezzo to the songs, conveying their tender romanticism in a way the visual presentation deliberately undermined.”

The Chicago Tribune

“Jennifer Johnson Cano brought a sincerity and emotional depth to these beautiful songs that made the texts’ occasional excesses seem completely irrelevant.”

Chicago Classical Review

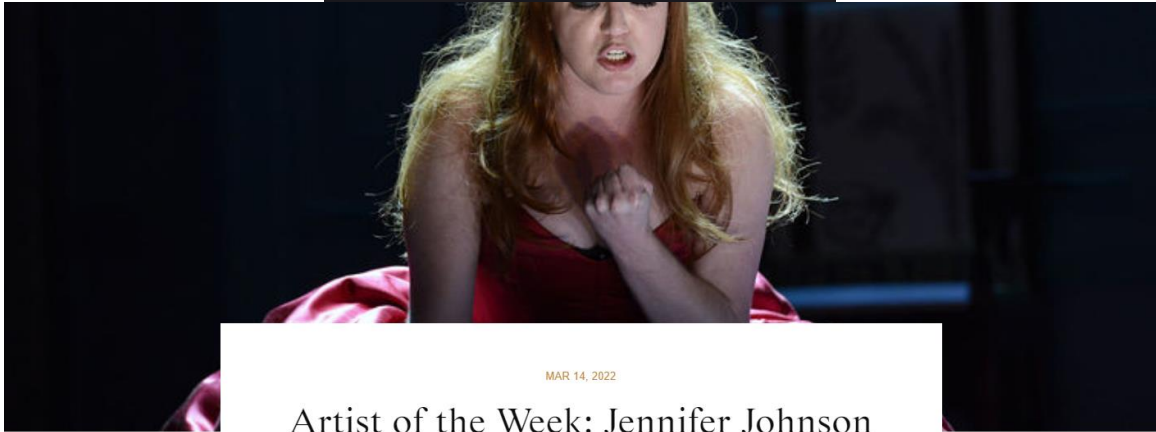
“Those who missed Monday’s recital by the young mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano at the Kennedy Center Terrace Theater lost a rare opportunity to hear a fine talent with a promising future right at her doorstep. Jennifer Johnson Cano brought a sincerity and emotional depth to these beautiful songs that made the texts’ occasional excesses seem completely irrelevant.”

The Washington Post

Features

Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERA WIRE



MAR 14, 2022

Artist of the Week: Jennifer Johnson Cano

American Mezzo-Soprano Brings Virginia Woolf to Life in 'The Hours'

By Francisco Salazar

This weekend Kevin Puts and Grieg Pierce's "The Hours" will make its world premiere. The work is one of the most anticipated operas of the year as it is based on the popular Michael Cunningham novel, which was later turned into an Oscar-winning film. Now three divas will get the chance to shine in three iconic roles with the Philadelphia Orchestra.

Jennifer Johnson Cano is one of those three divas, bringing the role of Virginia Woolf to life. As she noted in a recent interview with [OperaWire](#), Cano has been an admirer of the book for a long time and said, "The Hours' has been a bit of an obsession of mine since college. I fell in love with Michael Cunningham's novel and I share equal love for the film, both of which ignited a passion for learning more about Virginia Woolf as a person and her expanse of work."

Virginia Woolf was an English writer who is considered one of the most important modernist 20th-century authors and a pioneer in the use of stream of consciousness as a narrative device. In her preparation for the role, Cano noted that she has been rereading "Mrs. Dalloway" as well as "The Hours" and listening to literary podcasts about Virginia, and reading article upon article.

Over the years Cano has diversified her repertoire and has performed premieres of works like "The Handmaid's Tale" and standard repertoire pieces from Verdi, Bartok, Bizet, and Ravel, among others. For audiences not in Philadelphia for the world premiere, Cano will star in the world premiere of Gregory Spears' "Castor and Patience" and will perform with The Cleveland Orchestra in a series of concerts of Verdi's "Otello."

"The Hours" will also return to the Metropolitan Opera for the first staged production next season.

Recordings

Cano has a diverse discography such as "Unaffected: Live from The Savannah Voice Festival" and Beethoven: Symphony No. 9 from Pittsburgh Symphony. She is also featured on the Metropolitan Opera's HD recordings of "Otello," "Falstaff," and The Ring Cycle, among others.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERA WIRE

February 16 , 2022

Q & A: Powerful Mezzo-Soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano On Facing Challenging Roles in ‘Sketches from Frankenstein,’ ‘A Song By Mahler,’ & ‘The Hours’

By Matt Costello

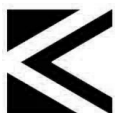


Jennifer Johnson Cano has garnered critical acclaim for committed performances of both new and standard repertoire. For her performance as Offred in Poul Ruders’s “The Handmaid’s Tale” she was lauded as “towering...restless, powerful, profound, she is as formidable as this astonishingly demanding role deserves.” With more than 100 performances on the stage at The Metropolitan Opera, her most recent roles have included Nicklausse, Emilia, Hansel and Meg Page.

Highlights this season include the premiere of Kevin Puts’s “The Hours” with the Philadelphia Orchestra, Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony with the Chicago and San Francisco Symphonies, and the New York premiere of Marc Neikrug’s “A Song By Mahler” at CMS

Lincoln Center. She performs Poulenc’s “Dialogues of the Carmelites” (Mother Marie) with Houston Grand Opera; the world premiere of Gregory Spear’s “Castor and Patience” (Celeste) with Cincinnati Opera; and Bartok’s “Bluebeard’s Castle” (Judith) with Roanoke Opera.

OperaWire recently had a chance to speak with the mezzo about her upcoming work, with a particular emphasis on “Sketches from Frankenstein” and “A Song by Mahler.”
Operawire: I first heard you perform in Gregg Kallors’ “Sketches from Frankenstein” in the catacombs of Green-Wood cemetery. That performance was a shattering, powerful experience for many reasons. (I actually



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selected it as my operatic event of the year for Operawire). What was it like for you to perform in such an eerie, atmospheric setting, with the intimacy of the audience, the candles — and the work itself? (Not to mention Dr. Frankenstein's creature...so nearby!)

Jennifer Johnson Cano: I loved it! I think that removing the performance from a formal stage or concert hall released both the performers and audience members from the expected, comfortable routine and allowed for a more unique and immersive experience. From a performer's perspective, we all found ourselves taking more risks and stretching ourselves creatively because our usual theatrical trappings were not available. I felt the audience listened differently. The attentiveness and anticipation were palpable because they just didn't know what to expect.

At its core, "Frankenstein" is a story about loneliness and a deep yearning for love and acceptance. The catacombs is a space that's a little cold and damp and unadorned with finery; you are pretty much face-to-face with human mortality. It truly is a conducive setting for personal reflection and seeking to understand the creature's existential longing.

OW: Can you tell us how it has changed and evolved since you first encountered it? Did you find your own interpretation *shifting* as the piece develops?

JJC: Gregg's "Frankenstein" is one of the only pieces I've done where I've been involved at such an early stage in development. It is super exciting to see it grow in scope from what was basically three scenes at the catacombs to a theatrical work that is now about two hours. With that grander scale, I think Gregg has done an excellent job in teasing out the beautifully nuanced themes in Mary Shelley's novel—questioning the purpose and path of progress, the nature of our humanity,

and how the denial of love places us all in danger.

My interpretation has evolved through the process as I have been given more information and material to draw on. In the last workshop, more was revealed about how my character, Elizabeth, relates and interacts with the other characters. Gregg also wrote her a truly beautiful aria, where she grapples with the human challenge of communicating pain in a compassionate way. I feel fortunate to have played some small part in the aria's creation. I love singing it and believe other singers will love it, too, when the time comes.

OW: You have two upcoming performances which share some — in my opinion — important emotional resonance; the subjects challenging, even overwhelming. The first I'd like to ask about is Marc Neikrug's "A Song by Mahler" to be performed February 17 with the Chamber Society of Lincoln Center. Can you tell us about the work, and perhaps share how your personal connection to aspects shaped your role? (And if that connection also brought its own challenges.)

JJC: Marc's piece focuses on the relationship between a husband and wife, both musicians, and how their lives change when the wife is diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. She is a singer, he a pianist, and their famous encore is Gustav Mahler's "Liebst du um Schönheit," which she is able to recall in different ways as her condition progresses. Even when she is no longer able to identify her son or her husband, she remembers the song. And the message of the song itself—to love not for beauty, youth or wealth but rather for the sake of love itself—serves as a touchstone for the big shifts in their lives.

I don't think Marc would mind me sharing that when he first approached me about joining this project, I declined. My father has vascular

dementia and, to be quite honest, the subject matter hit very close to home. I feared I wouldn't be able to manage the emotional commitment the piece required. Marc, in great kindness and compassion, approached me again, and I felt the universe was giving me a sign. And maybe what scared me about doing the piece was precisely reason I should commit to it and embrace it. One of the marvelous truths Marc captures, and there are many, is the nature of the relationship between the individual with Alzheimer's and the spouse who becomes their caretaker. I cannot help but think of my parents during each performance and I hope to honor their experiences in sharing this story.

OW: The other upcoming piece, coming in March, is the world premiere of Kevin Puts' "[The Hours](#)" with the Philadelphia Orchestra and Renée Fleming, where you play Virginia Woolf. Again, I imagine this is a role which demands empathy and understanding. What did you do to prepare for the role? And while all performances, I imagine, require getting into the skin and thoughts of your character... in this case, with a gifted writer who struggled, was that an especially difficult challenge? Did it shape your preparations and vocal approach to the new score?

JJC: "The Hours" has been a bit of an obsession of mine since college. I fell in love with Michael Cunningham's novel and I share equal love for the film, both of which ignited a passion for learning more about Virginia Woolf as a person and her expanse of work. For my New York debut recital, my husband, pianist Christopher Cano, and I programmed Dominick Argento's "From the Diary of Virginia Woolf," and through my preparation for those performances, I became more familiar with her diaries and letters. I sometimes joke that I've lived with her for quite a while. When the opportunity presented itself to

explore more of Virginia, through Kevin's compositional lens and aural world and on the grand scale of opera, I jumped at the opportunity.

In preparation, I've been rereading "Mrs. Dalloway" as well as "The Hours". I've been listening to literary podcasts about Virginia and reading article upon article regarding the many facets of her life and her work, including her journey with mental illness and how it affected and influenced her writing. I'm continually amazed by her—often in awe of her—and find my heart being both broken and mended by her and her words. She lived many universal, human truths, and I think that is why people feel connected to her, why her writing makes us all feel less alone in our struggles. And that connectedness makes my job much easier, because I know I can draw upon times in my own life when I've felt alone, misunderstood, euphoric, or brimming with creativity. I am beyond excited for people to experience this piece and how masterfully Kevin and Greg Pierce, our librettist, have shared both the inner workings and outward expressions of this remarkable woman.

OW: You have a wide range of performances this season, including your debut with the Houston Grand Opera in Poulenc's "Dialogues of the Carmelites" (in January) and the world premiere of Gregory Spear's "Castor and Patience" with the Cincinnati Opera (in July). Do you as a singer and performer bring a different approach to performing an established piece, such as the Poulenc opera, as opposed to a world premiere? Can one be more exciting (or daunting!) than the other?

JJC: I don't think my approach changes from one piece to another. With every project, be it part of the beloved canon or a new work, my responsibility remains the same: to serve the music and text and to communicate. Every composer has a unique style and every

story is told in a unique way, so I try to do my part through listening, studying and feeling to find possibilities. I avoid seeking “right” answers and try to find something that rings true.

I find every new project I undertake exciting *and* daunting, whether is it a beloved masterwork or a world premiere. If the work is already well-known, it can be daunting to find peace in knowing, whatever you do, you will, inevitably, be compared to other singers who have performed it. If it is a world premiere, it can be daunting to help introduce it to the world, because first impressions are important. But making music with colleagues and sharing it with audiences is always exciting, and when I focus on that simple act, it ends up outweighing my fears and doubts.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The Philadelphia Inquirer

March 17, 2022

Two opera stars and a Broadway Tony winner bring a world premiere to Philly. It's about the value of life.

An opera based on Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* will debut at Verizon Hall. It features Renee Fleming, Kelli O'Hara and Jennifer Johnson Cano. And the Philadelphia Orchestra.

By David Patrick Stearns



The Hours — whether the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel or the Oscar-winning film — would seem to have enough plot lines to populate three operas.

Instead, the world premiere opera by Kevin Puts, arriving at the Kimmel Cultural Campus March 18 and 20, juxtaposes three stories in a counterpoint that confronts profound issues — the value of life, for one — encompassed by the biography of legendary English novelist Virginia Woolf, a suicidal postwar housewife in Los Angeles and a 1990s New York City AIDS caregiver.

Performances of *The Hours* by the Philadelphia Orchestra under Yannick Nézet-Séguin are an unstaged preview of sorts for a full staging next season by the Metropolitan Opera — the first in what promises to be a continuing joint

arrangement between the two institutions.

Composer Puts, now 50, is best known for the Pulitzer-winning *Silent Night*, librettist Greg Pierce hails from off-Broadway theater, while the cast has mainstream opera stars Renee Fleming and Jennifer Johnson Cano plus Kelli O'Hara, star of numerous Broadway hits and a 2015 Tony winner for *The King and I*.

Has there ever been a lineup like this in a new opera?

Fleming, who has sung at least 60 opera roles in the world's greatest houses, can't quite put her finger on what draws her to playing the modern-day Clarissa, a woman fighting to maintain normality as her day crumbles hour by hour. But it's such a close fit, she jokes that she is typecasting herself.

O'Hara feels similarly destined playing the depressive Los Angeles housewife, even though her stage savvy will be tested by stage directions that seem too intimate for opera, such as "Laura looks at her family. Who are these strangers?"

"When you can't put words to thoughts and feelings ... that's why we musicalize things," she said. "It's much easier to pour out those big Greek mythology feelings. But a mother who is



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considering suicide while trying to make a [birthday] cake ... that's much harder." The greatest emotional weight perhaps falls on Cano. In a role that will be sung at the Met by Joyce DiDonato, Cano plays Woolf (1882-1941) during the writing of her novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, whose everyday activities become a downward psychological spiral that sets the tone for other stories in *The Hours*. And that includes Woolf's own demise years later, when she filled her pockets with stones and walked into a rushing river. "She just sort of disappeared," said Cano. "It's lacking big opera histrionics but with more compassionate, simpler humanity,"

And a deeper one. Librettist Pierce and composer Puts created an ever-present chorus that illuminates what characters are thinking and feeling in addition to what they are singing. Then there's the rich textures of the orchestra — a Puts specialty. Though short-ish by operatic standards (two hours, 20 minutes), the full orchestral score has 612 densely-packed pages. The character count is 19, some speaking, some singing, some dancing.

The music is full of clock imagery, whether chimes or an underlying sense of pulse. But within that pulse, the composer uses time-bending triplets that pack three beats into a two. Tinier increments create subliminal tension, such as seven notes packed into five beats. It's a nervous score.

"There have been heavy dark times writing it. Was it the pandemic? No. It's because ... I got up at 5 a.m. to work on this thing and felt similar things to these characters," said Puts over lunch in New York. "I've also felt trapped and hopeless."

His choice of subject matter has never been easy: Opera Philadelphia has presented his *Silent Night*, about a World War I cease fire on Christmas Eve (2013) and the Jack-the-Ripper-era murder mystery *Elizabeth Cree* (2017). More recently, he worked with New York City's Music Kitchen, setting to music words written by homeless people.

The Hours is his highest-profile work yet, a co-commission by the Philadelphia Orchestra and Metropolitan Opera. The partnership evolved at what the orchestra's president Matias Tarnopolsky describes as "an inspiring lunch" in August 2018 with Nezet-Seguin and Met chief Peter Gelb: New works slated for the Met, but first heard in concert in Philadelphia, will also include *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* by composer Mason Bates and librettist Gene Scheer.

The high-powered Met/Philadelphia collaboration, though, seemed to be little help at the inception of *The Hours*. Obtaining the rights to Michael Cunningham's novel and the Paramount Pictures film looked impossibly complicated.

But the 2018 Broadway revival of *Carousel* that featured Fleming was coproduced by Scott Rudin, who also coproduced the film and cut through the legal thickets. Artistically, the transition from page to screen to stage was obvious to Fleming: "There's this whole 'magic realism' [in the book] that works great in opera."

Indeed, Woolf almost seems to dictate the future, writing her novel *Mrs. Dalloway* while later generations read it. Librettist Pierce recognized how opera could tell those stories simultaneously — augmented by details that went well beyond Cunningham's and Woolf's novel. Through Woolf's *A Writer's Diary*, he discovered her "anxiety that accompanies creation" in unfiltered form.

Questions are likely to arise around how much male authors can truly probe the female psyche. As the Virginia Woolf surrogate, Cano feels gender is of secondary relevance to "the overarching point that this is a matter of common humanity."

"The struggle to get through the day and make it hour by hour ... we've all had those days," said Cano, "and days when we're alone and feel like we can't relate to anyone ... They [the authors] got that." And then some, thanks to 21st-century hindsight.

Fleming wrestled with why her lesbian character experiences endless remorse from losing her teenage romance with a male writer who is later stricken with AIDS. “They’re both gay. But now we’re in a time of much more open borders in terms of all kinds of identification,” Fleming said. “Young people could come to this and say ‘Of course she regrets it.’” The world was still reeling from the AIDS epidemic when the novel first arrived in 1998. Now, that part of story

stands to be more objectively understood — when told by a generation of artists that knows that epidemic from a distance. “We do these things in art because they’re cathartic,” said O’Hara. “Sometimes while we’re in it, the pain is too great; we’re living the story. But when we feel the story might be forgotten, we go back — in case people didn’t hear it at the time.”

December 2015

CLASSICAL SINGER

Into the Fray
Jennifer
Johnson Cano

Forget
Perfection—
Aim for
Excellence

Protecting
and Serving:
Joseph Mechavich



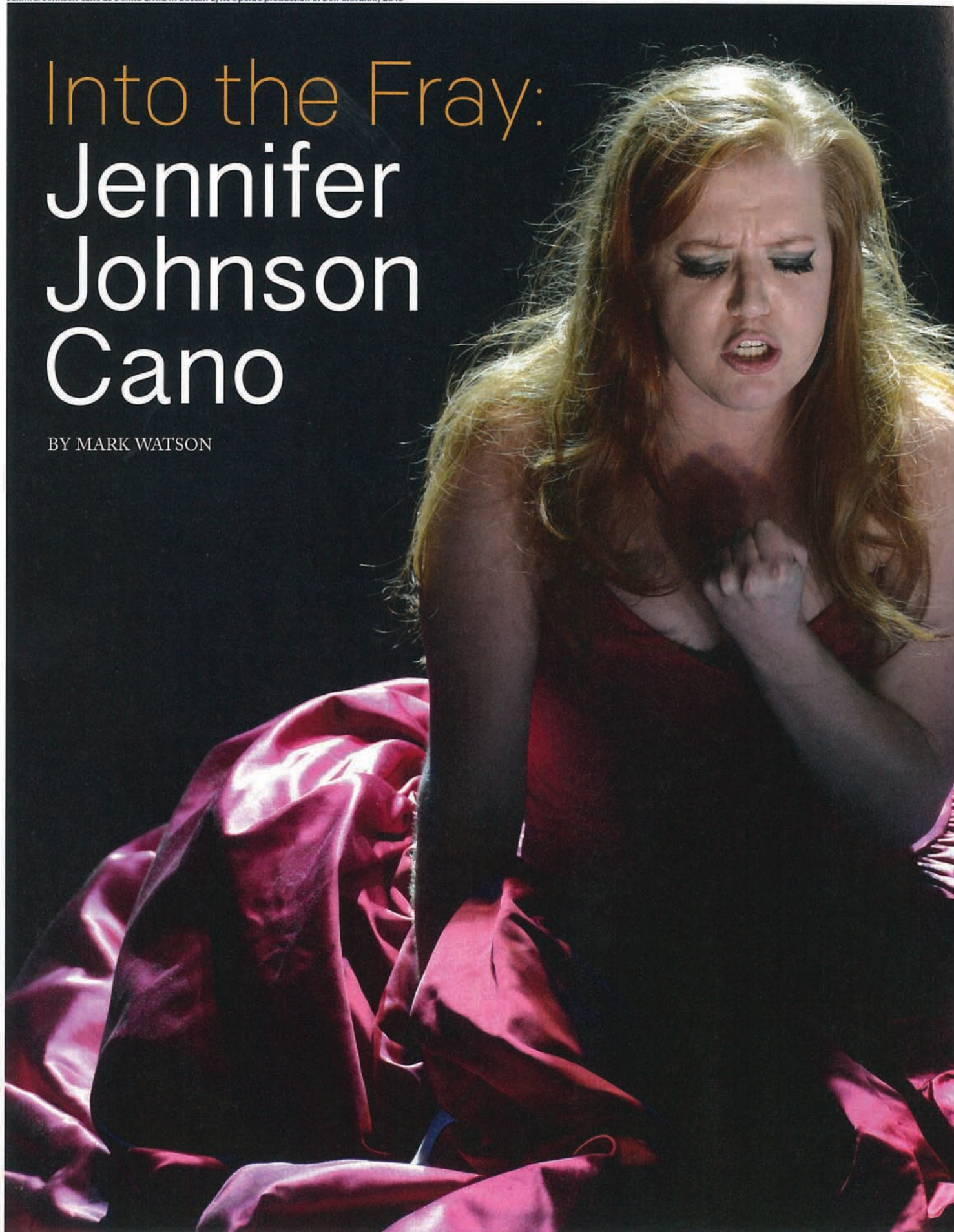
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Jennifer Johnson Cano as Donna Elvira in Boston Lyric Opera's production of *Don Giovanni*, 2015

Into the Fray: Jennifer Johnson Cano

BY MARK WATSON



Mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano has had some lucky breaks—key mentors placed in her path at critical moments, a terrific scholarship to Rice University, placing at the regional level of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions on her first attempt and then later winning, and marrying an equally accomplished pianist to collaborate with. And, yet, as Cano discusses these accomplishments and others, it becomes immediately apparent that there's much more than luck involved here. Hard work, thorough and complete preparation, and a level-headed yet passionate career approach are the real reasons for Cano's rising star.

Mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano is exactly the kind of artist that opera directors, conductors, and 21st-century composers are looking for now. Unlike singers who shy away from new music and innovative directorial concepts, she seeks them out. She likes to take chances. She wants to be involved in productions that push the envelope.

A serious and intelligent musician with a luscious voice, her meticulous preparation allows her the artistic freedom to make bold choices both on the opera stage and in recital. There is nothing pedantic about her personality, however. Quite the contrary—she is joyful and enthusiastic and has a wonderful laugh! “Her voice seems to come out of a happy nexus of heart, soul, and brain that lends an authoritative weight to every note,” writes the *New York Times*.

Perhaps Ken Noda, musical assistant to James Levine and coach for the Lindemann Young Artist Development Program where Jennifer spent three years, best sums it up. “Jennifer had a flame inside her that burned ever brighter once she was surrounded by the all-around stimulation the Met offers,” Noda says. “Within a year, she was already one of the shining lights of our program. She came to her first coaching on any new repertoire super prepared—she’d translated every word, had done all the historical research on the repertoire she was singing, knew all the right notes and rhythms, and was always on time.

“It meant we could focus immediately on the interpretive, dramatic, musical, linguistic, and stylistic aspects that make our work inspired and not merely remedial,” he continues. “Too many singers don’t do most of these things early on in the learning stages. Last season, her Hansel on a Met Saturday afternoon broadcast and her Nicklausse in ‘Hoffmann’ were two of the season’s top highlights.”

I caught up with Cano at her apartment where we enjoyed her delicious homemade cookies and discussed her career, successes, and the events and people who have inspired her along the way.

Did you always want to be a singer?

I grew up singing. My mother is a church organist and choir director. And my parents are avid music lovers. They took me to the St. Louis Symphony, to the Muny (“America’s Oldest and Largest Outdoor Theatre”), and other

musical events. I sang in choirs, took piano lessons, and played trumpet in the high school band—but I entered Webster University to study choral conducting.

Coming from a small town in Missouri, the only people that I saw who were making a living as musicians were church musicians and teachers. It didn't click to me that people I saw in the concerts were making a living. At school we were required to take voice lessons. The head of the voice department, Carole Gaspar, heard me and asked me to be in her studio. I didn't know at the time, but she never took education majors, only voice majors.

Carole didn't label me right away. She referred to me as a "female singer." We would play with keys and find the one that sounded best. She is the person who instilled my love of art song. We did songs in different languages, and she gave listening assignments of Strauss songs and operas and then Bolcom and Handel.

I liked everything and I was a sponge for this new information. She suggested I join the opera studio, where they performed scenes. I was a sophomore when I did my first scene—Cherubino with graduate students! I was nervous, so I worked really, really hard because I didn't want these older people to think I was an idiot.

At the end of my sophomore year, Carole sat me down and said I should seriously consider becoming a voice major. I was frustrated with the demands of the educational program because I never had time to practice piano or singing. I had never before considered focusing my studies as a performer. My parents wanted me to do a double major, but I told them that if I was going to do this well, I had to do it all the way.

I made the change, still took conducting classes, and was singing in chorus. I was much happier because I was studying music all day. I also felt I had to play

catch-up with the students who had been taking lessons since they were 15 or 16.

While a student at Webster, I studied in Vienna for three and a half months taking German classes and forcing myself to speak German. And I went to the opera 49 times to see 42 operas. Always in standing room, even for the Ring Cycle.

The head of the opera studio required her students to sit in on the Met District Auditions and discuss them the following Monday. My senior year, I decided to audition for the Met competition. My goal was "Just don't make a fool of yourself." I ended up being one of the three winners that got passed on to the regional level, where I was awarded third place.

After four years at Webster, Carole thought it was time for me to move to a bigger pond. I am fortunate because my teachers were the ones who encouraged me to take the next step, and my transitions have been smooth.

When I was preparing for the Met Regionals, Carole invited Kathleen Kaun for a brief residency. I worked with her and attribute my winning third place to the information she shared with me. She reacted positively to things that I had doubted about myself artistically. She was supportive of me owning those things and following through. I felt she genuinely cared and understood me.

In other words, she encouraged you to be you.

Very much so. She said, "Your voice is very special; it is like rose-colored gold that has sheen and warmth to it." I never had anyone say anything like that to me before.

After winning, she invited me to audition for Rice, though I had my heart set on going to Cincinnati. I discovered that I was the only person they were hearing. They offered me a lovely scholarship and I thought, "Maybe this is where I am meant to go."

The advice I had been given at Webster was "Go where you are going to get the best voice teacher and everything else will work out."

My first day at Rice, I told Kathy that I wanted to 1) "refine the package" (I had learned about "the package") and 2) win the Met competition in two years.

At Rice I was required to sing two recitals. I also did chamber music, sang pieces by student composers, and sang leading roles in three operas.

What was your vocal growth in those years?

My voice began to develop more of the mezzo color, and Kathy was making sure that everything was lined up. She instilled in me the idea that not every opportunity is a great opportunity and one shouldn't be just busy but mindful of the quality of the work.

Conductor Richard Bado, director of Opera Studies at Rice, gave me the best advice about how to prepare for working with a conductor. He taught me how to learn long recits by starting at the end and

working backwards. (It makes it easier to memorize.) He taught useful drills on how to repeat purposefully and efficiently.

In 2008, I won the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions performing "Parto, parto" and "Must the Winter Come So Soon?" Many people advised me not to offer the second aria, but Kathy said, "It means something to you, so sing it." It was a great lesson in trusting myself artistically.

I flew home and didn't know what I was going to do after that. I had finished at Rice and had not been accepted for programs at the Houston Grand Opera, Curtis, Yale, or JOC [Juilliard]. The day after I got home, I received a phone call asking me to fly back to New York to sing for Maestro Levine. After that audition, I was offered a position in the Lindemann Program.

I always tell young singers that story.

The chance to be in the Lindemann Program was not the only opportunity

that the National Council Auditions afforded me. I was slated to return to Opera Theatre of St. Louis as a Leigh Gerdine Young Artist to sing Kate Pinkerton in *Madame Butterfly* and cover a role in *Troilus and Cressida*. On the recommendation of Stephen Lord, who had conducted the finals concert of the competition, I was asked to step into the role of Nicklausse in *The Tales of Hoffmann*. I learned the new role in two weeks, while completing my finals at Rice.

How did it work out for you at the Lindemann Program?

It was the best possible thing I could have done. In New York I found my new voice teacher, Diana Soviero, and knew that she was going to challenge me in the best way possible. We were able to work twice a week, and I continue to study with her.

The program had incredible language coaching and great singers giving



masterclasses. We had language and acting classes, but the strength of the program is that it is individualized. I was able to try things and maybe discover “This isn’t for me.” If I changed my mind about something or made a shift, they were always respectful of my choices. It was an empowering experience for me. I was offered a few jobs which the administration agreed were good opportunities. I could attend Met performances on a regular basis having experiences that inspired me to return to the practice room.

Between Ken Noda and Brian Zeger (executive director) loving art song the way they, do I was able to continue to work on the repertoire that I had always loved. Steven Wadsworth was our main dramatic coach and I could take song cycles to him, tell him what I had imagined, and he would help me clarify and organize my ideas so I could best communicate those ideas to an audience.

Preparing small roles at the Met, I felt it was my job to go in and make sure nobody worried about me: “She knows

it, she sounds good, she understands what she is saying, she understands the staging, you can follow the story in her head . . . ” and that there would be an honesty about what I was doing. I didn’t need a pat on the head. I took great pride in not having to get a correction more than once. That set me up for being prepared for anything.

The preparation needs to be so ingrained that you can handle the live aspect of the theater. My goal is to be prepared so solidly that I can make music and react to artistic inspiration from my colleagues.

Do you learn music easily?

I wouldn’t say that I learn music easily, but I do put in a lot of time and effort so that once it is learned, it is learned quite well.

I compile many recordings of anything I am doing for study purposes—to familiarize myself with the piece as a whole, and to compare different performers and conductors, and to consider traditions and how they have

changed through the years. I do my “book work,” which includes putting my translations into my score as well as notes about musical structure and orchestration.

I learn notes, rhythms, and text both at the piano and through study away from actually singing. I often conduct myself through the score so I understand what I will see visually from the conductor. I take my music to my voice teacher to work through isolated bits and pieces where I feel I need technical help.

I also work through the score with my husband [pianist Christopher Cano] to begin getting a feel for the piece as a whole. I know it is sinking in when I begin singing parts away from the score and from study sessions. When memorizing, I sing along with recordings and conduct myself—if I flub it, I do it over and over again until it is correct and ingrained.

Dramatically speaking, my preparation begins with the actual poetry or libretto. I read source material and historical backgrounds, if applicable, for the piece. I enjoy watching movies or television programs which might provide insight or a different take on the material. I keep a notebook where I record my thoughts about the character and questions I want to answer as well and what I can do physically and vocally to communicate very clearly with the audience the mental and emotional state of the character.

Your love of art song seems stronger than ever and, like everything else you do, you are constantly stretching yourself in terms of repertoire and presentation. Many doors for recital work opened to you through winning the Young Concert Artists Auditions—like your debut recitals in NYC, Boston, and the Kennedy Center. Tell me about the recitals you do along with your husband, pianist Christopher Cano.

We sit around and dream up concerts and think about them from top to bottom. We are mindful of our audience. Is this something in Boston or Carnegie or



on the university circuit with a lot of students? We always have a wish list for music we would like to program in the future. We like to sit back and say, "What would we like to sit through?" Diversity is a big part of it. Different languages, different styles with some sort of unity and connection from group to group. We sit in our piano room with stacks

of CDs and stacks of scores and both of us have our computers open and use our veto powers. We come up with a list of possibilities and work to construct something that flows programmatically. We do it very much together.

Do you tend to be drawn first to the text or the music?

Intellectually, I am drawn to musically challenging works, music of the 20th and 21st centuries, where harmonic language is pushed to the limit and rhythmic structure is purposefully changed to prompt an emotional or primal response. Since I am drawn to this complex and dense music, I will begin to work on something many months in advance, but I rarely program an entire concert of that type of music because I would drive myself crazy learning all of it.

I respond to text on a much more emotional level. I like working with text which feels deeply personal, almost

confessional. When I learn that a given writer's text has been set to music I think, "Oh, I am interested to hear what the composer has done with it." Many times a piece is so overwhelming with the combination of both music and text that I say, "We have to give this a go." More often than not, my reaction to choosing any piece of music is quick, and I follow my instinct.

I did a piece by Mason Bates a few seasons ago and would love to work together again. Last season in La Jolla I did a piece by award-winning composer Howard Shore. [Film scores include *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Hobbit*, *Philadelphia*, *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and *The Silence of the Lambs*. He also composed *The Fly*, a one-act opera which premiered at Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris in 2008.]

My experiences with composers have been so positive. It is exciting to be part of something that is coming to life for the first time. Sometimes when they come

Cano in recital at Savannah VOICE Festival in 2014 with husband and pianist Christopher Cano.



Cano as Emilia and Sonya Yoncheva as Desdemona in the Metropolitan Opera's production of *Otello*, 2015



and hear, they make changes, which adds to the entire experience. I would work with any of them again, many times over.

I understand that Sherrill Milnes and his wife, Maria Zouves, are big fans of yours.

I met them a few years ago. Chris had worked as a faculty member of their

VOICEExperience programs, and Sherrill and Maria welcomed me like family. They have offered wonderful opportunities for Chris and me both as a couple and as individual musicians. We were invited to present the inaugural recital of the Savannah VOICE Festival, which they cofounded, and they graciously arranged

for our concert to be recorded. When we approached them about releasing that recording as a recital disc, they were completely supportive and encouraging. Our first recital recording, *Unaffected: Live from the Savannah VOICE Festival*, is evidence to the power of opportunity and collaboration. I'm quite grateful to them.

Last season you sang the polar opposite of Carmen: Hansel.

Yes, I was scheduled to sing one performance of Hansel in *Hansel and Gretel* at the Met. Then on Saturday I got a call at 10 a.m. to step in and sing the matinee radio broadcast. Fortunately I had already rehearsed with the Gretel. Playing a young boy is so physically freeing. Hansel is a role I want to do as long as I can. It was a blast. And, in a way, the expulsion of physical energy was the best way to get my nerves out—ever.

You have been singing Donna Elvira and will be singing it again soon, right?

I was part of a fun production at Boston Lyric Opera. I loved playing her. She is so womanly with her own unique strengths and flaws. She takes no prisoners and is constantly on stage, giving me the opportunity to experiment with color and intention. I look forward to portraying her again this season at Arizona Opera.

You also sang Nicklausse in “Hoffmann” at the Met. In that production you are onstage all the time. And James Levine was conducting.

Yes, and we had no rehearsal. I looked down the stage and there he was. So I said to myself, “I just have to make music with this wonderful man who has taught me so much and whom I admire greatly as a musician. And I have this chance tonight . . . but we have never rehearsed, so I have to be so aware and focused.” It was the high of a lifetime.

You have won awards in most of the major voice competitions. What are some things that are coming up for you?

I am doing Verdi’s Requiem with Robert Spano in Atlanta; *Messiah* with Cleveland Orchestra and Cincinnati Symphony; Granados’ symphonic poem, *Dante*; the *Alto Rhapsody*; and *Orfeo* in Des Moines. Also, Chris and

I are doing a few recitals including one at the Morgan Library for the George London Foundation in May.

What are your dream roles?

I find myself greatly drawn to Germanic and French repertoire. Dream roles would include Strauss’ Composer and Octavian (preferably in that order), more Carmen, and Charlotte in *Werther*. As a native English speaker, I relish the opportunity to perform English language opera and I’m fortunate that there are so many fantastic mezzo roles such as Britten’s Lucretia, the Minskwoman in Jonathan Dove’s *Flight*, and Sharon in Robert Aldridge’s *Elmer Gantry*.

Do you see any Wagner in the future?

I have performed a Rhinemaiden and Valkyrie in the Robert Lepage *Ring Cycle* at the Met. Two Wagner roles I would like to explore, when the time is right, are Venus in *Tannhäuser* and Brangäne in *Tristan and Isolde*. There are many more on the wish list, but only time will tell.

Mark Watson has performed roles with the Opera Orchestra of New York, Baltimore Opera, Michigan Opera Theatre, Connecticut Opera, and other regional companies. He is a frequent soloist in orchestra pops concerts and has sung in Israel, in Italy, and on national television in Japan. Upcoming engagements include concerts in Nassau, Bahamas, and Pescara, Italy. Last January, he made his fourth appearance at Carnegie Hall. In 2014, Watson was presented as an Artist of the Year at the Max M. Fisher Music Center in Detroit. There he premiered David DiChiera’s hauntingly beautiful “A Letter to Sarah” for baritone, voice, and trumpet. Watson completed his studies on full scholarship in the post-graduate opera program at the Juilliard School. 

And didn’t they offer you Carmen?

Yes, and I wasn’t sure if I was going to like doing my first Carmen. Singing was not going to be a problem but I was worried because it has so much weight in people’s expectation. I was excited and nervous and was wondering if I was totally off base in my concept of her. I tend to gravitate toward projects that are extreme, that could be crazy and cool, or people could hate it. I kind of thrive off of that.

I like risk taking, programming music that people shy away from, and unconventional staging—especially when the choices are thoughtful and respectful. As an audience member, I like being knocked off of my chair and seeing something done I have seen 14 times before and saying, “That works. I have never considered that.” That’s why I go to the theatre and go to multiple performances and see different casts.

People responded enthusiastically to our “Fight-Club” Carmen. She was tough and very smart. It was not the typical gypsy staging. We did a Q&A after the performance, and a distinguished gentleman said, “I really like this rocker chick. I thought it was very interesting.”

I think my Carmen will grow and deepen over time. I have arguments with myself about the best dramatic choices. So I found it rewarding and exhausting; it pushed me out of my comfort zone.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



January 12, 2022

Jennifer Johnson Cano finally makes her HGO debut

The mezzo-soprano failed to make it into the HGO Studio training program a few years ago but she returns as a star.

By Lawrence Elizabeth Knox



Acclaimed mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano has graced many a stage in her career, notably clocking in over 100 performances with the Metropolitan Opera in New York among touring engagements. This weekend, she adds to her already vast list of achievements.

As she peers over the darkened crowd in the Brown Theater, she will not only be

making her first-ever performance with the Houston Grand Opera, she will be celebrating a success that is truly indicative of her resilience.

While a graduate student at Rice University's Shepherd School of Music, the singer auditioned for a spot with HGO Studio, one of the most respected young artist training programs in the



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world. Much to her dismay, that door did not open for her, but today, the renowned performer and educator often reminds her students, “A ‘no’ now does not mean a ‘no’ forever.”

She speaks from experience, and she has returned to town — following a pre-pandemic appearance with DaCamera and nearly 14 years after earning her master’s degree — to prove it.

On Jan. 14, Cano will present her debut with the Houston Grand Opera as well as her debut in the role of Mother Marie in the company’s latest season production, Francis Poulenc’s “Dialogues of the Carmelites.” Directed by the legendary Francesca Zambello, the gripping tragedy, which will run for three additional performances, is based on the true story of the Martyrs of Compiègne, a community of Carmelite nuns who were sentenced to death by guillotine in the final days of the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror.

Cano joins a cast of fellow powerhouse females, including Natalya Romaniw as Blanche, Christine Goerke as Madame Lidoine, Patricia Racette as Madame Croissy and Lauren Snouffer as Sister Constance. The production, conducted by HGO artistic and music director Patrick Summers, will be sung in French with projected English translation.

“Returning to Houston is always wonderful, and this particular chance to perform with Houston Grand Opera is quite special,” says Cano, who often attended the company’s dress rehearsals as a perk of Rice University’s vocal performance program. “When you’re in a place as a young person in grad school who is drawing inspiration, and it’s feeding the fire of what you believe the possibilities may be, to now be on the other side and step foot on that stage, it’s very meaningful.”

A Missouri native, Cano initially enrolled in Webster University with the

intention of becoming a choral conductor, but at the encouragement of her voice teacher, she changed her undergraduate major and redirected her energy into honing her craft as a performer. A summer job as an Opera Theatre of St. Louis usher proved life-affirming, as she found herself swept up in the profound art form and the ability to express rich human emotion within it. “It became a very fast and hard love affair that still exists to this day. I’m not only a member of the profession, but I’m a big fan,” says Cano, who decided to continue her studies in Houston after meeting the now retired Shepherd School professor Kathleen Kaun.

Upon graduating in 2008 and facing her fair share of rejection, she was offered a position with the Metropolitan Opera’s prestigious Lindemann Young Artist Development Program. With this opportunity, she continued to build her reputation as a singer known for her meticulous work ethic, her warm personality and a commanding stage presence that Houston audiences will be able to witness this weekend.

Exploring themes of fear, faith, courage and sacrifice, “Dialogues of the Carmelites” details the power of devotion in a world rife with corruption. In becoming Mother Marie, whose ultimate fate is quite unexpected, Cano dove into a rule-abiding character with deep convictions and a formidable presence that she didn’t necessarily identify with but has grown to admire.

“The beautiful thing about what I do for a living is I get to crawl around in the skin of people I don’t initially see myself in,” she says. “I get to explore a world and a way of thinking which is very different from my own. That’s the joy and the challenge of being an actor, trying to not hide yourself but to immerse yourself in another human being’s experience.”

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The New York Times

May 4, 2019

‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Comes Home to Boston. As an Opera.

By Joshua Barone

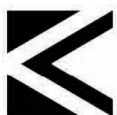


Boston Lyric Opera is staging Poul Ruders's 2000 adaptation of "The Handmaid's Tale" at the Lavietes Pavilion at Harvard University, which suggested the setting for much of Margaret Atwood's novel.

When Margaret Atwood began her novel "The Handmaid's Tale" with the line "We slept in what once been the gymnasium," she may well have been referring to the Lavietes Pavilion here. After all, the dystopian story abounds with references to Boston and neighboring Cambridge, and suggests a Harvard University — Lavietes, its basketball arena, included — repurposed for the militaristic theocracy of Gilead.

Boston Lyric Opera is running with that possibility. For its new production of the Danish composer Poul Ruders's unsettling and complex 2000 adaptation of the novel, the company opted for something site-specific. The gym was available, and for the first time the opera will be staged in the city where it takes place.

This is a happy coincidence for Boston Lyric Opera, which has been nomadic



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Jennifer Johnson Cano as Offred in the production.

while it searches for a permanent home. (The company ended its relationship with its longtime space, the Citi Performing Arts Center Shubert Theater, in 2015.) But that doesn't mean staging an opera in a basketball arena is without its challenges.

The acoustics, to start, can be a nightmare. And converting the basketball court involves effectively building a theater from the ground up. Then there's the Ruders opera itself: a dense and difficult score with one of the most taxing mezzo-soprano roles in the repertory. (She spends nearly all of the work's two-and-a-half-hour running time onstage.)

"There's no comparison," Jennifer Johnson Cano, the mezzo singing the title role of Offred, said after a recent rehearsal. "This is more challenging than Verdi and Wagner. I've done Elvira and Carmen. This beats all of them."

But despite the opera's demands — in addition to its leading role's endurance test, the work also calls for a large orchestra and cast — it is having a resurgence, thanks in large part to the popularity of Hulu's television adaptation of the novel, the #MeToo movement and the ever more urgent conversation around climate change.

"Any producer wants to have a thermometer on the zeitgeist," said Esther Nelson, Boston Lyric Opera's artistic director, who, as it happens, made a small appearance in the 1990 film adaptation. "This is the time to do 'The Handmaid's Tale.'"

Ms. Nelson and the company are ahead of the curve but will soon be joined by

others. Mr. Ruders — whose new opera, "The Thirteenth Child," will be given its premiere at Santa Fe Opera this summer — said that productions were in development in Copenhagen and San Francisco.

"This is certainly a happy thing for a composer," he added, acknowledging that "The Handmaid's Tale" has received an unusual number of productions for a contemporary opera, including an acclaimed American premiere in Minneapolis 15 years ago.

He began work on it in the mid-1990s with the blessing of Ms. Atwood, who, he recalled, agreed to the adaptation as long as she didn't have to be involved with it. (She will be in Boston on Saturday to talk about the opera with Mr. Ruders at WBUR CitySpace.) His librettist was the British actor and writer Paul Bentley, later known for playing the High Septon on "Game of Thrones"; they collaborated by phone and fax.

The opera, miraculously, loses little of the novel's plot and themes. The book moves fluidly among three time periods: before Gilead; Offred's training as a handmaid; and her present. So does the opera, with the casual abandon of a film script — rare for an art form typically limited to a handful of set changes, not more than three dozen.

And while the libretto's language can be frenetic and wordy, its structure is calculated in symmetries between the two acts. The music of the past is carefree and bright; "Amazing Grace" becomes a motif of irony and hypocrisy; the vocal range of Offred, pointedly a mezzo-soprano and not a soprano to emphasize that she is a slave and not a heroine, is narrow and introverted, allowed to soar only in her most private moments.

Working with David Angus, Boston Lyric Opera's music director and the conductor of this "Handmaid's Tale," Mr. Ruders has created a new edition of the score that slightly reduces the orchestration and makes it more manageable for smaller companies.

The libretto, however, remains as difficult to stage as ever. The veteran



"This is more challenging than Verdi and Wagner," Ms. Johnson Cano said. "I've done Elvira and Carmen. This beats all of them."

director Anne Bogart, who casually dropped references to the filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder and the writer Italo Calvino while explaining her approach to "The Handmaid's Tale," is treating the opera as something like a memory play.

She said she envisioned her staging as the experience of wearing virtual reality goggles: The set changes depending on Offred's perspective, which is, as Ms. Johnson Cano said, "a continuous stream." Anything not currently on Offred's mind or in her line of sight

simply disappears. That means a lot of set pieces are on wheels, coming and going from a backstage that essentially doesn't exist.

But a large staff has worked to make the arena as much like a theater as possible. Some things are surprisingly easy: The locker rooms don't require much to become dressing rooms. And, as every team has a coach in need of an office, so, too, does an orchestra have a maestro.

Carl Rosenberg, an acoustician, has been working on the space, aiming to strike a balance between reflective and absorptive surfaces. But everything he does is ultimately speculative: The results won't be known until the room has an audience.

What he most wants to avoid, he said, is a dead sound for the voices. If no one can hear Offred, there's no opera. As Ms. Bogart said, "The Handmaid's Tale" occupies a big world, but it's really the journey of just one person.

"It's the human heartbeat at the center of this," she said, "that makes you care."

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The New York Times

June 15, 2018

The Week in Classical Music

By Anthony Tommasini



Click to watch or visit <https://nyti.ms/2JRyTCZ>

Last weekend at Opera Theater of St. Louis — [read my report on “An American Soldier” and “Regina”](#) — a grave medical emergency curtailed a performance of Gluck’s “Orfeo and Euridice” after the first act. But from what I saw, Ron Daniels’s staging is inventively contemporary. The grieving Orfeo — the radiant, robust mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano; watch her here in an aria from Mozart’s “La Clemenza di Tito” — and his companions are dressed in punkish black jeans and leather. A troupe of wild dancers and masked choristers depicting furies of the underworld appeared in fiery red. Opera Theater presents all its productions in English. (Amanda Holden prepared the new English “Orfeo” performed here.) Hearing Orfeo tell his companions “Leave me alone; I long to mourn for her in peace” enhanced the immediacy of the moment, and was particularly poignant given the unpleasant circumstances of this particular performance.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

June 2, 2018

Hometown mezzo returns to Opera Theatre in a starring role

By Sarah Bryan Miller

Jennifer Johnson Cano has worked her way up from usher to star at Opera Theatre of St. Louis. On June 9, she'll take the leading role of Orfeo in Christoph Willibald Gluck's "Orfeo and Euridice."

It's been 10 years since the St. Louis native last sang at OTSL. That's when, scheduled to play the small role of Kate Pinkerton in "Madame Butterfly," the former Gerdine Young Artist was instead tapped to play a leading one in Jacques Offenbach's "The Tales of Hoffmann," replacing the established star who was originally hired to sing Hoffmann's friend and muse, Nicklausse.

That was right after she was named a winner in the Metropolitan Opera national auditions and chosen for the Met's Lindemann Young Artists program. It was before she married her husband, pianist Christopher Cano, who was an apprentice with OTSL for three summers. (They met when they were assigned to perform a program together; the couple now split their time between New York City and Phoenix, where he's the head of music and director of the Marion Roose Pullin Opera Studio at Arizona Opera.)

It was before she built an impressive resume in opera, orchestral music, chamber music and recitals, singing around the world and in important venues. (The last time she sang in St. Louis, in 2013, the husband-wife team gave a recital they'd later present at

Carnegie Hall.) Johnson Cano has performed more than 100 times at the Met; this coming season, she'll reprise her roles as Amelia in Verdi's "Otello" and Meg Page in "Falstaff."

"It's great to be back," says the red-haired mezzo-soprano from Festus. The daughter of Robert and Andrea Johnson, she's staying with her sister, Kathryn, an engineer at Boeing. ("It's especially nice because we don't have to make any special arrangements," she says. "We just know that, at the end of the day or the beginning of the day, chances are we'll see each other.") She got her undergraduate degree at Webster University and did her graduate work at Rice University.

Johnson Cano's relationship with OTSL goes way back. She worked as an usher, a job that also allowed her to soak up opera. She was part of the company's seasonal Spring Training Vocal Camp for high school students.

Surprisingly, she was never in the Artists-in-Training program. "I auditioned for AIT," she says, "but I was not chosen. It's something we've always joked about. I like to share that, particularly with young people, because there will be plenty of times when you don't get into a program, or you don't get into the school, or you don't get the job you were hoping to get. It's never a full-stop no. It's no to that right now."

They're not saying no to her anymore.

Several years ago, Johnson Cano sang an audition for OTSL's general director,



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Timothy O'Leary, then-music director, Stephen Lord, and artistic director, James Robinson.

"One of the things that I offered at that audition was 'Che faro senza Euridice,'" Orfeo's heart-stopping aria of grief over the death of his beloved wife, Euridice, "and Tim has since told me that he said to the others, 'We have to bring her back, and we have to have her do that part.'"

In between, Johnson Cano did the role at Des Moines Metro Opera, where she sang it in the original Italian. "I'm happy to revisit it," she says.

She's also happy to sing it in English. "It's so beneficial and so immediate for the audience," she explains. "It's nice to change things up a bit. It keeps things exciting, and the level of discovery sort of deepens and expands."

"Orfeo" is a "reform" opera, a counterpoint to the over-the-top vocal displays of the Baroque era. Musically, Johnson Cano says, the opera feels "very stripped down" after its Baroque predecessors.

"I feel as though in a lot of ways I get to draw on my experience as a chamber musician in this opera. It's exposed, and yet at the same time it's a very exciting challenge."

As for the role itself, she says, "There really isn't anything more intimidating than knowing that you're portraying a famous musician. It adds a little bit of oomph to what is on one's plate."

What really speaks to her, she says, is the combination of an ancient Greek myth, presented in an 18th-century opera. "Here we are doing it today for a modern audience and in a modern context. As much as humanity has evolved, human nature still has not changed that much.

"For me, this is a story about grief and the process of grief and an extraordinary opportunity that then goes awry. It goes awry because love is difficult, and love has its challenges. The edict of the gods is not to look at her and not to tell her (why). It knocks at the very foundation of any relationship, which is trust and communication and how simple it is — and also how difficult it is."

She's looking forward to performing it.

"I fully believe it's one of the unsung masterpieces of the operatic oeuvre, a pivotal moment in operatic history and a profoundly forward-thinking piece when it was created. I just want people to come and enjoy it, take in the spectacle and have a really nice evening of theater."

Jennifer Johnson Cano

ALIVE

April 24, 2018

A Conversation with Acclaimed Mezzo-Soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano

By Jorie Jacobi

Acclaimed mezzo-soprano and St. Louis native Jennifer Johnson Cano has plunged headfirst into a well-decorated career as an opera singer. Cano has given more than 100 performances at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City to date, with various roles such as Bersi in “Andrea Chénier,” Emilia in “Otello,” Nicklausse in “The Tales of Hoffmann” and more. She also splits her time between New York City and Phoenix, where her husband Christopher Cano serves as head of music and director of the Arizona Opera Studio.

Cano will return to St. Louis this summer to perform at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in the classic love story “Orfeo & Euridice,” featuring a special collaboration with The Big Muddy Dance Company. Audiences will also have the opportunity to meet Cano after each of the six performances between June 9 and June 23 and can purchase tickets at ExperienceOpera.org.

We caught up with Cano to discuss her life in music, humble beginnings and singing at Neil Armstrong’s funeral.

You’re coming back to St. Louis in June for six performances of “Orfeo & Euridice” with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, in which you’ll play the role of Orfeo, which is traditionally written for a male actor. Is that common of casting in opera?

Casting in opera is determined by the voice type the composer and

librettist believe will best portray a given character. The role of Orfeo is typically played by either a tenor, countertenor or mezzo soprano, and the convention of “trouser-roles” is quite typical in opera. I’ve spent a good deal of my life portraying young men on stage. At the time Gluck wrote this piece, higher voices were commonly cast in young, heroic roles, so the choice to cast a mezzo is following a long tradition in operatic history.

It’s a love story, and Orfeo’s love Euridice actually isn’t present for over half of the opera, because she has died. Orfeo pleads with the Gods to bring her back from the dead, and it’s about how he tries to make that happen.

How did you originally get connected to Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and embark on this career path?

My relationship with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis began in high school. They have a summer vocal camp program for high school singers. It was recommended to me by my high-school music teacher, and I really enjoyed it. I grew up in the small town of Festus, Missouri, about 45 minutes south of St. Louis. My mom would drive me from there to St. Louis every day, and that was where I learned that it’s possible to work as a musician for a living.

I had planned to study political science and law in college, but I discovered that I really had a passion for music. I loved



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singing, making music and working with people. I changed my major to choral directing, thinking I could teach high-school and college students to love music as much as I did. I entered Webster University to be a choral conductor, and we had to audition as part of the program. The head of the department at the time took me on as her student, and I didn't realize that she typically didn't take non-performance majors. She sat me down after my sophomore year and said, "I think you should change your major to be a performer." So that's what I did: I changed my major and focused on performance work. I reconnected with Opera Theatre and became part of their Gerdine Young Artist Program, and I also worked there as an usher while I was in school. The house managers knew I was a singer, so they'd let me watch the performances.

After Webster University, I went to Rice University for my Master of Music degree. I then entered the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions, which I'd entered before, but this time I won a top spot and joined their Young Artist Development Program. Then I went straight to New York.

That's quite a journey. Did you have any expectation that it would unfold this way?

No. Definitely not. If you'd told me or my parents when I was younger that this is what I'd be doing in 10, 15 or 20 years, we'd all have thought, "What?" My parents always thought I was a good singer, and they're the absolute opposite of stage parents. They're educators and accountants, so I was allowed to just enjoy music, sing and have a good time. It wasn't until I was about 20 that I even considered doing it as a vocation. So in a way it was for the best, because there was no pressure on me. I was able to develop a very natural love and curiosity about music before I made that choice.

How did you specifically make your way into opera?

It wasn't really my choice. The example I use to explain it is that voices are very similar to athletic ability. If you're a

runner, you'll likely be a long distance or short-distance runner, and your body informs where your natural inclination is. It's the same for voices: they tend to lean towards a genre, whether that's opera, jazz, pop, musical theatre, etc. Mine lent itself to the classical style. My voice made that decision on its own. I do my best to honor that, because it's a constant struggle if you're trying to be a square peg in a round hole. Every singer has a natural inclination, like how some are mezzos or sopranos. That's not a choice—it's just what their voice is.

Some audiences see opera and classical music as intimidating. What's your view about that, and what would you say to someone who's interested in seeing opera, but may be hesitant?

My view on any kind of art, particularly with opera, is you have to be open to the experience. Intimidation is something really put on ourselves. The first question I always ask someone who tells me they went to an opera and didn't like it is, "What show did you see?" And oftentimes it was something very complex or very dark. If you like comedy, I'd recommend Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro." Or for mythology buffs, "Orfeo & Euridice" would be great. Also if you saw an opera one time and liked it, there's nothing wrong with seeing it again. The more familiar you are with a piece, the more you can enjoy the nuances of the score, the libretto and what the performers are doing. Opera is an art form that deepens with repetitive experience. Also, don't be shy about asking questions. Everybody who works in opera wants people to love the experience.

What has been one of the greatest challenges of your music career, and how have you overcome them?

The greatest challenge for me—which still is the greatest challenge—is that it requires a lot of traveling and time away from family and friends. That's not something you can overcome; it's just the nature of this career. If you want to work as a freelance musician, you have to go where the work is. I'm very

fortunate in that I have a wonderful, supportive family. If I perform somewhere like Chicago or Kansas City, my parents often drive to come see me. But there's still a lot of living out of suitcases and in hotels, and a lot of time alone.

The alone time I don't mind, but sometimes I do wish I could get on a plane and see my parents. Everyone's life has its own set of complications and unique circumstances. These just happen to be mine. For some people it's workable, and for some people it's not. My husband tells a great story about how he sat next to a heart surgeon after a performance, who told him, "I could never do what you do: getting up and performing in front of people." And he told her, "I could never do what you do." We're all unique, and that's what makes it possible for all of us to do what we do.

Do you get nervous before performances?

I tend to get very excited. Kind of like a racehorse before they open the gate; it's a kind of anxiety that's contained in excitement. The worst thing about a performance is waiting for the show to start. You want to get out there and be focused and fresh. You have to control the pacing of your energy so you can deliver.

I'd be remiss to ask about this: You performed with your husband at

Neil Armstrong's funeral. What was that experience like?

It was surreal. Neil Armstrong's wife's cousin, who is a patron of the Metropolitan Opera, heard me sing some Kurt Weill songs at a cocktail party a few weeks before he passed away. His wife wanted "September Song" sung at the funeral, because it was their song. I performed it with my husband, who's a pianist. It was such an honor to be asked.

Musicians are often called on in times of celebration or grieving. We were there to really do something meaningful for his family, to honor his life and to bring comfort at that time. It was very surreal, and there were many other great astronauts there, like John Glenn and Buzz Aldrin.

They were seated towards the front, and you could see their names on the chairs where they'd be sitting. It was surreal to be in a room full of people who have accomplished all that they have. My sister was actually at Purdue—Armstrong's alma mater—where she was studying to be an engineer at the time. There were all of this amazing connections. How often do you have two sisters, one a singer and one a rocket scientist, and everything somehow converges that way?

Jennifer Johnson Cano **The New York Times**

December 18, 2011



The mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano at Merkin Concert Hall in May, accompanied by her husband, Christopher Cano.

Standouts in a Solo Setting

By Zachary Woolfe

IT seems that a recital should be a breeze for a singer. Unlike in opera, there are no ill-fitting costumes; there is no awkward directorial concept to pull off. It's just you, a piano and the music.

But even some of the biggest, best singers struggle with recitals: the exposure, the intimacy, the need to create instant drama in an art song's three or four minutes. This fall Anna Netrebko seemed intimidated enough by the prospect of her New York recital debut to cancel it for the second time in five years, and Jonas Kaufmann's recital at the Metropolitan Opera was genial but distant.

It's therefore worth celebrating the singers who made engrossing, gorgeous worlds out of just their own formal wear and the barest of supports. These were my favorites among the recitals I took in this year.

JENNIFER JOHNSON CANO Another mezzo-soprano made an exciting New York recital debut in May at Merkin Concert Hall, accompanied by her husband, the pianist Christopher Cano. She radiated honesty and emotion in songs by Porpora, Mahler, Ravel and — fabulously — Dominick Argento (his cycle “From the Diary of Virginia Woolf”).



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

April 12, 2012

St. Louisan Jennifer Johnson Cano, 3 others with OTSL ties win Tucker Competition

By Sarah Bryan Miller

Several singers with strong St. Louis (and Opera Theatre of St. Louis) ties are among the winners of the Richard Tucker Foundation's 2012 competition.

That's an extremely good thing; past winners include such stars as Renée Fleming, Joyce DiDonato, David Daniels, Lawrence Brownlee and Angela Meade. It's given to singers who are expected to make major careers.

Mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, a St. Louis native and graduate of Webster University, is certainly going on to bigger things. A Gerdine Young Artist in 2006 and 2007, she returned in the role of Nicklausse in Offenbach's "The Tales of Hoffmann" in 2008. Most recently, she graduated from the Metropolitan Opera's Lindemann Young Artist Development program, considered one of the best training institutions for young singers anywhere. She received a \$10,000 career grant.

Lyric soprano Ailyn Pérez, whose then-budding career got a big boost with her appearances at OTSL in 2007 and 2008, is the winner of the 2012 Richard Tucker Award, sometimes called "the Heisman Trophy of opera." The prize is \$30,000, and goes to an American opera singer thought to be "at the threshold of a major international career." That she is.

Two other former Gerdine Young Artists won career grants: baritone Nicholas Pallesen (2006 and 2007, with roles in "Street Scene" and "Anna Karenina") and soprano Jennifer Rowley (2007).



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Reviews

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The New York Times

July 24, 2022

A New Opera Tells an Original Story With an Open Heart

By Zachary Woolfe



Brett Dean's tumultuous adaptation of "Hamlet" played at the Metropolitan Opera two months ago, but it is still ringing in my ears.

Almost literally: It is a loud, chaotic score, mustering warring batteries of percussion and audience-encircling electronic effects, complex polyrhythms and virtuosic extended techniques. In all these qualities, it stands for a large swath of contemporary operas (some good, some bad) defined by being overwhelming. They are hurricanes of shock-and-awe sound, anarchic and bewildering.

The music of Gregory Spears — whose sensitive "Castor and Patience" was commissioned by Cincinnati Opera and premiered here on Thursday evening — is the opposite.

Warm, steady, restrained, securely tonal, the orchestras in his works tend to serenely repeat small cells of material, without strange instruments or strange uses of conventional ones.

So self-effacing is Spears's style that the somber drone at the beginning of this new piece emerges without pause from the ensemble's tuning, as if by accident. The overall effect is of a smoothly



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unfurling carpet — reminiscent of Philip Glass in its unhurried yet wrenching harmonic progressions — atop which voices soar.

And soar, and soar. The agonies and pleasures of “Castor and Patience,” running through July 30 at the Corbett Theater at the School for Creative and Performing Arts, are like those of a less densely orchestrated Puccini. As in “Tosca,” “La Bohème” or “Madama Butterfly,” unabashedly, even shamelessly effusive vocal lines draw us poignantly close to characters in a rending situation: here, a Black family riven by disagreement over whether to sell part of a precious plot of land.

Precious, because purchased with hard-won freedom. The action takes place on an unnamed island off the coast of the American South that was settled by former slaves after the Civil War. Among their descendants, Castor left and moved north with his parents; his cousin, Patience, stayed put with hers.

Decades later, both are adults with children of their own. It is 2008, and Castor — like so many people in the years leading up to the Great Recession — has borrowed far beyond his means. The only way he sees out of financial ruin is to return to the island and sell part of his inherited stake, likely to a white buyer intent on building seaside condos; that is an outcome that the tradition-minded Patience cannot abide. It is a battle between old ways and new, past and future, leaving and staying, overseen by the ghosts of ancestors and the lasting reverberations of their oppression. (“Living means remembering,” as one character sings.)

This narrative ground is familiar — gentrification versus preservation, with echoes of “A Raisin in the Sun” — and it could have been simply overwrought.

But Tracy K. Smith, the Pulitzer Prize-winning former poet laureate, has produced a libretto as unshowy as Spears’s score. An original story rather than one of the transformations of existing material that currently clog the opera world, her text is largely prose, and never purple; modest arias arise

naturally out of the dialogue. Inflamed by aching music — the orchestra of 36 is conducted with calm confidence by Kazem Abdullah — the result is passionate, but also clear, focused and humble.

Spears’s two most prominent earlier operas were both accomplished. “Paul’s Case” (2013), based on a Willa Cather story about a restless, dandyish young man, had the pertly stylized formality of Stravinsky’s “The Rake’s Progress.” That neoclassical (even neo-medieval) feel extended to the more naturalistic “Fellow Travelers” (2016), set amid the anti-gay witch hunts of the McCarthy era. But the lyricism that was tautly, almost unbearably heightened in “Paul’s Case” felt a bit repetitive and listless over the broader canvas that followed.

Six years in the making — and two years after the pandemic forced the cancellation of its planned premiere, in honor of Cincinnati Opera’s centennial — “Castor and Patience” is more intense yet more relaxed than either of those. “Paul’s Case” was 80 minutes long, “Fellow Travelers” an hour and 50. The new opera is more than half an hour past that, but it feels less protracted than unhurried, unruffled. You get to know the characters, and to sit with them.

That these figures are so vivid is also thanks to a committed cast, led by the baritone Reginald Smith Jr., an anguished Castor, and the soprano Talise Trevigne, delicate but potent as the implacable Patience.

Singing with mellow power, the mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano brought humanity and nuance to Castor’s wife, Celeste, who starts the opera pressuring him to sell but ends up in as much agonized ambivalence as anyone. Raven McMillon and, especially, Frederick Ballentine, bristled — convincing teenagers — as their daughter and son, Ruthie and Judah. Patience’s children, West (Benjamin Taylor) and Wilhelmina (Victoria Okafor), were gentle but stirring guides to the satisfactions of island and family life.

Their outpourings are so fervent, the melodies so sweet, that you can find yourself moved nearly to tears by more or less random lines — an accomplishment both impressive and, sometimes, overkill, particularly in the first act. But by the second act, the tension inexorably rising, resistance to a work so openhearted, tender and plain-spoken seems futile. If it's emotionally manipulative — in the distinguished tradition of Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein and Carlisle Floyd — it's expertly so.

Vita Tzykun's set stretches the facade of a house across the stage, but leaves the bottom half jagged and cut off, revealing the beams of the foundation and marshy grasses. This is a dreamy netherworld in which characters from the 1860s and 1960s mingle with the 21st century. Kevin Newbury's production uses some furniture and a few suggestions of shacks to conjure a range of locations on the island. If it's not entirely evocative — with projections that tend to be murky — it's at least efficient and straightforward.

As are the mechanics of the plot. The conflicts here are as sturdily old-fashioned as in an Arthur Miller play — but, as in Miller's work, they knot your stomach anyway. Probably unlike the version of this libretto he would have written, however, true tragedy does not strike in Spears and Smith's telling. Everyone is alive at the end.

And the secret that gets revealed near that point isn't quite a barnburner. But it does offer the real explanation for why Castor's parents went north — a telling reminder that migrations aren't just abstract sociological phenomena, but also happen family by family, for individual reasons.

There isn't a clear resolution to the plot. In the last scene we see Castor, Celeste and Ruthie on the ferry back to the mainland. (Judah has decided to stay.) The implication seems to be that they'll be back on the island for good before too long, but we can't be sure. In a final aria — an oasis of expressive, elegant poetry from Smith, after so much expository prose — Patience dismisses the possibility of choosing either past or future. We're always in between.

For all the ambiguous peace this ending offers, a bitter undercurrent tugs: In America, especially Black America, ownership is fundamentally tenuous. You can never run fast enough or far enough to escape the forces determined to dispossess you, or worse: "Sometimes I feel like something's trying to erase me," Castor sings. If he does eventually return to Patience's island, it'll be a homecoming, but also an admission of defeat — for a man and a country.

"What more," the opera asks in its quiet final moments, "must I give away before I get free?"

Jennifer Johnson Cano

Washington CLASSICAL REVIEW

April 22, 2024

Mezzo's Wagner songs provides highlight of Apollo Orchestra concert

By Charles T. Downey



The Apollo Orchestra continues its season split between two conductors. [David Neely](#) led two performances last fall, ceding the baton to David Chan this spring. Chan, one of the concertmasters of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra, made the strongest showing in opera selections in his [stand](#) with the orchestra last season. The results this time around were much the same, as heard Sunday afternoon at Chevy Chase Presbyterian Church.

Julie Vidrick Evans, director of music at the host church, joined as organ soloist in the opening work, the Adagio in G Minor once attributed to 18th-century Venetian composer Tomaso Albinoni. Musicologist Remo Giazotto, the composer's biographer, actually wrote this score, passing it off as semi-plausible Albinoni.

Chan's crisp tempo prevented the piece, often sentimentalized, from bogging down under its own weight. Evans, seated at the organ console above the

altar, was not always in lockstep with him, but the overall ensemble was generally clean. Concertmaster Claudia Chudacoff's impassioned violin solos ornamented transitions, with fitfully mixed intonation.

The highlight of the concert was an excellent rendition of Richard Wagner's *Wesendonck Lieder*, in the orchestration completed after the composer's death by Felix Mottl. Mezzo-soprano [Jennifer Johnson Cano](#), last heard about a decade ago, gave a splendid rendition of the vocal part. Her husband, pianist Christopher Cano, has led Washington National Opera's Cafritz Young Artists program since 2022, and the area will hopefully hear more of her going forward.

The mezzo deployed an exquisite instrument in these songs, often described as sketches for Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. With impeccable intonation and breath support, Johnson Cano easily reached the compass demanded by the score, her rich and burnished chest voice capped by a lovely bloom of sound at the top, heard prominently in the fourth song.

Chan led the orchestra with confidence, producing a full-throated sound appropriate to the smaller room, even with only around twenty string players. Principal oboist Noelle Drewes added plaintive beauty in her solos in the



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second song. The sound of the whole viola section proved better than the slightly sour viola solos in the third song, but overall the orchestra matched Johnson Cano with well-balanced beauty.

A performance of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony ("Pastorale") failed to come off with the same effortless grace. The horns had a few off moments and an early entrance in the first movement, followed by one from the double basses in the second. Chan set a pleasing walking tempo to start, but his beat did not always come across clearly, particularly in the second movement.

String intonation remained less than ideal, but the bird call solos from flute, oboe, and clarinet sparkled at the end of the second movement. In the trio of the third movement, the string drone overwhelmed the woodwinds at times. As the party depicted in the music of the third movement got out of control, the piccolo, brass, and timpani added raucous sounds for the thunderstorm of the fourth movement, providing a crackle of excitement in an otherwise underwhelming rendition of this Beethoven standard.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

Chicago CLASSICAL REVIEW

October 1, 2025

Pergolesi rarity highlights motley CSO program

By Tim Sawyier



“It is a sobering thought that when Mozart was my age, he had been dead for two years.” So said Tom Lehrer (who himself died earlier this year) on his timeless 1965 album *That Was the Year That Was*, recorded when he was 37.

Well by the time Giovanni Battista Pergolesi was 37, he'd been dead for eleven. Perhaps no other composer in the standard repertoire had a shorter creative life. His considerable reputation rests on a handful of inspired works composed in his early 20's. Pergolesi's oeuvre culminates with the *Stabat Mater*, completed weeks before his untimely death and performed Friday afternoon by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for the first time in over 40 years. Two standout soloists highlighted Friday's performance: soprano Giulia Semenzato, making her CSO debut, and mezzo Jennifer Johnson Cano, most recently heard with the orchestra in Haydn's *Mass in Time of War* under Manfred Honeck [last March](#).

Both sang with luminous, supple blend in Pergolesi's duets, conveying the pathos of Mary's lamentations at the cross with forthright expression. Semenzato's limpid tone glowed in her mournful solo arias, and Cano's darker hues were perfectly suited to the work's somber atmosphere.

Also making her CSO debut was conductor Daniela Candillari, currently principal conductor of the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, who led the accompanying string and continuo consort with unobtrusive efficiency.

Pergolesi's high Baroque vocal elegance followed a curious hodgepodge of a first half.

The performance opened with the first CSO subscription performances of Carlos Simon's *Fate Now Conquers* (2019). This five-minute curtain-raiser was composed as part of Gabriela Lena Frank's Creative Academy of Music, where Simon was asked to compose a work in response to a Beethoven symphony. *Fate Now Conquers* takes the Allegretto of Symphony No. 7 as its point of departure, and draws further inspiration from a Beethoven journal entry of 1815, which records an excerpt from *The Iliad*.

From the beginning, percussive accents punctuate racing strings and swirling winds, before driving arpeggios undergird sustained lines in the brass. The agitation thins out for a brief moment to give way to a plaintive cello solo, rendered sensitively by John Sharp, before the tension resumes, ultimately ending on a bruising chord in the low strings. Simon's energetic miniature



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undeniably packs a punch, though one could not help wondering about a programming choice that requires an entire wind section for five minutes of music, as the balance of the program only called for strings.

Barber's ubiquitous Adagio for Strings followed, in a rather direct, literal rendition from Candillari. The restive respiratory interjections from the audience seemed to speak to the absence of the desired rapt stasis in the performance.

The first half closed with the first CSO performances of Thea Musgrave's *Piccolo Play*. Originally composed in 1989 for piccolo and piano, Musgrave revised the work in 2022 with string accompaniment for the 50th anniversary of the National Flute Association. CSO piccolo Jennifer Gunn premiered this new version with the Chicago Philharmonic at the 50th NFA Convention in Chicago that year, and was again the soloist for its first CSO subscription performances.

Piccolo Play unfolds in seven brief movements, each named after a Couperin

harpsichord piece. The solo piccolo weaves enchanting melodic minor lines in "L'Enchanteresse" (The Enchantress) and makes ranine bounds in "L'Amphibie" (The Frog). Each movement has an aphoristic quality, and a pointillist texture prevails in the central ones. Gunn's stern piping vividly depicted "Le Bruit de Guerre" (The Noise of War) and she was unphased by the technical demands of the final breakneck "Le Turbulent" (The Turbulent One).

Gunn is a true virtuoso of her instrument, more at ease in a soloist role than many orchestral players. Her pure, well-projected tone was always in the service of Musgrave's condensed expression and made a compelling case for the piccolo as a concertante instrument.

Candillari attentively presided over the reduced string accompaniment, ensuring balances always favored Gunn, who received warm and well-deserved applause from the hometown crowd.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



October 31, 2023

Chills and Thrills

By Brian Taylor

If your Halloween trick-or-treating happened to find you at the doorstep of Alice Tully Hall, you escaped with a delectable treat. Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center devised a wickedly delightful evening in the humor of the holiday, animated by dazzling performances.

Beethoven's "Ghost" Trio — the Piano Trio in D Major, Op. 70, No. 1 — greeted cosplayers at the door. This fantastic masterpiece had little to do with modern-day Halloween, of course, but Beethoven evokes something mystic. His music often explored the darkness of human nature, and the harmonic language with which he captured the macabre has had lasting influence on the sound of Halloween.

Composed in 1808, the feisty outer movements are chock full of evil laughs and good-hearted shocks and surprises, but the middle movement, "Largo assai ed espressivo," is [the original source of the nickname "Ghost."](#) Cellist [Nicholas Canellakis](#), pianist [Alessio Bax](#), and violinist [Arnaud Sussmann](#) played with the assurance of an established trio, brought the three movement work a sweeping architectural arc, and illuminated some of its emotional truths.

Bax's pianism had one foot in the Classical, and another in the Romantic — wry and crisp in the first movement's unexpected twists and bursts, while the slow movement's spectral ripples seemed attuned to existential mysteries. Sussmann's silvery tone turned to mist in the *sotto voce* opening of the Largo, while Canellakis's plush, lyrical timbre blossomed into a

yearning *cantabile* as the movement cascaded and swelled with passion before dissolving again into the darkness.

Contemporary New York-based composer [Gregg Kallor](#)'s setting of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* for voice, cello, and piano does not immediately remind one much of Beethoven. But, this well-crafted work of post-modernism owes much to the German Expressionism that might trace back to him.

First performed at [Death Of Classical's The Crypt Sessions](#) (in the crypt of The Church of the Intercession) in 2016, this 25-minute solo opera is a tour-de-force for the performers, as well as a compositional accomplishment. Kallor pulls from an eclectic and imaginative vocabulary. In musical gestures that recall Bernard Hermann's music for *Vertigo* and John William's *Jaws* (the incessant heartbeat, a low grumble in the piano's lowest octave), Kallor demonstrates near-mastery of long form in skillful, idiomatic writing for his forces.

Repeating duties on the cello, Canellakis was joined by [Jennifer Johnson Cano](#), acclaimed mezzo-soprano, and pianist [Lucille Chung](#) for a committed, riveting rendering, which was enhanced by clever lighting effects, from blood reds to theatrical blackout. No stage director was credited, but Cano inhabited Poe's narrator with dramatic pacing and focused intensity, finding in the long-winded solo part moments of quiet and repose, encircling moments to let her vibrant instrument soar.



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Following intermission, Béla Bartók's *Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion* from 1937, cleared the cobwebs, taking a more abstract gaze into the underworld. While not overtly programmatic, Bartók's enduring (yet fiendishly difficult) quartet nonetheless suited the zeitgeist of the evening, even bridging the stylistic crevice between Beethoven's and Kallor's eras. Chung and Bax (and their busy page turners — not a job to be taken lightly!) almost melted into the surroundings while percussionists [Ayano Kataoka](#) and [Ian David Rosenbaum](#) commanded a fiendishly precise, flawlessly coordinated traversal through the virtuosic hills and valleys — Gershwin-possessed-by-a-demon. Nearly

veering into histrionics, they stylishly navigated the constantly shifting meters and complex array of mallets and toys (making show of the shared triangle) and other musical multi-tasking.

If the “Allegro non troppo” finale's prominent use of xylophone and winking final cadence portend the music of Danny Elfman (not inappropriate for the spooky occasion), the middle slow movement finds Bartók in his “night music” mode. The eerie soundscape of nocturnal insects and paranoid nightmares, which the pianists played with sneaky serenity, proved the *Sonata* to be an inspired choice for the season.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

May 4, 2023

Molding Mahler's Elemental Clay

By Lee Eiseman

Asked after the Boston Philharmonic Youth Symphony Orchestra's dress rehearsal of the Mahler Symphony No. 2 (Resurrection) whether it was going to be any good and whether I should come, Benjamin Zander replied to my ironical question.

Its almost certainly my last Mahler 2nd in Boston. It's too much physical effort to get that number of ducks in a row (230 people?). I'm 84! The orchestra is in top form. We will be touring in South Africa in June . . . Mahler 2nd hasn't been done in Johannesburg for over 40 years! We will perform it in Soweto to an all-black audience with a black choir and soloists.

The mezzo soprano is splendiferous — a major talent on the way to stardom. The chorus is on top of its game. Could you take in one more Mahler 2nd before you die, or at least before I die.....maybe? There is a party afterwards. Isn't that incentive enough? Of course I really didn't need to ask, since Zander has accomplished the once seemingly miraculous feat of elevating the eleven-year-old BPYO's performances to such consistent heights, that we expect miracles of engagement and execution every time they play.

Like a master potter, Zander has raised the elemental clay of his young charges into a vessel that overflows with their intentions to show the best of what enlightened Americans have to offer. This cornucopia of joy, hope, and

excellence spills out immeasurable gifts season after season.

Zander had been coy when wondering about his stamina. At the concert, his energetic, off-the-cuff opening remarks, which opened the ears of the full house to Mahler's worlds of nature, life, love, joy, fear, the wrath of God, and wonder about the hereafter, induced an electric charge before a note sounded. Then he practically leapt onto the podium and raised his arms to embark on his 12th world-wide "Resurrection."

Forty sumptuously stroked violins responded with anticipatory tremolos before the vocal cello section articulated its first noble statement. Energy crackled. A death march of souls proceeded upwards, confident that the *dies irae* would Passover. Was anything more important happening in the universe? Those at Symphony Hall on Wednesday night would say no!

The Andante Moderato lilted with Viennese *Gemütlichkeit*, the crinolines rustling and shimmering, and evanescing into mystical realms... moments evoke Beethoven's 9th's anticipations of the choral entrance. Juicy string portamenti and canny rubati signaled immersion in Mahler's style. Jack-in-the box pizzicatos lined up perfectly and led to rippling akin to Bach's first prelude.

In the third movement, *In ruhig fließenden Bewegung* (With a gently flowing movement) two strokes from the timpani lead to a turmoil in which Tristen Broadfoot's klezmer sound



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emerged as a human highlight. “Captivating orchestral solos, doublings—and even triplings—so challenging when that many different instruments must play in unison—families, and tutti would run the whole nightlong. (David Patterson).” The movement built to the cry-of-despair chord, pinning my decibel meter at 97, and setting up the *Urlicht*, (Primal Light) in which mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano consoled us with the most beautifully produced angelic tones since Jesse Norman floated out this ode to bliss and heavenly repose.

The sprawling Finale, Mahler’s longest movement save for the Eighth Symphony’s Part 2 (which is really much more than a movement) leading us from neutral passagework to ecstasy is hard to hold together, but Zander certainly marshaled it with the authority of experience and inspiration. It began in chaos before we heard the “Resurrection” theme. More angelic singing from Cano as well as moving strains from soprano Maria Brea teased the gigantic choral conclusion, which began in such a remarkable hush. The Chorus pro Musica, having sat on stage for so long, supported these tones with an astonishing ability to put across words and meanings at the threshold of inaudibility, thanks to the abilities of the 100-plus singers and Jamie Kirsch’s preparation.

And we adapt a pair of earlier reviews for the peroration.

E-flat major has never sounded so eloquent and moving as in the final section of this symphony, with the chorus, soloists and orchestra, so deeply under-girded with strong foundations of the organ, when the eternal call to us mortals is proclaimed: “Rise again, yes, you will rise again my heart, in the twinkling of an eye!” Who could fail to be moved by this music and this performance, in this place on such an evening? (Brian Jones)”

With such a sea of instruments and voices before him, [Zander] masterminded a performance reaching heights rarely experienced at Boston’s symphonic shrine. Without a single show of flashiness, the seasoned conductor led the teeming myriads of notes of Mahler’s perhaps most popular symphony to inevitable yet fresh destinations. Mahler was never so elegant, so wrought with musical design, and so deeply moving. (John Ehrlich)

Zander and his players said goodbye to those departing from their ranks with a cry of the heart, Elgar’s *Nimrod*. Rosamund Zander, Ben’s former wife and permanent Partner in Possibility, could be seen to wipe away a tear. She also privately co-conducted some of Jennifer Johnson Cano’s beautifully arched phrases. We responded in the same manner, though without actually shaping time.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERA NEWS

May 2023

Jennifer Johnson Cano & Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

Alice Tully Hall
NEW YORK CITY
By David Shengold

THE CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER'S last segment of its multipartite exploration of Franz Schubert, dubbed "Winter Festival: Schubert Forever," came to Alice Tully Hall on February 3. This pleasant but rather programatically grab-bag of an evening explored the posthumous legacy of the Austrian composer in works of his contemporaries (Felix Mendelssohn and Franz Liszt), successors in the Viennese tradition (Gustav Mahler and Erich Wolfgang Korngold) down through recent and contemporary musical creators (André Previn, John Harbison). Pianist Gloria Chien led off with a disciplined, yet fluidly disarming reading of Mendelssohn's "Fourth Song Without Words." Her keyboard colleague Michael Stephen Brown joined able violinist Kristin Lee in Fritz Kreisler's 1917 arrangement of the melodious second ballet excerpt from *Rosamunde*—more Kreislerian than Schubertian in effect, though well dispatched here. Brown proved pretty dazzling in Liszt's elaborate 1844 variations on one of Schubert's most immediately popular songs, "Die Forelle."

The first vocal piece, Previn's brief 1995 "Vocalise for Soprano, Cello and Piano" matched Chien and veteran rich-toned veteran Keith Robinson with the splendidly musical mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano. The "Vocalise" is a well-constructed,

clever work, with the three musicians getting equally weighted assignments, but to one listener it could equally have been said to represent the legacy of Gabriel Fauré or Sergei Rachmaninoff as of Schubert. Cano had absolutely no problem maintaining a silky finish and perfect legato in the tessitura Previn crafted for high lyric soprano Sylvia McNair. Next came another virtuoso turn, a piece redolent of nineteenth-century solo violin virtuosity: a Grande Caprice on "Erlkönig" by Heinrich Wilhelm Ernest (1814-65). Somehow, Sean Lee managed impressively to balance the low, steady triplet accompaniment and the rather eerie high line of the various "vocal" characters on his instrument. I'm not sure that Ernest's parlor trick adds much luster to Schubert's uniquely constructed masterwork; but, before and indeed into the age of recording, legacies came in all varieties.

Next, Cano gave a stellar reading of Stéphane Fromageot's 2013 chamber arrangement of the Rückert-Lieder, with deep yet unexaggerated concentration on the text but an uninterrupted flow of seamless phrases. "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen" was so quietly eloquent that one (almost) didn't want to hear the succeeding "Um Mitternacht," though the singer carried off its ringing avowal of faith convincingly. Yura Lee's



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soulful viola playing balanced Johnson Cano with particular beauty. The cycle was one of the highlights of New York's vocal season.

Harbison's 1988 piece for piano quartet, November 19, 1828, is a fascinating, deeply moving work with old-fashioned programmatic titles to its movements, relating to Schubert's last day on earth. The music uncannily cites, reharmonizes, mirrors and recomposes bits of Schubert's finished and unfinished projects in way that truly suggests, "Schubert Forever." Splendidly played by Brown, Kristin Lee,

Yura Lee and Robinson, this proved an apt tribute indeed.

After intermission we heard Korngold's attractive, at times lush and at times playful Piano Quintet in E major from 1921. Here too the connection to Schubert seemed loose, save for an undoubted rootedness in tradition. But the workings of the superb instrumentalists (here Chien, all three Lees and Robinson) more closely suggest the chamber output of Brahms. Still, it made a dazzling end to the evening.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

New York CLASSICAL REVIEW

March 13, 2023

A superb cast brings out the comic ingenuity of Verdi's swan song in Met's "Falstaff"

By George Grella

The more one sees performances of Verdi's *Falstaff*, the more strange it appears.

Verdi's last opera is not only atypical in his career for being only his second comedy (along with the early *Un giorno di regno*) out of more than two dozen total operas, it is far different in means than his main body of work. The opera is mostly dialogue and ensembles, there is barely a signature Verdi aria, and even that is incomplete.

That last detail is a secret key to *Falstaff*, which is that, coming at the dawn of cinema and 30 years before the Marx Brothers, it is operatic screwball comedy, one thing always collapsing or dovetailing into another, a moment's pause existing to set up the next conflict. Performing this, even in the intrinsically bizarre world of opera, demands a certain kind of cast and style of direction, and that's just what the Metropolitan Opera delivered in its revival at Sunday's matinee opening. What went above and beyond was the quality of the singing, especially baritone Michael Volle as Sir John Falstaff.

The Met has been producing this opera since both were new, and their most recent Sir John in this Robert Carson production was [Ambrogio Maestri](#)—a truly larger-than-life figure, a physical manifestation of the character who sang it in a heavily parlando style—old school and classic, in a way, but not as

musically effective as hearing the notes Verdi wrote. Having such a fine vocalist as Volle at the center of the action meant the voices, and the music were at the fore. It was not just hi-jinks, but fine music making and a whole satisfying package.

Not that Volle didn't fill out the part dramatically as well as vocally—with the help of a padded costume he was fully Falstaff. His strong, clear sound and elegant phrasing also meant he could more easily move through the different sides of the character, from blustery to buffoonish, insinuating to melancholy, overconfident but *slightly* self aware. It didn't hurt that in the character's rougher moments, he seemed like a Verdian version of Kramer from *Seinfeld*, not a bad thing—who could sing.



Hera Hysesang Park as Nannetta, Marie-Nicole Lemieux as Mistress Quickly, Ailyn Pérez as Alice, and Jennifer Johnson Cano as Meg in Verdi's *Falstaff*.



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It helped that Volle was backed by the usual deep cast of excellent singers one finds at the Met—including soprano Allyn Pérez as Alice, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano as Meg, contralto Marie-Nichole Lemieux as Mistress Quickly, and baritone Christopher Maltman as Ford. Pérez, Cano, and Lemieux were not only in fine voice, but seemed carefree as well, enjoying themselves in the characters, relishing what, at last in opera terms, is the equivalent of snappy dialogue. This suited the music, which goes back and further, interjects, and chatters as much as the characters—like recitatives but more musical and through-composed. The contrasting colors from these singers mirrored those in the score, which has more instrumental details than many of Verdi's older works. Pérez was tremendously clear and full, Cano sounded unexpectedly lighter than the soprano, an ideal vocal characterization for the lightheartedness of Meg, and Lemieux was perhaps best of all, with a gorgeous sound and a commanding presence—she came off as the ringleader of the Merry Wives of Windsor, very much like the figure in a sitcom who shoves all the other characters into action.

Maltman was also a highlight, not just his character but his vocal performance standing as a worthy rival to Falstaff. The natural edge in his voice means he can move quickly between comic and threatening qualities. As the husband threatened by a possible cuckolding he was full of the self-serious energy of a great straight man, even while wearing a ridiculous Las Vegas cowboy outfit in his masquerade as Fontana, opposite Falstaff in his English riding clothes. As the two tried to out-swagger each other,

they embodied superb clownishness, even without the red noses.

That was part of Gina Lapinski's stage direction, which smoothly mixes together the score with Carsen's somewhat confused setting, which seems to exist, depending on the scene, sometime in the '30s or '50s, and either in a private London club or a Los Angeles kitchen. In the kitchen, there is a spectacular sequence of Ford leading a crowd through live-action slow motion pratfalls as they seek to trap Falstaff.

Everyone is either a clown or is aiding and abetting clownishness, in one way or another, with the exception of the young lovers Nannetta (soprano Hera Hyesang Park) and Fenton (tenor Bogdan Volkov). The two have the purest, most operatic music—including the celebrated Act III scene. Volkov was warm, though a big muffled compared to so many of the big voices on stage, while Park had a shining soubrette sound without losing any of the character's simple innocence.

While every single individual moment was easily excellent, some of the ensembles were ragged. Daniele Rustioni is in the pit for this revival. His leadership was mostly solid, and the orchestral details were terrific, but the Act I ensembles were a murk of conflicting pulses and articulations, with an uneven pace between singers and orchestra.

This problem seemed solved by Act II, with the "Merry Wives of Windsor" trio tight and sparkling. Then, the opening of the third act felt sluggish at first, up until the point where Falstaff is joined by the other characters and chorus. The lyrical, wispy music came together with energy, and Volle knew how to milk the final comedic gestures to maximum effect.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERA NEWS

January 29, 2023

Don Giovanni

By Stephanie Adrian

THE ATLANTA OPERA CONTINUED its 2022-23 season with a film noir-inspired production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* that gave the classic a controversial twist (seen Jan. 29). Originally conceived by set designer R. Keith Brumley and costume designer Mary Traylor for Lyric Opera of Kansas City, the production transformed Tirso de Molina's seminal tale into a world of betrayal bathed in chiaroscuro lighting. In this alternate reality, Giovanni bears a striking resemblance to Humphrey Bogart with a touch of gangster, while his conquests Donna Anna and Donna Elvira are reminiscent of Hollywood femmes fatales Rita Hayworth and Ava Gardner. Seville is no longer Seville, but a world of shadows, tall, gray buildings, and back alleyways in which the cigarette-smoking Giovanni skulks, molesting and serenading as he goes.

Conductor Jan Latham-Koenig and stage director Kristine McIntyre led a nearly ideal cast, beginning with Brandon Cedel's Giovanni, which was dashing—to say the least—as evidenced by the breadth of his vocalism and the physicality that permeated his interactions with every other character. Cedel amped up his singing little by little as the evening progressed, providing fluid recitative, a *sotto voce* rendition of “Deh vieni alla finestra,” eventually delivering brash, emboldened singing just before meeting his ultimate demise at the hand of Leporello, played by Milanese bass-baritone Giovanni Romeo.

Atlanta Opera's trio of sopranos each offered an exceptional voice, deployed expertly. Jennifer Johnson Cano was an electric Elvira, her comedy and preemptory interjections perfectly timed; she was truly a thorn in Giovanni's side. As delicious as Act I was, Act II held the most glorious singing of the evening, including Cano's “Mi tradì quell'alma ingrata.” Cano's pulsating precision in melismatic passages and thrilling resonance up and down the range were pure luxury. Mané Galoyan, the flaxen-wigged Donna Anna, had paramount control over her sound, with breathtaking pianissimo singing in “Non mi dir.” The allure of Meigui Zhang's voice as Zerlina understandably captivated Andrew Gilstrap's Masetto in “Batti, Batti.” Tenor Duke Kim gave a spell-binding performance as Don Ottavio, delivering an exceptional “Il mio tesoro.”

Although the Commendatore—sung by unflinching bass George —emerged to escort Giovanni to hell at the end of Act II, he was denied that privilege here by stage director McIntyre, who altered the finale of Mozart's *dramma giocoso* significantly. McIntyre deleted the larghetto at the end of Act II and reimagined Giovanni's death as a shooting that paralleled the opening of the opera, perhaps fulfilling Giovanni's karmic destiny as well as the film noir theme.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

April 29, 2022

Runnicles starts to say goodbye with ‘Requiem’

By Jon Ross

Donald Runnicles, principal guest conductor of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, was more than a decade into his tenure with the orchestra when he last led them in Maurice Durufle’s “Requiem.”

It was the most recent time the ensemble performed the sacred piece, which feels tailor-made for a church setting. (Norman Mackenzie, ASO’s director of choruses, programmed the work more recently at Trinity Presbyterian Church, where he serves as music director.)

Another decade on, Runnicles is preparing to end his time with the orchestra by looking back at the awe-inspiring Durufle work. The conductor’s final appearances with the ASO Chorus won’t occur until his next season in Atlanta — he offers up the Brahms-penned “A German Requiem”, in January 2023 — but Runnicles has been associated with Atlanta for so long that he deserves something of a long goodbye.

For Thursday night’s expertly crafted program, Runnicles led the orchestra in two Debussy works — “Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun” and the engaging “Nocturnes”— before the main choral event. In “Nocturnes,” the string section created a robust, opulent ensemble blend that both felt ethereal yet tactile at once. The gauzy clouds of sound supported slithering woodwind melodies.

In March, the chorus performed Mozart’s “Requiem,” led by incoming music director Nathalie Stutzmann. Durufle’s setting for the requiem mass, composed 150 years later in a musical world that Mozart would hardly recognize, is so dissimilar as to make comparisons useless — and the chorus likewise had a vastly different sound in this performance.

For the symphony musicians, Durufle’s orchestration contains intricate, delicately constructed string parts that are unique when taken one at a time but together gently push forward the “Requiem” with a cohesive, organ-like sound. The expansive orchestra rarely got close to overpowering the full ASO Chorus, which was at its most powerful in the quieter movements of a contemplative “Requiem.” The Durufle is a world away from the fiery, aggressive Mozart, but no less passionate.

I’ve written before that the ASO Chorus is most impressive in the low dynamic range, when the energy and force of their sound is focused into a delicate but deliberate pianissimo. Durufle’s “Requiem” is full of those instances, and it is in these spots that the chorus once again fully came alive. On the other end of the dynamic spectrum is where the chorus sometimes had problems. In the “Sanctus,” the collected voices sang out with triple-forte gusto that should have been reigned in a bit.



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For all the beauty of the choral movements, the “Pie Jesu,” a solo for mezzo-soprano, turned out to be the most gratifying. Soloist Jennifer Johnson Cano’s performance Thursday was one of those instances where I almost sensed mouths dropping open in amazement. Her voice seemed to hold the packed house still for four and a half minutes. Baritone Douglas Williams was likewise impressive, singing beautifully with a forceful vigor.

The world outside the hall still casts a shadow over performances within, and health and safety was certainly on my

mind Thursday. Before the concert, one of the chorus members tested positive for COVID-19, necessitating extra mitigation efforts developed by the ASO in concert with Dr. Carlos del Rio and Dr. Susan Ray, who have been guiding the ASO during the entire pandemic. They, and the entire Atlanta arts community, have done tireless work to bring performances safely back to the stage. While the pandemic put a pause on the celebratory goodbye for former music director Robert Spano, here’s hoping Runnicles’ final tour proceeds as planned.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The Philadelphia Inquirer

March 19, 2022

Philadelphia Orchestra premieres 'The Hours.' Next stop: Metropolitan Opera.

"The Hours" — not the book or the movie — becomes a penetrating opera despite near-impossible odds. The opera-in-concert presentation, repeated Sunday at Verizon Hall, can be safely called historic.

By David Patrick Sterns



No operatic team takes on a literary property as deep and complicated as *The Hours* without having a viable plan for theatrically blending its three psychologically penetrating stories that take place all over the 20th century. But composer Kevin Puts, librettist Greg Pierce, and an all-star cast with the Philadelphia Orchestra beat the next-to-impossible odds in an operatic

adaptation of the famous Michael Cunningham novel and 2002 film in the premiere Friday at the Kimmel Cultural Campus.

The opera-in-concert presentation, repeated Sunday at Verizon Hall, can be safely called a historic event. Though something of a preview for a full production next season at the Metropolitan Opera, there was no sense



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that this is a work in progress, so fully realized was the opera's treatment of the three parallel plots, as well as the performances by Renee Fleming, Kelli O'Hara and Jennifer Johnson Cano under Yannick Nézet-Séguin. The near-full audience that cheered the opera's concluding, mesmerizing, three-soprano trio would no doubt agree.

Without lowering the brow of the story, the opera is immediately lovable, with a lush orchestration that hits you in the solar plexus — plus an ever-present chorus that sings what everybody is thinking, and had the Philadelphia Symphonic Choir deftly blended with the textures of the orchestra.

Harmonically, the opera reflects influences from John Adams — as do so many pieces by many current composers — though composer Puts has a more precise dramaturgical sense than Adams, and a tougher edge that's demanded of the opera's three stories: about author Virginia Woolf writing her famous novel *Mrs. Dalloway* in the 1920s; a suicidal housewife reading the novel in the 1940s; and an AIDS caregiver living the novel in the 1990s. Thanks to the kind of magic realism that's possible in opera, the different stories overlap, unfold simultaneously and ultimately have powerful dialogues with each other, thanks to Puts' mastery of high-def, big-screen sound pictures and librettist Pierce's smart choices in drawing from the huge possibilities of the source material. Surtitles were full of plot signposts that saved this operatic package from potential confusion.

And as one who followed the opera easily from having studied the film and Puts' score, I was pleased to talk to concertgoers who had no background in *The Hours* but had no problem navigating its constantly shifting sands.

Of course, Puts' broad musical vocabulary is very much responsible for telling the stories on visceral and subliminal levels. Big turning points arrived with both grandeur and detail, so much that a good orchestral suite could be drawn from this score, starting with

the Act I prelude, suggesting Debussy in his darker, Edgar Allen Poe-influenced moments. But the opera's hallmark was more intimate moments that achieved gut-wrenching intensity equal to the best of Puccini, but with an extra ring of truth. Those who have lived through similar stories — including the 1990s AIDS epidemic — might find that this opera goes knowingly into the core issues of that time.

Each main character had an individual sound world: Virginia Woolf's being spare with good use of silence, often implying more than the music said and an occasional dash of Ralph Vaughan Williams. Laura, the housewife, had music with a surface luster suggesting a materialistic world of post-war plenty plus whiffs of 1950s pop music. The latter-day Mrs. Dalloway of the 1990s was a common musical meeting ground, a nerve center of sorts, and with plenty of nervous rhythm, of course.

Fleming and O'Hara had the luxury of having their roles written specifically for them, which was reflected in any number of arresting moments, though both were still in the process of wrapping their voices around some of the contours of their vocal lines. Cano's portrayal of Woolf was 100% there: Every word was clear both in content and intention, and her mezzo-soprano tone was deeply alluring. Equally excellent in similar ways was Brett Polegato as the AIDS-stricken Richard. Even small rolls were fully realized, including Jonah Serotta as Laura's son Richie. The orchestra under Nézet-Séguin played the score as if it had lived with the music for years (as opposed to days, which was actually the case).

A historic event indeed, and one that stands with Jennifer Higdon's *blue cathedral* (2000), Michael Hersch's *The Vanishing Pavilions* (2005) and Julia Wolfe's *Anthrax Fields* (2014) as great beacons of artistic truth that were first heard in Philadelphia.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The New York Times

March 20, 2022

‘The Hours’ Will Bring Renée Fleming Back to the Met

Kevin Puts’s new opera had its premiere in a Philadelphia Orchestra concert presentation before coming to New York this fall.

By Zachary Woolfe



Three women are left alone onstage. The orchestra is low as they begin to sing. Their voices (two soprano, one mezzo-soprano) gradually swell and intertwine in a radiant, aching trio about all that separates them from one another — and their essential union.

This is, famously, the ending of Strauss’s “Der Rosenkavalier,” which five years

ago [was the last work](#) the superstar soprano Renée Fleming sang at the Metropolitan Opera. But her performance, [a farewell](#) to the canonical repertory, did not mark a full retirement. Fleming said she would continue to concertize, and left open the possibility of returning to staged opera for new pieces written with her in mind.



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So on Friday here in Philadelphia, it felt like a moving nod to her distinguished career that a radiant, aching trio of women (two sopranos, one mezzo) left alone onstage — a trio about all that separates them from one another, and their essential union — is also the coda to “The Hours,” which will bring Fleming, for whom it was composed, [back to the Met this fall](#).

There the work, Kevin Putz’s new adaptation of the 1998 novel and 2002 film about the reverberations of Virginia Woolf’s “Mrs. Dalloway” in the lives of three characters in different places and eras, will be conducted by the company’s music director, Yannick Nézet-Séguin. And on Friday, at the Kimmel Center, Nézet-Séguin led its world premiere in a concert presentation with another ensemble he leads, the Philadelphia Orchestra.

With a libretto by Greg Pierce, “The Hours” is even prettier and more sumptuous than [“Silent Night,”](#) a grandly scored yet sweetly humble opera about a cease-fire over Christmas during World War I, for which Putz won a Pulitzer Prize in 2012. The new work is, like “Silent Night,” direct, effective theater, with a cinematic quality in its plush, propulsive underscoring, its instinctive sense for using music to move things along. For all its shifts and overlaps of time and place, it’s an entirely clear piece, its sound world never too busy or difficult — never too interesting, perhaps — to muddy the waters.

Fleming has the role Meryl Streep played in Stephen Daldry’s film: Clarissa Vaughan, a prosperous book editor in late 1990s New York City who is preparing a party for her friend, a famous poet dying of AIDS. She suffers regrets and despair, as do other two women: Laura Brown (the acclaimed Broadway soprano Kelli O’Hara), a Los Angeles housewife in 1949; and Woolf herself (the mezzo Jennifer Johnson

Cano on Friday, but Joyce DiDonato at the Met) in a London suburb, trying to surmount her depression long enough to write “Mrs. Dalloway” in the early 1920s.

In Michael Cunningham’s delicate novel, these three are linked in a carefully wrought knit of Woolfian prose and coincidences, among them that Clarissa Vaughan shares a first name with the title character of “Mrs. Dalloway,” who in Woolf’s novel — which Laura Brown is reading as she fights anomie and the urge toward suicide — is also making a party.

The film version is far more lugubrious, not least in Philip Glass’s [melodramatically undulating score](#), which so defines the movie’s mood — its dusky, urgent strings inseparable from Nicole Kidman’s Woolf and her puttied aquiline nose striding off to drown themselves — that there is something brave in another composer taking on this material.

a kind of sonic carpeting, but his repetitions are much less insistent. The opera begins in a watery blur, with a choir, sounding simultaneously floating and precise, chanting fragments of Woolf’s classic opening line: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.”

The events of the opera, as in the book and film, are studiously modest, taking place in a single day. Clarissa goes to the florist, visits her dying friend, and muses on what her life would have been like had she not, years ago, broken off a budding romance with him. Woolf chats with her husband about page proofs, forms phrases and greets her sister’s family. Laura attempts to bake a cake for her husband’s birthday before escaping to a hotel to read alone.

With each of the two acts unfolding in an unbroken stream, Putz moves smoothly between parlando sung conversation and glowing lyrical flights. The stylization of opera allows him to

bring his characters together in the same musical space, even if they are otherwise unaware of one another. So there are, for example, ravishing duets for Woolf and Laura, one in which they sing lines from “Mrs. Dalloway” in close harmony over trembling strings. Puts is acute in using the chorus, which will presumably be offstage in a full production, to convey further shadows of these women’s interior lives.

Prepared with remarkably limited rehearsal time for a two-hour work with a substantial cast, this was a lush yet transparent account of the score, performed with polish and commitment. The opera leans heavily on this orchestra’s storied opulent strings, as well as on its characterful winds and brasses, and precision at a large battery of percussion instruments (including a celesta, used frequently, in a cliché of dreaminess).

Puts’s work is attractive and skillful. Yet much of it, despite lots of activity and ostensible variety in the orchestra and among the singers, gives a sense of engulfing sameness of musical texture and vocal approach. The arias, if you set the words aside, are more or less interchangeable: pristinely soaring. The saturated orchestral colors recall Nelson Riddle’s symphonic pop arrangements and Samuel Barber’s gently reflective soprano monologue “Knoxville: Summer of 1915.” But Riddle songs are just a couple of minutes long; “Knoxville,” about 15. Over a couple of hours, it’s lovely but wearying.

The ’50s style for Laura’s world — mild Lawrence Welk-type swing, choral writing like TV jingles — feels obvious. And some moments of highest drama smack of the overkill that mars the film, as when the threat of Woolf’s devastating headaches is marked by pummeling darkness, yawning brasses and instrumental screams.

New fantasy sequences, demarcated in concert with sudden shifts of lighting, telegraph a bit too crudely how much these women want to run from their lives. Woolf’s imaginary interaction with a contemporary male novelist who speaks about how much she’s meant to him — an invention of the libretto — is cloying and overwrought, drenched in bells.

The more intimate and understated, the better for Puts’s music, and the cast embodies both those qualities. Cano sings with mellow sobriety — and, in Woolf’s darkest moments, stricken intensity. O’Hara’s voice is silvery at the top and full in the middle, her pain registering gracefully.

As Clarissa’s poet friend, Richard, the baritone Brett Polegato sang with lightly sardonic airiness. The tenor William Burden sounded shining and eager as his old lover, Louis. The tenor Jamez McCorkle, the mezzo Deborah Nansteel and the bass-baritone Brandon Cedel were steady, sonorous presences as the main characters’ much put-upon romantic partners.

Fleming began with some paleness of tone, but grew in command through the evening, past her characteristic propriety to a kind of somber nobility. Clarissa dominates the opera’s final scenes, when “The Hours” is at its finest: the emotions sincere and persuasive, the music fervent.

And at the end, the three women come together, perceiving one another in a way they cannot in the novel or film and arriving at a simple moral: “Here is the world and you live in it, and you try.” There was poignancy in having a great diva, now 63, singing the nostalgic leading role, a woman taking in all she has done — and realizing she still has more to give.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

ClassicalSource

February 17, 2022

Marc Neikrug's *A Song by Mahler* – Jennifer Johnson Cano, Ryan Bradford, David Shifrin and the FLUX Quartet

By Susan Stempleski

The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center continues its New Milestones series with Marc Neikrug's 2018 *A Song by Mahler*, which had its world premiere at Chamber Music Northwest's 2021 Summer Festival in Portland, Oregon. The eighty-minute work explores the nature of love as it follows a celebrated concertizing singer as she and her husband, who is also her coach-accompanist, are forced to deal with a terrifying reality when she is diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's.

'*Liebst du um Schönheit*' (If You Love for the Sake of Beauty), one of Mahler's *Rückert-Lieder*, is at the heart of the work. At the beginning of the story, the diva performs the setting which serves as her character's trademark encore. As the action progresses, we hear snippets of Mahler's refrain as we witness the heroine succumb to her disease, and the song serves as a symbol of the transcendent power of music in the most devastating circumstances.

Jennifer Johnson Cano is intensely ardent, arrogant and brave. With her commanding stage presence and dusky, arresting mezzo-soprano, she is exceptionally well cast. She intones Mahler's melodies stunningly, and her keen dramatic skills inhabit every moment of her performance and every aspect of her multifaceted character.

Ryan Bradford skillfully navigates the role of the singer's husband who remembers their life and love, and through whose eyes we witness her withdrawal from reality and from him. A sensitive actor and singer, he

poignantly recounts his wife's torturous mental decline, as well as his own anxiety and changing emotions as their relationship becomes increasingly strained.

Marc Neikrug's libretto employs speech and singing, and he takes a unique approach to the relationship between the two. When dialogue is casual, the spoken text is rhythmically synchronized with the music and acted as in a play. In more emotionally charged situations, where speaking might not suffice, the words are sung. Cano and Bradford skillfully manage this unusual demand.

Neikrug's expressionistic score, brilliantly performed by the FLUX Quartet and David Shifrin, employs a Schoenberg-like fluctuating tonality that follows the evolution of the couple's relationship and perfectly reflects the wide-range of emotions permeating their story. Among the many impressive interludes are cellist Felix Fan's heartfelt opening solo and Shifrin's haunting flights on clarinet.

Douglas Fitch's inventive and economical set consists of two wooden frames. One serves as a screen onto which projected video images summon up a concert hall, the singers' home, a doctor's waiting room, and other locations. The other, in the shape of a giant stave, frames the chamber ensemble seated at the back of the stage. Nicholas Houfek's quickly-changing lighting designs most effectively suggest the emotionally charged atmosphere of Neikrug's profoundly moving drama.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

TEXAS

CLASSICAL REVIEW



January 16, 2022

Missteps apart, “Carmelites” makes powerful impact at Houston Grand Opera

By Steven Brown



Francis Poulenc’s *Dialogues of the Carmelites* returned to Houston Grand Opera Friday night after an absence of 33 years.

The opening-night performance at Wortham Theater Center brought moving portrayals to Poulenc’s tragic drama of an order of nuns condemned to the guillotine during the French Revolution. This Francesca Zambello production was first premiered at Washington National Opera in 2015.

Based on a real-life historic tragedy, *Dialogues* adds a fictional character at the center: Blanche de la Force, a young noblewoman who is so terrified by the world’s upheavals that she retreats into a convent. But the revolution’s violence follows her there, and the opera focuses on Blanche’s struggle with fear—culminating in her joining her fellow nuns in the opera’s climactic procession as they walk one by one to the guillotine.

Natalya Romaniw brought a rich, full-throated lyric soprano to Blanche. Her vibrant singing easily conveyed the fervor that welled up within Blanche at pivotal points in the story—for instance, when Blanche faces down her brother, who comes to her convent trying to take her home. In moments like that, Romaniw gave Blanche’s declarations an almost heroic resolve. And when the terror of potential martyrdom beset Blanche, Romaniw’s voice took on an edge that captured that affectingly.

What was lacking was Blanche’s nervousness and frailty—the fear of life itself—that underlies the character. Those are the qualities that make the young nun’s struggle so compelling and her ultimate self-sacrifice so powerful.

Red-blooded though Romaniw’s singing was, she failed to convey an essential vulnerability. When Blanche berated her fellow novice, Sister Constance, for being so cheerful, Romaniw merely made her come across as aggressive and mean-spirited—rather than communicating Blanche’s own fears.

With that side of Blanche shortchanged, Sister Constance emerged Friday as the story’s most sympathetic character. Lauren Snouffer’s silvery tones put across the young novice’s sunny nature right away, and when Constance told about the fun she once had at her



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brother's wedding, Snouffer's little burst of dancing lent the drama one of its few moments of lightness. Though high notes in Poulenc may not have the showiness of those in Verdi or Puccini, Snouffer's ease in soaring aloft turned those moments into embodiments of Constance's spirit and fervor.

Snouffer also sang the quieter moments with a lyricism and conviction that revealed Constance's visionary, even mystical side, such as when she (in French) declares: "We do not die for ourselves alone, but for each other—or sometimes even instead of each other."

After portraying the likes of Tosca and Butterfly for HGO in years past, soprano Patricia Racette returned for her first local opera appearance in more than a decade to play Madame de Croissy. Zambello's staging confined the ailing prioress to a wheelchair in her first scene and a bed in her second. Even so Racette still managed to hint at her dignity and resolve, and project the agonies of the nun's death throes.

The role of the old nun, written for contralto, lies low for Racette's soprano; at times the singer was barely audible. But when the prioress's outcries rose into a more comfortable range, Racette hurled them out fiercely.

Before singing a note, soprano Christine Goerke gave the new prioress, Madame Lidoine, an entirely more congenial demeanor than her elderly predecessor: Greeting the nuns in turn, she smiled and touched each affectionately.

A vein of that coziness ran through Goerke's singing, too. But in the big moments of Madame Lidoine's addresses to the nuns, Goerke's voice surged out with a heft that recalled her past HGO Brünnhildes, powerfully conveying the prioress's courage, faith and conviction. A few of those grand statements lost some of their potency, though, when Goerke didn't quite make it up to the right pitches.

Even amid such stage veterans as Racette and Goerke, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano made an impact of her own as Mother Marie, the prioress's assistant.

Cano's voice was full and sturdy enough to project Marie's courage when she confronted revolutionary soldiers and her resolve when she urged the nuns to take a vow of martyrdom. Yet when Blanche buckled with fear, Cano sang with a warmth that revealed the tenderness behind the toughness.

The men on the edges of the story helped set the women in relief.

As Blanche's father, the Marquis de la Force, Rod Gilfry at first sang with a booming tone that felt way over the top for the first scene's conversational intimacy; ; fortunately, he soon pared the volume down, making the characterization more natural. Tenors Eric Taylor and Chad Shelton brought sturdy voices and dignified demeanors to the roles, respectively, of Blanche's brother and the chaplain.

The entire group of nuns joined voices with breadth and sweetness in their Ave Maria and Ave Verum Corpus, and held their own alongside the HGO Orchestra's heft in the climactic Salve Regina.

Conductor Patrick Summers spurred the singers and orchestra to make the opening of that Salve Regina so forceful that they thwarted one of the opera's most arresting moments—nearly drowning out the first slash of the offstage guillotine. That misstep apart, Summers and the orchestra captured the score's ever-changing sounds and moods vividly, from the silky allure of Poulenc's fleeting bursts of lyricism to the ferocity that depicts the revolutionaries and the fearsome swagger of the march that opens the finale.

Zambello's staging brought out not only the natures of the individual characters—from Madame de Croissy's dignity and Madame Lidoine's warmth

to Sister Constance's charm—but also made the nuns into a cohesive group. Whether they were warily taking a vote for martyrdom or resignedly exchanging their habits for civilian clothes, they were wholly believable.

Hildegard Bechtler's sets, dominated by stark, almost-bare walls, conveyed the nuns' ascetic existence and focused attention on the principals. But in the final scene, the walls left so little space for the action that the nuns were clustered at one side and a small group of spear-toting revolutionaries at the

other. That hardly created a powerful scenic vista.

Worse still, before the nuns began their procession to the guillotine, the wall at the center opened to reveal a chamber bathed in yellow light: After each nun climbed the stairs onto the scaffold, she stopped there and faced the audience for a moment before going to her death. The stilted directorial gambit by Zambello robbed the nuns' final steps of the grim relentlessness that makes it so heart-rending.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

THE ROANOKE TIMES

November 6, 2021

Opera Roanoke delivers a smart and creative 'Béla Bartók: Bluebeard's Castle'

By Gordon Marsh

Béla Bartók wrote his lone opera in 1911, a decade after Sigmund Freud's "The Interpretation of Dreams" introduced the "subconscious" into art.

More than a century later, Opera Roanoke hoped to open minds with Bartók's "Bluebeard's Castle," at Jefferson Center's Shaftman Performance Hall. Advance publicity had made much of its post-Halloween timing, and there was a hint of zombie at the end. In total, the audience received a smart, creative staging of this unique opera.

The Bluebeard fairy tale comes to us in many versions. In our day, a Freudian reading lends itself naturally to the story's haunted spaces, where a series of locked castle doors can be read as recesses of mind and memory, something far from the fable's somewhat misogynistic roots. Unlocking these doors reveals the opera's engine, and Opera Roanoke's creative team — Artistic Director Steven White, lighting designer Tlaloc López-Watermann, and technical director Joey Neighbors — found surprising (and wonderful) ways to unlock them.

Balázs' libretto narrows the plot's gruesomeness, a bit. Bluebeard brings home Judith, his fourth wife, not his seventh. This affords Bartók the opportunity for fantastical music at each door's enumerated reveal — torture chamber, armory, treasury, secret garden, and, most fantastic of all, his vast empire. Spoiler alert: things don't

end well for Judith (welcome to opera, right?). This is not the curtain of a Verdi or Puccini heroine. The opera inhabits a grim world. Judith's final reckoning is certainly the most unnatural end for any diva in operatic history.

The cast for this production boasts two rising stars, the extraordinary bass-baritone Kyle Albertson and the radiant mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano. Albertson, whose Scarpia and Wotan figure on the international stage with increasing frequency, delivered a regal Bluebeard whose sadness morphs into warmth and love before revealing a tainted soul's steely resignation.

His magnificent tone moved effortlessly between the dark and gleaming poles required by this austere role. Cano's Judith tugged at Bluebeard's (and our) heart strings, driving her husband to impose a ruinous finish. Her mastery of tender intimacy and thrilling to-the-rafters sound was matched by a deft turn at representing Judith's conflicted motivations.

Maestro White led Roanoke's Amici Musicorum — a new ensemble first heard a year ago online at the height of the pandemic in a remarkable chamber performance of Mahler's "Song of the Earth." The ensemble's 36 players are among the region's finest, and Maestro White ranks among today's expert conductors. Bartók's 1921 version calls for a massive orchestra of more than 100, but Opera Roanoke presents it as the American premiere of German



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composer Eberhard Kloke's 2018 arrangement.

Kloke reduces Bartók's orchestra to a third its original size, adding alto flute, alto saxophone and contrabass clarinet to the forces, while also asking musicians to play multiple instruments. Kloke claims that his transcription makes it possible to dispense with the opera pit: "the small orchestra can be positioned on, beside or behind the stage." Unfortunately, Opera Roanoke's decision to place the orchestra on stage

posed a problem for balance between the singers and players. Where the music took the voices into mid-level dynamics or moments of lowered intensity, the orchestral sound almost buried them. Nonetheless, the performance delivered a brilliant rendering of this dark, disturbing work. The final performance of Opera Roanoke's "Béla Bartók: Bluebeard's Castle" is at 2:30 p.m. Sunday, at Shaftman.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The New York Times

May 11, 2019

‘The Handmaid’s Tale’ Is a Brutal Triumph as Opera

By David Allen



“Restless, powerful, profound,” Jennifer Johnson Cano stars as Offred in “The Handmaid’s Tale.”

Long before the Hulu series, the viral marketing and the protest bonnets, there was the opera.

Which makes sense. Opera, as the scholar Catherine Clément has written, is built on “the undoing of women.” So “The Handmaid’s Tale,” Margaret Atwood’s 1985 novel about a dystopian but all-too-possible theocracy built on rituals of rape and repression, was always a natural fit with “Lucia” and “La Traviata.”

Composed by Poul Ruders to a faithful, slightly clunky libretto by the actor and writer Paul Bentley, “The Handmaid’s Tale” had its premiere in Copenhagen

nearly two decades ago, and its only production in the United States, at the Minnesota Opera, in 2003.

That’s a shame. The Boston Lyric Opera’s staging, which runs through Sunday, reveals it to be a brilliant, brutal opera, one that should be taken up widely. Even if it is, though, I doubt that it will be done as powerfully. This is a triumph for the Boston company.

Why? For one thing, there’s the matter of location. Under the artistic direction of Esther Nelson, the Lyric had made a habit of taking at least one of its four annual productions out of the opera house even before it lost its home, the



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Shubert Theater, in 2015. Plenty of companies have been doing the same, and like a lot (though not all) of that work, some of the Lyric's productions have had only the loosest connection between the sites chosen and the operas presented.

Not this time. Ms. Atwood's book is set in the Republic of Gilead — a future version of Massachusetts, evocative for its Puritan roots. It opens in a gymnasium, a basketball court — probably the very one in which the Lyric's production takes place: the Lavietes Pavilion, just across the Charles River from Harvard Yard. In the opera, like the novel, we see a descent into dictatorship through the memories of a witness, Offred, who tries to challenge her oppression after being captured by the regime and forced into slavery for her fertility. This production tells her story where she lived it.

Although it is challenging to stage an opera in a sports arena, especially one with a large cast and a very large orchestra, the challenges are surmounted by the director Anne Bogart, the movement director Shura Baryshnikov and the designer James Scheutte. The action takes place at center court, surrounded on three sides by seats and bleachers, and on the fourth by the orchestra, piled in where one hoop ought to be. The buzzer is repurposed as if it were a prison bell. The set is bare; the few props are wheeled on and off by Gilead's riot police. The sound is better than it has any right to be, helped by a hint of amplification and decent balancing by the conductor, David Angus.

Mr. Ruders's score is oppressive — too much so for comfortable listening, though that's probably the point. Cut slightly, and wisely, by the composer for this production to focus the story more

on its essentials, it lets up barely at all, except for a remarkably tender, second-act duet between Offred and her past self about her love for a daughter lost to the regime.

The score sets a harsh, dissonant, unrelenting portrait of the power and savagery of Gilead against static, quieter sounds for Offred's interior life, sounds that always feel profoundly menaced and unhappy. The atmosphere is stifling, resonant of Berg but also, with its use of hymns and an organ, of Britten's "Peter Grimes." There is no escape, nor is there joy: Witness the cacophonous, Ivesian punishment that "Amazing Grace" is subjected to in counterpoint to a rape sequence.

Find joy, instead, in the towering account of Offred offered here by the mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano. Restless, powerful, profound, she is as formidable as this astonishingly demanding role deserves. Caroline Worra sings Aunt Lydia — the enforcer of mores, the assailer of the weak, the collaborator with the patriarchy — with sadistic relish, half venomous, half gleeful. Among her victims are the resistance member Ofglen, given understanding and sense by Michelle Trainor.

They are not alone in their excellence in a 16-person cast, the women of which sing so well that they make anything seem possible. As the scholar and critic Lucy Caplan notes in a smart program essay, we can see the women of opera as undone, after Catherine Clément — or we can find ways to "defy that 'undoing.'"

We do not quite know what happens to Offred in the end, as she is hauled away by heavies who might be from the regime, or might be from the resistance. Perhaps the answer is up to us.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The Boston Globe

May 6, 2019

Boston Lyric Opera's powerful 'Handmaid's Tale' lands close to home

By Zoë Madonna



Jennifer Johnson Cano as Offred in "The Handmaid's Tale." (LIZA VOLL)

There is power in symbols, and a great deal of power in the red dresses and white bonnets of Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale." The television adaptation, streaming on Hulu, has won 11 Emmys. Women around the world have donned Handmaid garb to protest legislation that restricts reproductive freedom; the headgear obscures the face, anonymizing the wearer and creating a poignant sense of unity.

Now, with an ambitious, immersive staging by Anne Bogart and a fantastic cast and chorus, Boston Lyric Opera's production of composer Poul Ruders and librettist Paul Bentley's "The Handmaid's Tale" has landed close to home.

The story takes place in the theocratic dictatorship of Gilead, formerly the United States of America (specifically, Harvard Square), where fertile women are forced to bear children as Handmaids for the upper class. The first sentence of the novel explains that the "Red Center," where Handmaids are indoctrinated, was a school gym. Mounted appropriately in Harvard University's Laviates Pavilion, this production puts stage and orchestra at floor level, surrounded on three sides by bleachers from which we, the audience, observe as we might a mass wedding or public execution, were we in Gilead.



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Through much of the opera, what we are observing — and marveling at — is the tour de force performance of mezzo soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano in the central part of Offred, seemingly a role she was born to inhabit. Offred is onstage for almost all of the opera's roughly 150 minutes, singing for much of that time. When Offred laments her lost child with a memory of her past self (mezzo Felicia Gavilanes), the duo's voices grasp in keen desperation, trading syllables seamlessly. In interactions with her oppressors, Offred's vocal range is confined, and Cano adds poignant weight to each note when engaging with them. When the character is alone and free to escape into memory, the singer soars into a luminous, complex high range, letting her voice stretch toward freedom. This is her tale to tell, and she tells the hell out of it.

But it is also of course Atwood's tale, and here to a remarkable degree. The opera hews closest to Atwood's novel out of any of the adaptations I've seen — the Hulu series and the strange 1990 film adaptation being the others — and I'd argue that faithfulness to the source is enabled by the operatic medium.

The book's public scenes offer striking, often shocking material, but Offred also spends a sizable portion of the story alone with only her thoughts and ghosts for company. On screen, that's awkward; in an opera, that's an aria.

Here shifts between Offred's real-time interactions, narration, and flashbacks feel natural, needing only a change in lighting or the appearance of a character who shouldn't logically be there.

The new edition of the opera commissioned by BLO omits Atwood's framing device, which places Offred's story as the subject of an academic conference in the year 2195, but this

isn't a loss; Offred now has the last words, as she should.

The world of "The Handmaid's Tale" here feels alarmingly close. A sense of the audience's direct involvement pervaded Sunday's matinee, as light flooded in through the glass ceiling, eliminating the remove of a dimmed house. When the chorus of Handmaids participates in mass ceremonies on the gray stage, choreographed by movement director Shura Baryshnikov, their red dresses pop like flowers of blood. Acoustics-wise, the production fights an uphill battle in this space, but even through the sonic hiccups, little dramatic effect is lost.

Among the other cast members, the stentorian mezzo Dana Beth Miller makes the most of dated material as Offred's first-wave feminist mother, while soprano Michelle Trainor is no-nonsense as the covertly rebellious Ofglen. Bass-baritone David Cushing, as Offred's captor, the Commander, sings with the disturbing lightness of a man who knows the woman next to him literally can't say no. And the Handmaid headmistress Aunt Lydia is played with terrifying, almost campy zeal by Caroline Worra, who condemns the iniquities of the world in coloratura flights that are even more impressive for her unleashing them while storming around the stage.

BLO music director David Angus steers the large orchestra adeptly through this dark tale, elevating the drama and capturing its many moods. Among them, in Ruders's evocative score, are some stunning ensemble passages, most hauntingly a slew of sinister scriptural chants for the Handmaids and the creepiest version of "Amazing Grace" you may ever hear.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



May 19, 2019

Ballets Russes @ Chamber Music Society

For their final concert of the 2018-2019 season at Alice Tully Hall, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center offered a program of works by composers associated with Serge de Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*. It was a long program, full of rewards.

Jennifer Johnson Cano, the Metropolitan Opera mezzo-soprano who in February shared a memorable program with tenor Matthew Polenzani at Zankel Hall, sang works by Manuel de Falla and Maurice Ravel, and a septet of marvelous musicians were heard - in varying configurations - in these, plus music by Debussy, Prokofiev, and Stravinsky.

Ms. Cano opened the concert with Manuel de Falla's *Psyché* in which she was joined by Tara Helen O'Connor (flute), Nicolas Dautricourt (violin), Yura Lee (viola), David Finckel (cello), and Bridget Kibbey (harp). Composed in 1924, as a setting of a poem by Georges Jean-Aubry, this is the awakening song of Psyché, a mortal woman whose beauty has caught the eye of Cupid, god of Love, who she will eventually marry.

The *flûte enchantée* of Tara Helen O'Connor opens the work; the addition of M. Dautricourt's ethereal violin and Ms. Kibbey's delicate harp create an exotic atmosphere. Ms. Cano's singing - clear, warm, and wonderfully nuanced - was vastly pleasing; in her unaccompanied opening passage, the sheer beauty of her tone and its evenness throughout the registers marked her as a singer of exceptional natural gifts.

Adding depth and colour to the enticing 'orchestration' were Ms. Lee's viola and

Mr. Finckel's cello; overall the five instrumentalists created an impression of a larger ensemble thru the richness of their individual timbres. The music becomes urgent, and Ms. Cano's singing golden, as flute trills and harp melismas lure the ear. *Psyché* this evening was an intoxicating delight.

For Maurice Ravel's chamber arrangement of *Shéhérazade*, Ms. Cano and Ms. O'Connor returned, along with pianist Alessio Bax. It's Mr. Bax's delicate, silvery playing that sets the mood of the opening song, *Asie*. At "*Je voudrais voir des assassins souriant*", passion builds: Ms. Cano brought an operatic quality to her performance at this point, rising to her steady and blooming upper range to fine effect. *Asie* has a little pendant at the end, full of lovely mystery. It ends on an exquisitely tapered note.

La flûte enchantée brings forth limpid, entrancing sounds from Ms. O'Connor's flute, and the weaving together of voice, flute, and piano is hypnotic. The concluding song, *L'indifferent*, begins with a calm lullabye played by Mr. Bax. Ms. Cano's beguiling singing, sometimes bringing straight tone into play, was a marvel of expressiveness.

Infringing on our enjoyment of the Ravel was the sound of text booklets dropping onto the floor, and a crash of something falling in the outside corridor. But Ms. Cano held to her course; this is a truly wonderful voice that I would love to hear in the music of Massenet's Charlotte.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERA NEWS

August 2019

Jennifer Johnson Cano & Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

By Steven Jude Tietjen

On May 19, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center closed its 2018–2019 season with *Ballets Russes*, an extraordinary program of music by composers who composed for Sergei Diaghilev's pioneering Ballets Russes, an incubator of talent for many of the early twentieth century's greatest composers. Diaghilev's company acted as a springboard for the international careers of de Falla, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, and many others. The company also provided established composers, such as Ravel and Debussy, opportunities to explore and experiment within the world of narrative dance. With the exception of the four-hand arrangement of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*, which closed the program, none of the works on CMS's program were written for the Ballets Russes. Rather, the works selected, from de Falla's *Psyché* to Prokofiev's Sonata in D Major for Violin and Piano, focused on the two dominant musical styles of the Ballets Russes, French-inspired Impressionism and Russian modernism. The program began with Manuel de Falla's *Psyché*, a sensual, nebulous song for voice, flute, violin, viola, cello, and harp. Mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano embodied the alluring mystery of de Falla's work, her voice shimmering and pulsing with a languorous, almost nonchalant desire. Together, Cano and the instrumentalists created a seamless ensemble of texture and timbre. The

themes of desire and mystery continued through Ravel's exquisite *Shéhérazade*. Cano captivated with her malleable musicality, bending her sizable mezzo-soprano to meet the subtle and delicate demands of Ravel's vocal writing. Her "Asie" was full of melancholy, restless excitement of the spirit, and frustrated resignation. In "La Flûte enchantée," Cano's poetic sensuality was balanced by the marvelous and ecstatic playing of flutist Tara Helen O'Connor. "L'Indifférent," the third and final song, brought Cano and pianist Alessio Bax together in an enigmatic and delicate performance, which ended, appropriately, with more questions than answers. Debussy's Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp gathered together the ethereal, gossamer, and wandering sounds of the first half program, which O'Connor, violist Yura Lee, and harpist Bridget Kibbey transformed into the joyful, dynamic, and tongue-in-cheek playing that also defined the French influence on the Ballets Russes.

The second half of the program showcased the music of Sergei Prokofiev and Igor Stravinsky with two monumental virtuoso pieces. Prokofiev, who wrote three ballets for Diaghilev in the 1920s, was represented by his Sonata in D Major for Violin and Piano. The sonata was originally composed for flute in 1942–1943, and Prokofiev



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adapted it for the great Soviet violinist David Oistrakh a year later. Violinist Nicolas Dautricourt and pianist Bax threw themselves fully into the relentless virtuosity of Prokofiev's sonata and relaxed with ease into the melting lyricism and breathless melodies of the third Andante movement. Stravinsky's *Petrushka* was his second ballet for Diaghilev, commissioned immediately after the

sensational success of his *Firebird* in 1910. Bax and Lucille Chung concluded the program with a thrilling performance of a piano arrangement of *Petrushka* for four hands, which was first used for rehearsals and revised by the composer in 1946. Bax and Chung were perfectly synchronized throughout the forty-minute arrangement, giving the most fully theatrical and musical experience of the evening.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

THE PLAIN DEALER

August 20, 2019

Cleveland Orchestra wraps classical season in challenging, satisfying manner

By Mark Satola

Although it has a few more concerts to play at the Blossom Music Center this summer, the Cleveland Orchestra closed out its 2019 lineup of standard concerts in especially fine form Saturday night.

Vinay Parameswaran, the Orchestra's assistant conductor, led a meaty program of music by Ives, Bernstein, Rachmaninoff that was challenging and satisfying in equal measure.

Ives would have been gratified to hear his "Decoration Day," part of the larger "Holiday Symphony," given as masterful and committed a performance as the one by Parameswaran and colleagues that opened Saturday's concert.

From the work's misty and mysterious opening bars to the rousing march near its end, Parameswaran provided an exemplary reading of this almost hallucinatory score, with supple pacing and a good sense of balance, so critical when it comes to blending Ives' quotations of popular tunes with the larger fabric of the piece.

Bernstein's "Jeremiah Symphony" is an early work from a composer who would return time and again to music that expressed his Jewish roots. While certain influences – Hindemith and Copland most prominently – are audible in the score, it's more remarkable for the way it expresses the composer's own musical personality.

The symphony's third and final movement is a setting for mezzo-

soprano of verses from the Lamentations of Jeremiah, in which the Old Testament prophet decries the way the Hebrew people have fallen away from the worship of God in favor of false idols. It's easily the focal point of the symphony, and some of the most moving music Bernstein wrote.

There could not have been a better choice for soloist than Jennifer Johnson Cano, whose dark and lustrous mezzo-soprano and emotive power held the audience spellbound. Her extensive operatic experience, most prominently with the Metropolitan Opera, allowed her to bring conviction to the text's range of emotion, from flashing anger to prayerful supplication.

Parameswaran was in impressive command of the score, especially in the second movement, a scherzando dance with uneven meters and tricky cross-rhythms.

The concert ended with a solid reading of Rachmaninoff's colorful "Symphonic Dances," a longtime audience favorite. The three movements are, of course, full of orchestral color and blazing dynamics, but much of Rachmaninoff's score is contemplative, suffused with nostalgia and a certain sadness that is the composer's trademark.

It is, in fact, something of a field-day for the principal woodwind players. Principal clarinetist Afendi Yusuf, principal oboist Frank Rosenwein, and assistant principal flutist Jessica



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Sindell were outstanding, whose instrument is given much to do in the score.

Parameswaran had the measure of the score, and under his assured leadership, the “Symphonic Dances” received as fine a performance as one might want. Given the excitement Rachmaninoff generates, the work could easily kick off its traces, but Parameswaran kept firm control, allowing the music’s climaxes to blaze forth without sacrificing dynamic or dramatic balance.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

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August 19, 2019

Cleveland Orchestra at Blossom with Parameswaran & Cano (Aug. 17)

By Nicolas Stevens

Literal and metaphorical miles from the cool luxury of the concert hall, outdoor concerts can imply a looseness that extends beyond attire, seating options, and environmental sound. With crickets singing and picnic blankets unrolling, it seems only natural that musicians might relax as well, either in repertoire or level of performance. Not so for The Cleveland Orchestra, who were spot-on as ever in a recent Blossom program that avoided fizz and fanfare in favor of sober, engrossing American classics.

It takes confidence to open a concert with delicate deliberation, as assistant conductor Vinay Parameswaran did on Saturday, August 17 at the Blossom Pavilion. The opening of Ives's *Decoration Day*, at once a standalone piece and part of *A Symphony: New England Holidays*, calls for just the sort of hushed delivery that Parameswaran, intense and animated, seemed to pull straight from the rustling trees.

English hornist Robert Walters and principal clarinet Afendi Yusuf played with characteristic grace, and the entire ensemble showed restraint right up to the explosive march at the climax, a reminder of the horrors that make Decoration Day — now called Memorial Day — necessary. Even in this moment of heightened energy, the Orchestra kept their delivery snappy and synchronized. Parameswaran held firm at the false ending, which is almost designed to

prompt premature applause, to usher in a wonderful and heartbreaking conclusion.

Bernstein's *Jeremiah Symphony* gave new principal horn Nathaniel Silberschlag a chance to show off in an opening solo, and he made the most of it, playing with steely brilliance and faultless phrasing. For the first of many times over the course of the evening, principal trumpet Michael Sachs and contrabassoonist Jonathan Sherwin proved to be power players.

Conducting from his head and shoulders as well as his arms, Parameswaran brought both precision and fire to the second movement. The finale found the trumpets sounding pristine and principal keyboard Joela Jones chiming in with perfectly judged piano chords — but the show mostly belonged to mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano. By turns stern and mournful according to the demands of the sacred text, Cano held the crowd in the palm of her hand as the orchestra faded behind her in a moment of descending pitch and volume. Her flawless final taper to silence seemed an inimitable moment of artistry, until Parameswaran conjured a conclusion of startling clarity from the orchestra.

Rachmaninoff's *Symphonic*

Dances makes good on both halves of its title, not always at the same time. Its first movement sandwiches meditative moods between more balletic motions.



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In a just world, Yusuf, Walters, principal oboe Frank Rosenwein, and especially guest alto saxophonist Steven Banks, would all have received bouquets at the end of the concert, so distinctive and unimpeachable were their solos. Parameswaran summoned sinister yet radiant chords from muted trumpets and trombones in the second movement,

and allowed its waltz portion to remain eerily calm. (That's appropriate for a piece that was composed while its continent of origin burned in an escalating war.) A mid-movement slowdown gave the central portion of the finale a feverish quality, but its concluding dance of death roused a crowd bowled over by artistry.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERAWire

March 2, 2019

Matthew Polenzani & Julius Drake In Recital

The Tenor & Company Deliver An Potent & Insightful Emotional Journey

By Logan Martell

On Sunday, February 24, 2019, tenor Matthew Polenzani took to Carnegie Hall for a sold-out recital of song cycles from Schubert, Beethoven, Brahms, and Janacek. Accompanied by Julius Drake, this evening's recital featured not only a finely-crafted program, but experienced artists who burned with a passionate fire.

Some Schubert To Start

First on the evening's program was a selection of songs by Franz Schubert, beginning with "Nocturne." This highly tender number made for a captivating opening to the recital; the text follows an elderly man who enters the forest to die in peace, with the forest promising sweet repose. Due to its theme of endings and gracefully transcending death, its placement at the beginning of the program allowed Polenzani to begin the evening's journey with the closing of another.

Following this was "In Spring," which bore the relishing, almost idyllic quality often associated with beginnings. Polenzani beautifully laid out the imagery of nature as seen through the memories of a lover, before shifting into the tumult caused by the thought of her lost, and finally synthesizing all these feelings through the desire to become part of nature and "sing a sweet song about her all summer long." The tenor placed a delicate attention on the word "her" which bore a wealth of emotional nuances happening almost simultaneously, conjuring with a single

breath nearly all the highs and lows that come with love and loss.

Last of the lieder from Schubert was "In the Sunset," which follows the thoughts of a narrator who, having seen the beauty of the light, finds no reason to fear night's darkness; Polenzani ended this portion of the recital with a strong affirmation full of the desire to live despite the end which awaits all things.

Bringing On the Mezzo

Joining Polenzani this evening was mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, who performed Johannes Brahms' song cycle "Zigeunerlieder, Op. 103." This cycle looks upon the gypsy lifestyle with Romantic fervor, seeing its freedom as exotic as it is enticing. Cano gave a charged, determined passion to the opening number "Gypsy Songs," bolstered by the driving accompaniment played by Drake.

The second song, "High-towering Rima river," details a lover singing to the river, which Cano treated with an almost-possessive flair, as heard by the fierceness she placed on the words "my love."

Making for a lighter shift was the third number, "Do you know when my beloved." Here, Cano delivered the text with a fun, excited body language as she shared her passionate secret with the audience. This exuberance returned in "The young gypsy boy leads to the dance," as Cano relished in outlining the text.



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The following number, "Three little roses in the row," saw Cano launch into the pattering lyrics with enthusiasm and precision, skillfully handling the alternating, whimsical shifts in tempo and dynamic.

The last number of this cycle, "The red clouds of evening draw," was reminiscent of the earlier-heard "In the Sunset" due to their imagery of crepuscular beauty. As Cano sustained a powerful note on the word "firmament," Drake's accompaniment sounded with two strong chords like the pulsing of a heart, this musical device was used to punctuate the ends of Cano's phrases and emphasize her romantic tones.

Together For Janacek

A far more searing look into the bohemian lifestyle came when Polenzani and Cano shared the stage to sing Leos Janacek's cycle, titled "The Diary of One Who Disappeared."

The first song, "One day I met a gypsy girl," featured a dire accompaniment to contrast the imagery of the gypsy's untamed beauty. After that fleeting encounter, Polenzani sang the following number "That black-eyed gypsy," while wrapped in infatuated torment. This angered atmosphere gave way to uneasy, lingering chords which set the languid rhythm of "Through the twilight glow-worms dance." Here the narrator languishes over his separation from the object of his affections, and Polenzani closed this number with a strong but vulnerable softness that well-captured the narrator's surrender to the shackles of love.

As the narrator toils in the field for the song "Why has my plow broken?" his mounting frustrations result in a chance encounter with the gypsy Zefka; this frustration is reflected in the accompaniment full of dissonant trills, crossing hands, and tumultuous tones which conjure the feelings of one possessed.

After all the prior musical and dramatic build-up, Cano strode back on stage and wasted little time in enticing the narrator; Polenzani's expression told much of his inner conflict, which bore needing as well as uncertainty as he attempted to rebuff her advances. The scornful tone shifted back to a sweeter one as Cano redoubled her efforts, backed by dissonant, seductive arpeggios.

It's here that a trio of women began to sing from offstage, acting as a Greek chorus; these haunting voices were supplied by mezzo-sopranos Marie Engle and Megan Esther Grey, and soprano Kathleen O'Mara. After finally consummating their desires for one another, the narrator does not find relief, but more anguish with the rapid tempo of "Forest's shady height," which settled into a slower-burning sense of unease for "Sunlight on the meadow."

These emotions reach a fevered peak for three numbers, "What has come over me?" "Who can escape his fate," and "Nothing matters now." Here Polenzani unloaded with all the sounds and fury that spoke of the chaos his heart had been thrown into upon the realization of what a life with Zefka would entail. These fears were realized in the brief song "Now she bears my child," which bore a troubled delivery to underscore the loving, sensual lyrics.

The final song "Then farewell, dearest land," saw the narrator ready to close the book on his former life and adopt the bohemian life with Zefka. Despite the sense of resignation the lyrics bear, Polenzani closed with an enormous power as Drake hammered out the conclusion.

One Encore

This evening's recital saw only one encore, but one with great beauty and personal significance, as Polenzani would elaborate. The trouble, he explained, lied in choosing a song that could follow up the tremendous strength

and resolution of Janacek's cycle. What Polenzani settled on was Frederic Weatherly's famous Irish ballad "Danny Boy," a number that was often requested of him during his childhood when he sang with his father's barbershop quartet.

Polenzani's traditional interpretation was replete with a warm, inviting beauty

of sound that seemed to come effortlessly. This encore was given a stunning conclusion as Polenzani sustained the final note with a chilling, gossamer delicacy that was answered by the tremendous applause from the audience.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

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October 12, 2018

The Angel's Share Presents Gregg Kallor's Gothic Thrillers in Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery

By Rick Perdian



In the early 1860s Green-Wood Cemetery was a tourist attraction that drew half a million visitors a year, second only to Niagara Falls in popularity. People flocked there to enjoy family outings, carriage rides and sculpture viewing in one of the first American landscape gardens. On a balmy October evening the cemetery is still a marvelous if somewhat spooky place with its magnificent views of New York Harbor and a glittering Downtown Manhattan.

This year Green-Wood has become a nocturnal destination for fans of contemporary classical music and those who appreciate phenomenal young talent in a series of concerts entitled The Angel's Share, presented by Unison Media and Green-Wood and curated by Andrew Ousley. The final concert of the season was devoted to the music of American composer and pianist Gregg Kallor, who was named the Classical Recording Foundation's 2017 Composer of the Year. The cemetery, lit only by stars and burning torches, with just the tiniest sliver of moon visible, was the

setting for tales of horror and the macabre in its subterranean vaults.

Reading Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* was the impetus for Kallor to take a stab at writing opera. It is a work in progress, with the sketches intended to be the seeds of a full-length opera. An extended scene was presented in which the creature confronts his creator and relates his isolation and loneliness, the fear and hatred that his grotesque appearance provokes in people and his murder of Victor Frankenstein's brother. Above all he demands that Frankenstein create a female companion for him because as a living being he is entitled to happiness.

The sketches were mostly a soliloquy for Frankenstein's creation, which Kallor identifies only with a dash, reluctant to call someone so human a monster. Tall and towering, clad in dark industrial attire with a hooded jacket that obscured his patched together face, Joshua Jeremiah gave a powerful performance as the creature. His voice rang out rich, free and open and his diction was extraordinary. Every word was discernible, making me nostalgic for the old days when you had the luxury of only listening to the sung words. Jeremiah was just as potent dramatically, intertwining the anger and rage of the creature with his humanity.

Tenor Brian Cheney mostly cowered in horror, holding a lantern that cut through the dark like a search light. Jennifer Johnson Cano made a brief



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appearance, displaying little of the powerhouse mezzo-soprano voice that she would unleash in *The Tell-Tale Heart*. The accompaniment was by Kallor at the piano and Joshua Roman playing the cello. Roman's full tone and passionate playing were a perfect match with Jeremiah's baritone. When united, their sounds combined in an exquisite, electrifying frisson.

As seems to be the case with many contemporary composers, Kallor has the gift for melody but not the inclination to spin it into song. His characters sing a snippet of a tune that is taken up and developed in the accompaniment. Stylistically, the spaciousness of the musical textures he creates and his ability to fuse words and music into dramatic cohesiveness reminded me of mid-twentieth-century composers such as Douglas Moore and Robert Ward. His music did not sound like theirs, but it had the same effect on me. I do mean that as praise.

In words and music Kallor paid tribute to Leonard Bernstein who is buried in the cemetery, noting the surprisingly simple gravestone that marks his final resting place. He spoke of the breadth of Bernstein's genius and the impact that the 1973 Norton Lectures had on him and countless others. The musical offering was his performance of the world premiere of his work for solo piano, *The answer is: Yes*. There were no Bernstein musical quotes, but his spirit was present in Kallor's own melodies, rhythms and dynamism. The seamless interplay between classical and jazz were Kallor's alone.

The woman on stage is wearing hospital scrubs. In a single stroke, Meyers

connected the dots as to the who and why that Edgar Allan Poe left unanswered in *The Tell-Tale Heart*. She is the embodiment of your worst fears: a gruesome death at the hands a psychotic, murderous support-giver. Kallor transformed Poe's 1843 tale of Gothic fiction into an operatic experience of epic emotional and musical proportions. As operatic heroines' crash-burns go, the Narrator's only real rivals are Strauss's Elektra and Salome. Those mythical figures' demises are terrible to behold but kept safely at a distance. There was no such detachment here, and in the dark confines of an underground crypt, the unhinged woman under the harsh glare of light was all too contemporary and real.

Kallor's music is equally Straussian in scale and emotional impact. The vocal line was as carefully etched as in *Sketches from Frankenstein*, but soared to ever increasing crescendos of sound and emotion. Piano and cello again combined to create the complex sonorities of a much larger ensemble. Undoubtedly the acoustics played their part, but Kallor and Roman conjured up a ferocious, whirlwind of sound.

Cano's singing was volcanic: molten sound poured out of her. She was fearless in plumbing the depths of the Narrator's psyche both vocally and dramatically. There were no props for her to rely on and only one lighting change, when a red wash coincided with the imagined beating of the victim's heart that tormented her. It was just Cano and the music. She's a voice, talent and temperament to be reckoned with.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



September 9, 2018

Vocal Miniatures: Art Song Thrives In Chicago Festival

By Kyle MacMillan



Art song can be among the most rewarding facets of classical music. Unlike opera, which is about sweeping scale and the grand gesture, these vocal miniatures derive their power from intimate storytelling and subtle inflections. But because these qualities can all too easily get lost amid the flash and freneticism of today's tech-obsessed world, art song has become something of an endangered species.

That's where the Collaborative Arts Institute of Chicago comes in. Pianists Nicholas

Hutchinson and Shannon McGinnis and tenor Nicholas Phan formed the organization in 2010 to counteract this negative trend and champion this venerable and still viable musical form. To that end, it presents the annual Collaborative Works Festival, which is devoted to nothing but art song – old and new, familiar and unfamiliar. The festival's seventh installment, titled *The Song as Drama* and devoted

to song cycles with a narrative arc, kicked off Sept. 5 on a high note with a well-balanced program of selections from three different centuries. The event took place in a 125-seat hall – a perfect size for this compact musical form – at the Poetry Foundation. Two subsequent programs in the festival's line-up – Sept. 6 and 8 – were held in other small venues elsewhere in the city.

The Sept. 5 highlight was also the best-known piece on the program, Gustav Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (*Songs of a Wayfarer*), excerpts of which figure in the composer's First Symphony. The four songs about lost love are some of Mahler's most famed creations because of the extraordinary depth and breadth of emotions they traverse.

When it comes to performing art songs, name recognition and operatic success really don't mean much. What matters is finding a singer who understands the particular demands of art song, is committed to the art form, and does not treat it as a mere dalliance. The Collaborative Arts Institute found just such performers for this concert, including Phan, who is precisely such an involving artist in this repertoire.

The evening's stand-out was mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, a veteran of more than 100 performances at the Metropolitan Opera, who powerfully realized these Mahler songs. She possesses a voice with depth,



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weight, and complex character, and she knows how to use it to maximum emotional effect, from the bright ebullience of “Ging heut’ morgen übers Feld” (I Walked across the Fields this Morning) to “Die zwei blauen Augen von meinem Schatz” (The Two Blue Eyes of My Darling), which switches from dark to light. She brought an understated yet palpable intensity to these songs, fully embracing the distinctive qualities of each with a range of vocal timbres, nuanced phrasing, and even subtle yet telling changes in body language. Put simply, this was a bravura performance in every way.

The program, which revolved around the theme of literal and metaphorical travel, ended with Ralph Vaughan Williams’ underperformed *Songs of Travel*, nine settings of poems by Robert Louis Stevenson. The cycle might not have quite the profound impact of Mahler, yet it still possesses plenty of aural pleasures and emotional impact of its own. To perform these songs, the festival turned to Tyler Duncan, a flexible, fresh-voiced baritone who perhaps does not have the timbral range of Cano but who nonetheless delivered these songs with appealing directness and clarity.

More than holding its own with these two classic song cycles was Missy Mazzoli’s *Songs from the Operas*, which are exactly what the title suggests. In July, Mazzoli, 37, was named as the Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s new Mead Composer-in-Residence, a position that continues through 2020. She has gained a fast-rising reputation as one of the field’s most original young voices. This piece, the Collaborative Arts Institute’s first co-commission, consists of three tenor arias from two of her three operas – *Proving Up* and *Breaking the Waves* (winner of the 2017 MCANA Award for Best New Opera in North America). *Proving Up* has its New York premiere Sept. 26 and 28 at the Miller Theatre.

By pulling these from one context into another, Mazzoli blurs the lines between opera and art song – giving the arias an intimacy that simply would not be

possible on the opera stage. As this Midwest premiere of the work made clear, she has an obvious knack for writing for voice, using the tenor’s full range and frequently pushing it into falsetto. At times, she adorned the vocal lines with fascinating, bel canto-like ornamentations, emphasizing certain words, as she does in the stanza “Miles and Nore, Proving Up!” Phan dove into these arias with gusto and drew the maximum effect from each.

Every bit as interesting is Mazzoli’s intoxicating writing for the three accompanying instruments – piano (McGinnis), violin (Yvonne Lam) and viola (Rose Armbrust Griffin). They have highly distinct parts that at times overlapped and intersected in mildly dissonant and jarring ways and at other times blended in sumptuous fashion. These instrumental lines, always undergirded with a strong rhythmic pulse, are sometimes complicated and tightly interwoven but, at other times, are quite simple and open, like the sustained viola note (perhaps a double stop) and a repeated, clipped staccato piano motif during the opening stanza of “Who Owns the Land?” These songs have a definite contemporary feel, but it’s also clear that Mazzoli is keenly aware of vocal and operatic writing from the past couple of centuries, and she has no hesitancy in drawing from it. Indeed, it is this creative melding of old and new, the traditional and non-traditional, that give them such dynamism. There is much to recommend in *Songs from the Operas*, and it would be surprising if other performers don’t take it on.

As a kind of scene-setter, Phan began the evening with Franz Schubert’s “Der Wanderer” (The Wanderer), D. 649.

In art song, the instrumental line is more than mere accompaniment to the singer. It is every bit as important, supporting and amplifying the vocal line but also filling in gaps of meaning and emotion and adding a dimension of its own. The two pianists – McGinnis and Erika Switzer – as well as the two string players in Mazzoli’s work, fully grasped their roles, playing breath by breath in sync with the singers while

also projecting important and memorable components of their own. Art song is one of the great treasures of classical music, and the Collaborative

Arts Institute of Chicago deserves kudos for keeping it wonderfully alive and vibrant.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERA*Wire*

June 26, 2018

Orfeo and Euridice: Johnson Cano Stellar in Probing Gluck's Mythical Vision of Love

By Santosh Venkataraman



It has been a particularly heavy season at Opera Theatre of St. Louis, with an absolutely splendid run of Marc Blitzstein's "Regina" and the emotionally-charged world premiere of Huang Ruo's "An American Soldier."

It was thus welcome that the final production to debut this season, Gluck's "Orfeo and Euridice," provided an uplifting ending. This production by director Ron Daniels, though sprinkled with some peculiarities, was a delightful version full of music and dance and was seen in the final week of the OTSL season at the same time the Opera America convention was in town.

Berlioz's Version

Of the many versions of Gluck's "Orfeo," the one chosen for this production is a modified 1866 version of the 1859 recreation by Hector Berlioz. The 1859 edition was cast with Orfeo as mezzo-soprano Pauline Viardot as opposed to prior versions in which tenors and contraltos were employed.

Remaining consistent from this to the 1774 Paris version that is also often used is Gluck's idea of transitioning from

opera seria with his concept of a "reform opera" in which the simplicity of a work through music and a linear plot reigned supreme. The effect to a listener is a more relaxed operatic experience and the implications changed the opera world.

Big Muddy Dancers Excel

With that simplicity in mind, Daniels' production features an uncomplicated set design by Riccardo Hernandez that is true to Gluck's ideal. Act one features a large likeness of the face of Euridice in soprano Andriana Chuchman and the remainder of the opera is a largely open space in which Orfeo, portrayed by Jennifer Johnson Cano, attempts to win back her lover. The finale features block letters spelling "Amore" as the lovers are reunited.

Notable to this work are the number of ballet scenes favored by the Parisian public with dancers from the Big Muddy Dance Company employed to an eye-pleasing effect. The dancers complemented Orfeo's arduous journey through the Furies in Hades and Blessed Spirits in Elysium.

Striking among the dance scenes by choreographer Katarzyna Skarpetowska were that none were excessive as one would imagine when envisioning the tastes of French elites who demanded them back when this opera was created. Rather they were fluidly and tastefully mixed in with only the slight qualm of



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being used a bit too many times within the audience instead of just on stage.

The Leather Costume Conundrum

While a mythical time period is typically the setting for these characters, none is specified in this production. The idea may be that the themes of love and loss are universal and if there is a clue as to when the action takes place, it is revealed in the costumes.

Johnson Cano's Orfeo is seen in a leather jacket, back pants and a tie, while Chuchman's Euridice looks stunning in a flowing, white dress. The finale saw Johnson Cano sporting a different leather jacket and Chuchman in a sleeveless leather vest over a pink dress.

These outfits certainly didn't detract from the performance though they did not add much either and the same can be said for eccentric, colorful costumes in a balloon-filled finale that was rousing nevertheless.

Star Turns

It was a bonus that the mezzo-soprano Johnson Cano was not only an accomplished artist worthy of carrying such a vehicle but also a native of the area. Her hometown appeal and down-to-Earth personality no doubt added to any local fervor for this production.

Johnson Cano delivers a vocally elegant Orfeo, deftly navigating her lines with appropriate color and showing no signs of strain. Clear-sounding and purposeful, she received ovation after ovation and none bigger than after her heartfelt "J'ai perdu mon Eurydice" sung in English like every OTSL production over the loss of her lover.

While Chuchman loomed over the proceedings with her giant portrait, it was not until after intermission that the audience was treated to her lovely and enchanting voice. Chuchman shined as Euridice this past season in a Lyric Opera of Chicago production that featured the 1774 Paris edition and her interpretation conveyed an ardent urgency to see her lover. There was an overall better chemistry between her and Orfeo in this production as the lovers forged a beguiling emotional connection.

Soprano Maria Valdes was clad in ripped jeans, a backwards baseball cap as well as wings as Amore. Her voice and presence brought balance to the action in her company debut.

Absolutely Sublime

Gluck's music sounded absolutely sublime under the baton of maestro Pierre Vallet in an understated fashion that allowed Johnson Cano to flourish. This production of "Orfeo and Euridice" was altogether charming to seasoned operagoers in town for the convention as well as newcomers to the art who were no doubt enthralled by the dance scenes. While Opera Theatre of St. Louis has deservedly gained a reputation for new and rarely-performed works, this run proved that the company is versatile enough to also excel at the classics. While the 43rd season is now over, the countdown to No. 44 under the leadership of new general director Andrew Jorgensen can only be anticipated.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

June 14, 2018

**Opera Theatre of St. Louis presents a
musically outstanding 'Orfeo and Euridice'**

By Sarah Bryan Miller

Christoph Willibald Gluck's first "reform opera," 1762's "Orfeo and Euridice," is a landmark, changing the direction of the art form. It's based on the familiar myth of Orpheus, who went to Hades to rescue his beloved from death, with beautiful music and opportunities for dancers as well as singers. What's more, it's short, clocking in at just over two hours with an intermission. The mystery is that it isn't produced more often.

Opera Theatre of St. Louis' production, seen in its entirety Wednesday night (after a second-act cancellation June 9), is musically outstanding. The opera is largely carried by its Orfeo, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, who brings a big, rich voice that's flawlessly produced in both lyrical and fiendishly challenging coloratura passages. Dramatically, she was fully engaged, whether in mourning Euridice (she does a lot of that), charming the furies, or, finally, rejoicing. OTSL built its production around the St. Louis native, and it paid off.

Her Euridice is soprano Andriana Chuchman, who made her mark at OTSL as both Boonyi and India in Jack Perla's "Shalimar the Clown" and has a beautiful, soaring voice. Her dancing was graceful. Chuchman was a supremely sympathetic Euridice, adjusting to her new life as a blessed spirit and grieving when Orfeo wouldn't look at her, or explain why, on their passage out of the underworld.

Making her OTSL debut as Amore, the god of love, soprano Maria Valdes was

utterly charming as a boyish figure who knows he's cute. She wielded a lovely voice.

The chorus was outstanding, both in its singing and acting, moving well throughout. The excellent translation was by Amanda Holden and sung clearly by all, with the help of English diction coach Erie Mills.

In the pit, conductor Pierre Vallet led the 1859 French version of the score (supervised by Hector Berlioz) with idiomatic style. This split of the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra played this graceful music with skill and true artistry; particularly notable were associate principal oboe Philip Ross, in an onstage duet with Johnson Cano, and associate principal flute Andrea Kaplan, for her solo work in the "Dance of the Blessed Spirits."

Stage director Ron Daniels' production was a mixed bag. He had some good ideas (putting Ross onstage for the duet) but sent the ensemble into the house a little too often and seemed to be trying too hard to be hip.

One of his best ideas was to work with choreographer Katarzyna Skarpetowska and the Big Muddy Dance Company. Skarpetowska's dances were effective and athletic, whether as the Furies, outraged at having to give up a soul, but unable to resist Orfeo's voice, as the happy Blessed Spirits, or in enthusiastic celebration at the end. This production will be a welcome introduction to a fine local company for a lot of operagoers.



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Set designer Riccardo Hernandez didn't have much to do; the stage, covered by a dance floor, was nearly empty, with just a few roll-on pieces: a contemporary-style shrine with a giant portrait of Euridice, decked with flowers, black balloons and the obligatory teddy bears; the word "AMORE," lit up. Much of the "scenery" consisted of projections by videographer Peter Negrini.

Emily Rebholz's costumes were in a style that Daniels calls "heightened contemporary." Orfeo and his friends

seemed to belong to a motorcycle gang; the Furies wore long, red rain slickers over black leotards. (The dancers' sleeveless dresslike tunics were more effective.) Euridice had an attractive white dress in Elysium, but her sleeveless, black, leather biker vest at the end was too much. Amore, in a "Love" T-shirt, boyfriend jeans and a backward baseball cap, sported large, fluffy wings with lights on them. Rebholtz really went over the top with some cheesy outfits in the finale.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



June 15, 2018

ORFEO & EURIDICE at OTSL Dazzles

By Steve Callahan



You know the story: at the marriage of Orpheus and Euridice the bride dies of snake-bite. Orpheus so loves her that he proceeds to Hades to demand his wife back. The gods have dictated that she may return to life with Orpheus, but only if he *does not look back at her* as she follows him up from the world of the dead.

On the opening night of Gluck's *Orfeo & Euridice* at OTSL a terribly ironic incident occurred. The audience had been treated to an astonishing first act by Ms. Cano and her colleagues; we had enjoyed a pleasant intermission on the beautiful grounds at OTSL, and we sat eagerly awaiting Act 2. We waited. Then we saw all the patrons in an upper bay calmly leaving the area, under the direction of emergency medical technicians. In a far corner of that bay a patron had suffered cardiac arrest; EMT people were, like Orfeo, valiantly

striving to bring a loved one back across that mortal threshold.

The audience patiently waited.

Act 2 was cancelled. We were invited to attend a subsequent performance.

Christoph Willibald Gluck was an opera reformer. In his day *opera seria* had grown ornate and cluttered, filled with virtuoso flourishes and irrelevant subplots and bits of ballet--like barnacles or like parasitic vines, strangling the opera's story. Gluck's goal was to return all aspects of opera into the service of the drama--overture, arias, recitative, dance--everything. In this he foreshadowed Wagner's urge to create a truly unified art form.

Orfeo ed Euridice goes far toward this end. Nothing is irrelevant to the plot. The opera was originally written for a castrato (much the rage in Gluck's day). But it has gone through several revisions--by Gluck, Liszt, J.C. Bach,



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and (most notably) Berlioz. The central role has been given to castrati (both mezzo and soprano), to *haute contres* or counter-tenors, and finally to mezzo-sopranos.

Opera Theatre St. Louis, with conductor Paul Vallet and stage director Ron Daniels, uses the latest, polished version of the text to great success. The overall visual concept is a kind of hippie/*carnaval*. Orfeo, in black jeans, black leather jacket, skinny black tie and a pony-tail, is a rock superstar.

The set, by Ricardo Hernández, is simplicity itself--great plain walls onto which quite wonderful projections appear. These are sometimes superbly realistic huge drifting clouds, sometimes the gloomy red vapors and flames of the underworld. Once there is a great face of Euridice which only after long moments blinks, then moves ever so slightly. Designer Peter Nigrini does beautiful work with these projections. Lighting designer Christopher Akerlind gives lovely balance and flow to the evening.

We begin at Euridice's funeral. Center stage we see a gigantic head-shot of the deceased. Mourners carrying lanterns drift in through the audience--all in black, some with black balloons. Flowers and stuffed toys are laid beneath the picture of Euridice. There is gorgeous chorus work, the voices blending with the low strings, while Orfeo wails his lament for his beloved, his voice soaring above the chorus.

Amore, the god of love, appears in the form of a charming young blonde hippy teen-ager with ragged jeans, backwards ball-cap, a "LOVE" T-shirt--and with gaudily lighted wings. Here Maria Valdes shows a beautiful voice--not as powerful, perhaps, as that of Ms. Cano, but in her higher range she gives Orfeo a run for his money.

In one deeply moving aria Orfeo is alone on an empty gray stage accompanied by a live oboist (Philip Ross) standing in an upstage corner. It is a poignantly simple duet, instrument and voice.

In the underworld we see a bit of sky--distant, distant, beyond the earthen rings through which we've descended.

And here Jennifer Johnson Cano seizes one of the most challenging arias in all of opera and she flies to glory with it. In an astonishing coloratura display she warbles like a skylark. She sprinkles showers of notes with laser-like precision. It's a brilliant *tour-de-force*.

In the underworld Orfeo is confronted by a crowd of angry furies. Here the chorus is joined by members of the Big Muddy Dance Company. Costumer Emily Rebholtz gives these fiery spirits flowing shiny red slickers and caps. With choreography by Katerzyna Skarpetowska the *corps de ballet* does beautiful work throughout the evening--always at points appropriate to the plot. As furies they swirl and flurry and writhe, but then they succumb to Orfeo's musical charms. They wilt, they melt, they let him pass.

In act two we enter the peaceful Elysian Fields. All is soft gray. The dancers, in long, flowing "glamour slacks" execute many small graceful romantic *pas de deux*--suggesting the binary love of Orfeo and Euridice. Flautist Andrea Kaplan beautifully supports this dance. And we meet the lovely Andriana Chuchman as Euridice. Miss Chuchman, who did such fine work in *Shalimar the Clown* two years ago, once again sings most beautifully. Again she dances--this time with the shades in the underworld.

We follow the lovers on their way to the mortal world, the chorus and dancers now draped in diaphanous white shrouds--like rather spooky brides. Of course Euridice pleads for Orfeo to look at her and, at last, he does so. She dies again, whereupon Orfeo draws a pistol to kill himself.

But . . .

Gluck was writing this opera to celebrate the emperor's name-day. A tragic ending just would not be acceptable. So (holy *deus ex machina*!) the god Amore arrives again to announce that he was really just kidding; Orfeo has so proved his love that Euridice will be allowed to join him again in the mortal world. Amore shrugs off his wings and saunters off stage.

The big finale is a great *carnaval* celebration. Gaudy, glitzy costumes! Great gilt letters--"A M O R E"--gleam in the background. All of the couple's fans and groupies arrive in tie-dies and cut-offs and Sgt. Pepperish festive gear to distribute bright balloons on sticks throughout the audience. There's a graceful little gavotte, and . . .

HAPPY ENDING!

Jennifer Johnson Cano, a home town girl, totally owns this role, this show. She's almost always on-stage singing her heart out. She makes this a truly . . . GLORIOUS PRODUCTION.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



April 23, 2018

The Los Angeles Philharmonic at Disney Hall

By Maria Nockin

On Sunday, April 22, 2018, the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra gave a matinee performance of Leonard Bernstein's Chichester Psalms together with Ludwig van Beethoven's Symphony No. 9 in D Minor.

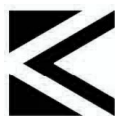
The origin of Bernstein's CHICHESTER PSALMS dates back to a letter he received from the Very Reverend Walter Hussey in late 1963. Hussey, the dean of Chichester Cathedral in Sussex, England, wanted a new piece for a festival to be held in the summer of 1965. Writing Bernstein later, he suggested PSALM 2, or some part of it, accompanied by orchestra, organ, or both. Bernstein did not write for the organ but he did use Psalm 2 along with otherwise unperformed music from WEST SIDE STORY and from the never completed musical THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH.

Sung in Hebrew, each movement of the CHICHESTER PSALMS includes one complete psalm and pieces of another psalm. In the first movement, we heard all of Psalm 100 and selections from number 108 as the music invited believers to praise God. The percussion-led second movement featured countertenor John Holiday intoning the beautiful phrases of the 23rd Psalm. The composer intertwined the singer's music with the war-like verses of Psalm 2. Although seated at the back of the orchestra, Holiday's lyric voice carried well and its sound was as luscious as

aged sherry wine in Disney Hall's excellent acoustics. After the thoughts of war brought on by brass and percussion, conductor Gustavo Dudamel used the final movement to restore the peaceful atmosphere of Psalm 131 mixed with excerpts from Psalm 133.

After a short intermission, the Phil played the piece most of the audience had come to hear: BEETHOVEN'S NINTH SYMPHONY. Conducting from memory, Dudamel seemed to relate orchestral tones to the sounds of nature. The opening horn call was soft, as though heard from a distance. From this tiny thread of sound, Dudamel gradually brought up the level of concerted tone to forte. It was not the loudness that was exhilarating, but the excitement contained in each note that made the performance memorable. The maestro's approach to the second movement, the scherzo, was light and quick. It seemed as though sunbeams were dancing on his baton.

Listening to Beethoven is always meaningful because of the many ways in which this composer uses and reuses his musical material. He never repeats himself. He always has new ideas, and in the Ninth his imagination seemed unlimited, even though his hearing was almost completely gone. At the this symphony's premiere, the composer's friends had to point him in the direction of the applause because he could not hear any of it.



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The vocal soloists entered the stage before the third movement and, like the countertenor before them, they sat behind many instrumentalists. The orchestra played the Adagio flexibly and with song-like tones as though it was an aria. Here, the audience could see and hear Dudamel's concept of this movement as an arch that culminates in the last movement, the ODE TO JOY.

Poet, historian, and dramatist Friedrich Schiller, author of seminal works such as DON CARLOS, THE MAID OF ORLEANS, and WILLIAM TELL, wrote the spiritually uplifting ODE in 1785 and published it the following year. Beethoven loved the idea of uniting all humanity into a peaceful group, but even the magic of his music has not brought it to fruition.

After a rousing drum roll, the commanding voice of bass-baritone Craig Colclough called upon humanity to unite in brotherly love. All four soloists had to have voices powerful

enough to sing over a large orchestra and each had a distinct timbre that was easily distinguishable from the others.

Soprano Julianna di Giacomo had crystal clear high notes that carried through out the hall. Mezzo Jennifer Johnson Cano sang with creamy tones that seemed to envelope the orchestral sound. Tenor Michael König had a smoky sound that seemed to incorporate a baritonal quality. Together their voices formed a unique multicolored aural tapestry as they soared above and below the voices of Grant Gerson's Los Angeles Master Chorale.

Most of the same soloists will be going on tour with the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. The Phil will perform the Bernstein and Beethoven program in Washington D.C., New York City, and Paris. The weekend in LA was just a harbinger of performances to come.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

SEEN AND HEARD INTERNATIONAL

MusicWeb International's Worldwide Concert and Opera Reviews

February 7, 2018

A Master-Class in Poetic Nuance from Seemingly Modest Songs

Jennifer Johnson Cano (mezzo-soprano), Christopher Cano (piano)
Benjamin Franklin Hall, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia
By Bernard Jacobson

What promised, on paper, to be a relatively undemanding and domestically based evening of lightweight songs turned, in the event, into a musical experience of close to epic seriousness.

The winner of several important awards, St. Louis native Jennifer Johnson Cano has appeared more than 100 times at the Metropolitan Opera since winning the company's auditions in 2008. It was immediately evident in the evening's opening group from the *Songs of the Auvergne* that she is possessed of a mezzo-soprano voice that combines tonal beauty with at times awe-inspiring power. She wields it with the utmost smoothness. And it became clear from the rest of a program that ranged linguistically from those songs' Occitan texts, by way of German and Spanish, to the English set by Barber, Bernstein, and the 58-year-old London-born Jonathan Dove, that her care for clarity and expressiveness of diction is unrelenting, and extends to an unusually precise yet delicate way with final "r"s.

While all these qualities revealed the widely differing musical characters of the cleverly chosen repertoire she was singing, her husband, Christopher Cano, was no whit less impressive in his command of the keyboard, responding to his scores with frequently dazzling strength of tone and lucidity of texture. Altogether the recital was something of a master-class in the realization of poetic nuance. As absorbing as the other composers' texts were, Dove's Tennyson poems, especially 'O Swallow, Swallow', instantly lifted the quality of the literary discourse to a strikingly higher level. An enthusiastic ovation from the audience was rewarded, by way of encore, with John Jacob Niles's 'Go 'way from my window', performed, again, with compelling understanding and skill.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

TheAtlanta
Journal-
Constitution
ajc.com

January 26, 2018

ASO excels with Kurth, Bernstein and Beethoven

By Jon Ross



Two days after music director Robert Spano, who has led the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra since the 2000-2001 season, announced he will step down from his full-time duties in 2021, he took the Symphony Hall stage Thursday to a standing ovation.

Spano will leave his longtime post once he hits the two-decade mark as leader of the ensemble. He'll thereafter take up the mantle of conductor laureate, a position Robert Shaw held after his semi-retirement in 1988.

Spano may have bowed a little lower and longer than usual at the start of the concert, but that was the only acknowledgment that anything had

changed in the world of the ASO. His semi-departure is still more than three years away. So on Thursday night, it was business as usual, beginning with what has become a hallmark of Spano's tenure in Atlanta: new music.

ASO bassist Michael Kurth's "Everything Lasts Forever," premiered by the ASO in 2013, is precisely the type of composition Spano champions. The piece began with "Jaws"-like plodding in the cello and bass sections, which establishes the rhythmic intensity that runs through the entire composition. Through off-kilter melodies — including a violin solo that is somehow both spiky and silky smooth — this rhythmic



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propulsion remains; it bubbled up as pizzicato filigree in the violins under a muted trumpet theme, and it later emerged, in the background, as a solitary martial snare drum, keeping time amid a dialogue between flutes and violins.

This first movement, at times, turned into a wonderful cacophony, thrillingly disorienting in its rhythmic verbosity. This all set up the second movement, which utilized silence and space instead of constant motion. The pulsing rhythms returned in the final movement, but were restrained under hopeful, optimistic melodies. In part, “Everything Lasts Forever” is a rumination on impermanence. But the final notes of the third movement are enough to sustain a sunny outlook for quite a while.

The second movement of Leonard Bernstein’s Symphony No. 1, “Jeremiah,” carried forward the rhythmic theme of Kurth’s piece by presenting the syncopated, quasi-jazz melodies that run through most Bernstein works. And while the first two movements — packed with emotional playing and lush orchestral writing — were affecting and poignant, a moment in the final bars of the piece pushed everything else to the background. Toward the end of the operatic third movement, mezzo soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano cried, filled with rage and

emotion, “Depart ye! Unclean.” In full voice, Cano uttered this judgment, then stopped, shaking with fury. In this momentary pause, she let the anger wash away; returning in the next phrase, with soft sweetness, she asked for forgiveness. In that short passage, Cano elegantly interpreted the mastery at the heart of Bernstein’s earliest symphony.

Pianist Jorge Federico Osorio, the second guest artist of the evening, will make Symphony Hall his second home for the next month, as he helps the ASO perform all five of Beethoven’s piano concertos. Beginning his residency with Piano Concerto No. 5, “Emperor,” Osorio showed the audience the bubbly, rambunctious side of Beethoven.

Throughout the work, Osorio dexterously navigated fluid, finger-twisting passages that had him skipping up and down the entire range of the keyboard in various intervallic combinations. The piece began with an extended solo section, accented with short chordal punches from the orchestra — encouragement in the form of musical accents. While this opening passage was far from the only unaccompanied flight of piano fancy, the orchestra functions as more than just a bystander to pianistic fireworks. In this introduction to a monthlong partnership, both parties played their roles with vigor.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERA TODAY

OPERA NEWS, COMMENTARY, AND REVIEWS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

January 21, 2018

Tucson Desert Song Festival Presents Artists from the Met and Arizona Opera

The Tucson Desert Song Festival consists of three weekends of vocal music in orchestral, chamber, choral, and solo formats along with related lectures and master classes.

By Maria Nockin

Held at the University of Arizona, artists and patrons also enjoy in the warm Sonoran Desert climate where flowers bloom in January and February. The festival's sixth year features a celebration of the life and music of Leonard Bernstein who would have been one hundred years old in 2018.

On January 17, the festival presented a recital by Metropolitan Opera mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano and collaborative pianist Christopher Cano who is Head of Music and Director of the Marion Roose Pullin Opera Studio at Arizona Opera. Upon entering, the audience was greeted with a wonderfully well organized program that included song texts in the original languages and excellent English translations by the singer herself. Also the lights were never too low for members of the audience to read translations as Jennifer Cano sang them.

The Canos opened their program with three selections from Joseph Canteloube's *Chants*

d'Auvergne: "L'Antouéno" ("Anthony"), "La delaïssádo" (The Deserted Girl), and "Lou Coucut" ("The Cuckoo"). Canteloube's collection is made up folk songs from the Auvergne region of France that he arranged for voice and orchestra between 1923 and 1930. The songs are sung in Occitan, (also known as Provençal or Languedoc). Occitan

speakers communicate officially in French, but they still use the dialect for local purposes.

Clad in black silk trimmed with lace, in the first song, russet haired Jennifer Cano charmed "Anthony" into taking her to the fair. She sings of getting a cow but will only let him have its horns. Then she made us commiserate with the sad young girl whose lover never comes to meet her. The evening star finds "The Deserted Girl" in a place so many of us have been, alone in the dark of night. "The Cuckoo" drew us out of the sad mood with its cheery song, however, even though we had to imagine him singing in the cooler forests of France. Christopher Cano's virtuosity had been evident during each of these pieces. He brought out sonorities not always heard in a piano accompaniment and his articulation was comparable to many of the finest solo pianists. This was one of the rare vocal recitals where it was important to sit on the keyboard side of the house.

For their second group the Canos' performed Antonín Dvořák's *Ziguenerlieder* ("Gypsy Songs"), a set of seven songs set to texts by Czech poet Adolph Heyduk. Heyduk translated some of his poems into German so Dvořák could set them to music for popular Vienna Opera tenor Gustav Walter. For many people of



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European extraction, these songs bring back memories of childhood. "Als die alte Mutter" ("Songs My Mother Taught Me") could frequently be heard not only in Prague and Vienna but in many American cities during the years following World War II. It was a treat to hear it sung by members of a new generation who carefully detailed all its hidden meanings.

The Canos' idiomatic rendition of Manuel de Falla's 1914 composition, *Siete Canciones Populares Españolas* ("Seven Popular Spanish Songs") concluded the first half of the program. De Falla composed some songs in styles representing particular areas of Spain such as Murcia and Asturias. Other songs tell of the vagaries of love. The Canos presented each piece as a precious jewel in an individual setting. I particularly loved the beautifully expressed meanings, both sung and unsung, in the "Jota," a dance from Aragon.

After the intermission, the Canos presented songs in English by Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein and Jonathan Dove. In 1935, when Barber won the Prix de Rome, he composed music for three poems about love and lovers from James Joyce's 1907 *Chamber Music*. In each, Barber allows his music to follow the poetic speech pattern. The first and last songs of the low voice edition are in the key of A minor while the middle song is a minor third lower. Sung and played by the Canos, they dazzled listeners with a kaleidoscope of gorgeous sound colors.

Three Songs from *West Side Story* with texts by Stephen Sondheim have increased meaning when we

contemplate them as a memorial to a great composer. With "One Hand One Heart" the artists spoke of unity. Onstage there was complete unity of singer and pianist during the entire evening. Christopher and Jennifer Cano seemed to breathe together and each was able to anticipate the other's moves. In "Somewhere" they expressed common longing for a place that could appreciate people who care and create. In the less familiar "I Have a Love" they spoke of love as the most important aspect of life.

London born Jonathan Dove has composed opera, choral works, plays, films, chamber and orchestral music. Over the years he has arranged a number of operas for British companies. *Three Tennyson Songs* is a short song cycle composed in 2011 for Canadian baritone Philippe Sly. In it the poet first sends a swallow to tell his lady of his love. Day breaks upon a still wakeful lover and "The Sailor-Boy" obeys his unquenchable desire to spend his life riding the high seas.

Although the nearest bay is a hundred miles away, the Canos brought its beauty and its thrill to the desert with their ability to project musical images into the minds of their audience. When they finished presenting these songs, there was a great thunder of applause from this excellent audience, which only applauded at the end of each group. After several forays before the curtain they gave their single encore: John Jacob Niles' "Go 'Way From My Window," and the audience departed slowly with tunes from this excellent recital still running around in their brains.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



September 29, 2017

Cleveland Orchestra opens 100th season with a stunning Cunning Little Vixen

By Sam Jacobson



Saturday marked the opening night of the The Cleveland Orchestra's 100th season, yet apart from the façade of Severance Hall being draped in centennial banners, matters were decidedly down-to-business, with the high level of music-making the only celebration necessary. The repertoire of choice for this milestone evening was delightfully off-kilter in Janáček's 1923 opera *The Cunning Little Vixen*. This was in fact an encore presentation of Yuval Sharon's ingenious production, previously given in 2014 when it

garnered stellar reviews – an assessment to which I can only concur. In a nod towards its origins as a comic strip by Rudolf Těsnohlídek and Stanislav Lolek, this staging of *The Cunning Little Vixen* was achieved largely through animation, projected onto a massive trifold screen that wrapped the back of the stage in forced perspective. A small platform on which the human characters acted was placed in front of the screen, while the animals poked their heads through peepholes in the screen, with the rest of their bodies



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rendered digitally. The use of animation solved some of the more unwieldy stage directions (for instance, the Frog jumping on the nose of the Forester), and further provided an almost childlike simplicity in the wake of the plot's contemplative and sometimes tragic moments. This dichotomous tension was duly emphasized throughout the performance. Front and center was the orchestra with music director Franz Welser-Möst, and rightfully so, as in spite of a stellar vocal cast they proved to be the true stars of the evening.

A projected image of the Severance Hall organ faded into a forest scene as the prelude began, yet the prevalence of nervous trills hinted that this wasn't an entirely peaceful idyll. The music surged into a colorful portrait of the woods, perhaps echoing Wagner's *Waldweben*, but not without Janáček's unmistakably idiosyncratic stamp, a daunting language which the orchestra has mastered with an astonishing fluency. Interludes for the orchestra alone – again, having them as the focal point paid off – marked the passage of time, and the first such selection was characterized by a strikingly angular theme. As the titular Vixen, one couldn't have asked for a stronger advocate than soprano Martina Janková, her light, limpid tone coyly capturing the intended capriciousness. The opposite end of the vocal spectrum was also held with aplomb in the sonorous depths of Alan Held's bass-baritone as the Forester.

Passages for the celesta and bass clarinet broadened the color palette at the opening of the second act, and shortly thereafter the audience was introduced to the Badger. Despite his imposing presence given by bass-baritone Dashon Burton (who would appear shortly thereafter in the role of the Parson), he was easily outsmarted by the Vixen who

usurped ownership of his home. Cunning, indeed. Later in the act, night fell, and the chorus sang from offstage to create a sublimely mysterious atmosphere wherein the Vixen met the Fox. The latter was portrayed by mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, her mellifluous tone a fitting complement to Janková. For the first time, the two foxes emerged from behind the screen into full view, a wise staging decision in drawing one's attention to the couple.

The clarinet conveyed the Vixen's coquettishness, while the sumptuous melody in the solo violin was filled with yearning. In the ensuing wedding scene, the chorus was repositioned to the balcony, creating a veritable surround-sound effect. A final duet between the Vixen and the Fox was to be had in the last act before fate halted their aspirations, the Vixen falling victim to Harašta (portrayed with vigor by bass Andrew Foster-Williams). Despite taunting him, this time she was not cunning enough. While this was a tragic moment to be sure, I was also struck by its apparent nonchalance – this was not the first time the crosshairs have been centered on her, and there was a certain *amor fati* in her resignation to the inevitable.

The concluding scene – which, quite poignantly, Janáček requested be performed at his own funeral – was a pensive meditation on the ebb and flow of time. The Forester, now animated as if in unity with the animals, returned to the woods and encountered the Vixen's child and the grandson of the Frog. While forceful, the ending served to convey the cyclical nature of life, perhaps here even being an allegory for generations that have come and gone during the now century-long tenure of The Cleveland Orchestra.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

New York CLASSICAL REVIEW

March 24, 2017

Stoyanova and de León deliver gripping vocalism in Met's "Aida"

By Eric C. Simpson

For such a staple of the repertoire, Verdi's grand Egyptian tragedy *Aida* has been a struggle for the Metropolitan Opera in recent years. The opera is a difficult one to cast, and the company's revivals have often suffered, putting journeyman singers in demanding lead roles.

The revival cast that opened on Thursday night offered a welcome change in that trend, even if it boasts little in the way of star power. In the title role was Krassimira Stoyanova, a Bulgarian soprano who has been only an occasional presence at the Met. This was an impressive vocal performance, sporting a laser focus in the top and middle of her range, and a light smolder in her chest voice. "Ritorna vincitor!" was sung with gripping intensity, bringing the evening to life after a slow start. This aria in fact overshadowed the far more famous lament "O patria mia" from Act III, which was also emotionally effective and intelligently sung, though a little cautious, never opening up to her full power.

The punishing role of Radamès is not an easy one for a debut, yet Jorge de León made an admirable first bow. "Celeste Aida" is about as cruel a start as exists in any major role, a demanding aria that marks the tenor's first appearance

onstage. De León's rendition was a little blunt in its phrasing, but that he could produce so strong and ringing a sound right out of the gate was impressive nonetheless, ending the aria on a long, clarion B-flat. He tired noticeably as the night wore on, yet saved enough energy to give a passionate account of his final duet with Stoyanova, his shining tone mixing beautifully with her focused warmth.

From Scarpia to Tonio, George Gagnidze has been called upon to play a number of memorable antagonists on the Met's stage. His robust, fine-grained baritone was in top form on Thursday and he brought unusual depth to the Ethiopian King Amonasro, avoiding common the temptation to play him as a skulking schemer.

Violeta Urmana returns in this run for yet another tour of duty as Amneris, the haughty heiress presumptive to the Egyptian throne, and Aida's rival. She seems to save up all her energy, vocal and dramatic, for one crucial episode the extended first scene in Act IV in which she pleads with Radamès to accept her help, and then mourns his grisly fate. Her portrayal here was intensely emotional and strikingly sympathetic, showing her most consistent tone of the evening.



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Otherwise, she sounded taxed by the role—though there's still plenty of burning power in her chest voice, her top range is stretched thin and her middle all but disappears.

Another veteran joining the cast is perennial house favorite James Morris as the imperious high priest Ramfis. His voice, too, bears the marks of time, though in his case the strain of year fits the role, leaving a lean bass-baritone that groans with weariness. Morris can't boom the way he used to, but the tautness of the voice gave his recitation of the charges against Radamès an imposing feel nonetheless.

Morris Robinson's vocal profile is strikingly similar to James Morris's, though darker and—at this point—weightier. He brought a grand presence to the stage as the King, with superb vocal power and a firm grasp of the role's lowest notes. The manic intensity of Jennifer Johnson Cano's taut mezzo was captivating in her brief but memorable offstage turn as the priestess, singing the entrancing prayer to Ptah.

Daniele Rustioni made his first appearance in the Met's pit on Thursday. The young Italian conductor

had trouble corralling some larger scenes, and was out of step with individual singers here and there. Nonetheless, it was a promising debut as he showed strong dramatic sense, fitting the score to the demands of each scene, and managed the tricky ballet of the triumph scene with exemplary precision. The Met chorus sounded as rich as ever, and the orchestra brought their best, the onstage brass positively gleaming during the triumphal march.

Sonja Frisell's 1988 production is still able to awe its audiences all these years later, as Gianni Quaranta's enormous sets stretch the limits of the Met's gargantuan stage. Sadly, the action onstage often fails to measure up: the choreographed rituals create a sense of magic that is quickly undone by the aimless flailing of the actors, under the supervision of revival director Stephen Pickover. The Met desperately needs to employ stage directors for repertory productions who can encourage actors to work off of each other instead of offering them decades-old blocking: far too often, this sort of canned mugging throws a generous coat of dust over even the most impressive stagings.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

THE CLASSICAL ARTS

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February 2, 2017

Cleveland Orchestra & Seraphic Fire Raise The Bar Uniting With Bach And Bruckner In Miami

By Kumar Rahul

The audience at the Arsht Centre in Miami, South Florida had an evening of unforgettable music when the Cleveland Orchestra along with Seraphic Fire collaborated to perform with Bach and Bruckner. The show saw all of them performing at their best.

According to the Cleveland, the Miami-based group of vocalists Seraphic Fire, who are globally renowned for their excellence in music, combined with the Cleveland Orchestra on works by Johann Sebastian Bach. The orchestra led by the stalwart Franz Welser-Most presented the beautiful symphony no.7 by Anton Bruckner. It was a work of ultimate prudence as Bach and Bruckner stand far away from each other, independent in their styles.

Welser-Most balanced three brilliant trumpets with the singers of Seraphic Fire in perfect harmony to offer a "profoundly cohesive program" to the audience. The Mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano with her indulgence of divine voice in Canata No.34 was a piece to be cherished. Her presence was hugely welcomed by the audience. The effect of Symphony no.7 from Bruckner was not very different from that of Bach. Its logic or design was unquestionable. Welser-Most did not rush through the piece and made the audience

indulge in every note and tune. Starting from the opening Allegro and transitioning smoothly through the Adagio and Scherzo, finally ending with a brilliant Finale, the quality of Bruckner played was exquisite, to say the least.

According to South Florida Classical Review, the collaboration proved to be one of the finest concerts performed in a decade by the Clevelanders. Welser-Most, a master in Bruckner's musical structures had ultimate command on the whole rendition and presented arguably their best music piece of the year. In the recitatives, Steven Soph and James K. Bass' voices spoke volumes.

It has been a decade-long wait for Miami to lend its ears to the masterpiece of Welser-Most. The performance proved that the long wait was worth it. It is believed to be one of the best pieces that the music loving people of Miami has experienced in a very long time. They will be hoping that this is the first of many performances that the maestro and his company will be bringing out in the future.

The performance took place on January 27, Friday and was repeated on January 28, Saturday at the Arsht Centre. It goes without saying that the audience was left craving for more after attending them.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

South Florida
CLASSICAL REVIEW

January 28, 2017

Cleveland Orchestra, Seraphic Fire ascend the heights with Bach and Bruckner

By Lawrence Budmen



Franz Welser-Möst conducted music of Bach with Seraphic Fire, the Cleveland Orchestra and soloist Jennifer Johnson Cano Friday night at the Arsht Center.

The pairing of the Cleveland Orchestra and Seraphic Fire with music by Bach and Bruckner drew a large audience to the Arsht Center on Friday night and the combined musical forces, each performing their signature repertory, did not disappoint.

Choral works of Johann Sebastian Bach have been central to the programming of Patrick Quigley's outstanding choral group. The massive symphonies of Anton Bruckner have been a house specialty in Cleveland during Franz Welser-Möst's musical directorship.

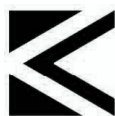
With both ensembles in top form, the evening proved one of the Clevelanders' finest concerts in ten years of Miami residencies.

The program's first half comprised a complete Bach cantata and choruses from two others played without pause as one large musical canvas. Seraphic Fire's complement of twenty-five voices, nearly twice as large as its usual forces, stood directly behind the reduced Cleveland Orchestra forces.

The opening and closing choruses of this segment offered music that Bach later recycled for the Mass in B minor, his late masterpiece. Two trumpets, timpani and strings set the joyous mood of "Gloria in excelsis Deo" from Cantata No. 191. The choir's projection over the orchestra was clear and resounded throughout the Knight Concert Hall. In the five-part fugue of the contrasting second section, Seraphic Fire's unique sonority and vocal blend potently came to the fore.

The Cantata No. 34, *O ewiges Feuer, o Ursprung der Liebe*, (O eternal fire, o source of love) is prime Bach with the central mezzo-soprano aria one of his finest vocal inspirations. The choir's first entrance was marked by tight and precise ensemble singing and Bach's weaving of overlapping vocal lines was rendered with spot-on clarity.

Welser-Möst demonstrated a fine sense of Baroque style with taut tempos and fine balancing of instrumental and vocal



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components. In recitatives, Steven Soph's excellent lyric tenor and James K. Bass' firm and voluminous bass were pillars of strength. The central aria "Wohl euch, ihr auserwählten dir" (Wise is he who has selected you). was superbly sung by Jennifer Johnson Cano. Her range was wide with low notes free of vibrato or unsteadiness. Cano's lovely mezzo timbre, affinity for Baroque style and emotional projection of the text were a real luxury. Marisela Sager's elegantly tailored flute obbligato was a delight to hear.

The sublime melody of the chorus "Wir danken dir, Gott" (We thank you God) from Cantata No. 29 is better known as the concluding "Dona nobis pacem" of the B minor Mass. Sung and played with serene beauty, this Bach gem was an appropriate conclusion to this first collaboration between Miami's splendid chamber choir and one of America's finest orchestras.

It has taken a decade for Welser-Möst to bring his Bruckner to Miami, but the performance of the Symphony No. 7 in E Major was one of the conductor and orchestra's best offerings to date.

Welser-Möst is a master of Bruckner's vast musical structures, with pacing that was unhurried but never stodgy. Drawing thrilling playing from all sections of the orchestra, he

demonstrated innate command of Bruckner's symphonic architecture and building blocks of sound. While the composer's spiritual depth was not ignored, this performance perfectly balanced the music's fierce vigor and lyricism. The big climaxes were scaled with impressive corporate power.

Silky string textures and depth of sound from the brass were matched by warm, cleanly articulated winds. Principal flutist Joshua Smith's many solos were particularly beautiful in tone and rhythmic acuity.

As Bruckner surely intended, the Adagio was deeply moving, spun by Welser-Möst as one long threnody. A mighty blend of horns and dark-toned Wagner tubas with cymbal and timpani crashes in the climax was stirring. The Scherzo emerged as a frantic dance with the trio section given just the proper amount of Viennese schmaltz.

In a fleet final movement, Welser-Möst brought out the shimmering wind writing which often gets lost in overblown performances. The build up to the final pages was intense and inexorable. This Bruckner performance displayed a world-class orchestra at its best and was definitely worth waiting for. Played before a rapt and attentive audience, hopefully it was a harbinger of more Bruckner symphonies to come.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

musicOMH

December 4, 2016

El Niño @ Barbican Hall, London



By Sam Smith



© Vern Evans

In March 2013 the LA Philharmonic, under the baton of Gustavo Dudamel, brought John Adams' *The Gospel According to the Other Mary* to the Barbican. The oratorio, which on that occasion was enjoying its European premiere, describes Jesus' crucifixion and was designed to be a companion piece to *El Niño* of 2000. Now with Christmas nearly upon us, the earlier nativity oratorio proved a fitting work for the London Symphony Orchestra to present, and the occasion was made all the more special by the fact that the

performance was conducted by the composer himself.

El Niño meditates on the period from the annunciation to the flight into Egypt by setting a series of pre-existing texts to music. Those from the Gospels stand alongside a range from several world cultures, and the fact that the texts come from a variety of eras makes the messages that are proclaimed feel universal rather than merely contemporary. While many writings are directly religious, others are more broadly philosophical in tone while some address very recent political



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issues. By the time we have added in stories from the Apocrypha, which inspire a sense of child-like amazement, the oratorio has practically run the full gamut of human emotions and experiences. In this way, it may provide a metaphor for the way in which Christmas today has a reach far beyond the confines of Christianity to envelop all aspects of humanity.

The oratorio is brilliantly paced as it constantly turns the emotional colour wheel to contrast intimate moments of private reflection with more highly charged passages of anxiety or menace. Writings such as *For with God nothing shall be impossible* (from Luke, Chapter 1) and *Shake the Heavens* (drawn from the Haggai and Gospel of James) feature a more unrelenting style of music, typical of the sound that might instantly spring to mind if we were to think of minimalism. Other moments prove far lighter, with the strings backing the soloist with an ephemeral sound, only slightly punctuated on occasions by the brass or other instruments. In terms of structure and approach these passages are just as minimalist as the others, but the contrast is so immense that the resulting experience feels very multi-faceted.

Unlike *The Gospel*, which featured dancers, and the original production of *El Niño*, which had live movement and film (courtesy of director Peter Sellars in both instances), this evening was presented as any more traditional oratorio would be. This actually worked because it gave greater opportunity for the singers to engage directly with the audience, providing us with the means with which to make sense of all we were told, but not overtly directing us to think and feel certain things. As Adams explained from the podium at the start of the evening, there is something ironic and imbalanced about the story of a birth having been told almost entirely by men. As a result, he and Sellars were determined that their oratorio would include as many writings from women as possible, and one particular delight came from hearing the words of

Mexican writer Rosario Castellanos. Lines such as 'My solitude was a passage through darkness, an impetus of inconsolable fever' (from the poem *La anunciación*) stunned with their richness, even when only understood through reading the surtitles.

The female perspective on the story was also explored in interesting ways. For example, 'The babe leaped in her womb' (from Luke, Chapter 1) was sung not by the soprano or mezzo-soprano that the oratorio features, but by the three countertenors. This seemed to be an expression of empathy that also stressed the idea of Christ being in all of us, and was emphasised by the fact that the men then changed their line to 'The babe leaped in my womb'. Other mysteries were woven into the piece so that when Mary in the guise of the soprano and mezzo-soprano proclaimed that she saw two people before her, the women were joined by one of the countertenors, thus alluding to the Trinity as two became three.

Adams' conducting seemed to bring a 'rhythmic sensuality' to the score. In other words, because of his obvious understanding of his own intentions, he was able to imbue into the piece's rhythms a meaning, purpose and aesthetic not achieved perhaps by any other conductor, even in some very good performances of the work. The soloists were also excellent, with Jennifer Johnson Cano standing out in particular. Her heartfelt performance of Castellanos' La anunciación was beautifully measured as her mezzo-soprano felt sumptuous without seeming inappropriately flashy. Joëlle Harvey displayed a sweet, feeling and yet suitably strong soprano while the darkness and richness of Davóne Tines' bass-baritone was superbly tempered by an expansiveness of tone.

It was also hard to picture the countertenors of Daniel Bubeck, Brian Cummings and Nathan Medley, none of whom are strangers to performing Adams' oratorios, ever being bettered in the piece. The sensitive tone of each worked so well with the words and

music that as each sang 'God exists', irrespective of one's religious beliefs, it was impossible not to be entirely convinced by the proclamation. The London Symphony Chorus and London Youth Choir, directed by Simon Halsey and associate chorus director Neil

Ferris, both played their parts to the full. The latter brought the whole evening to a beautifully sensitive conclusion with their performance of another Castellanos poem, Una palmera, which at the very end was accompanied by a sole guitar.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The Boston Musical Intelligencer

September 25, 2016

BLO, Bieito Take Boston by the Horns

By Kate Stringer



Jennifer Johnson Cano scrawls on the chest of solider Joseph Yonaitis.

Waiting for the curtain to rise on Boston Lyric Opera's season-opening revival of Calixto Bieito's production of *Carmen*, I was fully prepared to be shocked, outraged, confused, irritated and/or disgusted. It's all but impossible to be an opera aficionado in the 21st century without being aware of the Catalan stage director's notoriety as a *provocateur, enfant terrible, bête noire* and other continental terms denoting an artistic rebel-without-a-cause. As noted in the *Carmen* program book, Bieito made his debut in 2004 with a production of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* that graphically depicted

fellatio, rape and torture; he has been blithely scandalizing the operatic establishment ever since. Though BLO and revival director Joan Anton Rechi carefully defended Bieito against his detractors, many of the marketing materials surrounding this revival and its twin production in San Francisco made much of the auteur's legend in order to ramp up audience interest. It's an understandable sales tactic—after all, stark depictions of the reliable commodities of sex and violence constitute Bieito's stock-in-trade. Gratifyingly or disappointingly, depending on one's perspective, I left



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the Boston Opera House on Friday night having experienced none of the jarring symptoms of theatrical malaise I'd been warned against and/or promised. In BLO's hands, the production proved challenging, flawed but coherent, dramatically effective and often exciting, and not just in a titillating sense.

In this judiciously abbreviated version of Bizet's classic (much of the spoken dialogue is cut), and the action takes place in Ceuta, the Spanish autonomous city located at the far end of North African coast. The opening scene reveals an unmistakably masculine environment: a group of military men stand watching a comrade doing punishment laps, clad in nothing but a pair of combat boots and sweat-drenched tighty-whites. A large wooden flagpole equipped with thick, noose-worthy rope towers over the ensemble. The set piece provides a neat double-image, recalling both a phallus and a gibbet, helping to illustrate the drunken Lillas Pastia's opening pronouncement, "*L'amour c'est comme la mort.*"

Throughout the show, Alfons Flores's set remains spare, yet impressive. A large backdrop of a bull overshadows the scene during the final two acts, until it is dismantled in a simple but startling *coup de théâtre*—in 2016, it's nice to hear a gasp from audience members convinced that they can be surprised by nothing. In the second and third acts, a small fleet of Mercedes-Benz cars roll onstage, their headlights glaring straight at the audience for a moment or two as they drive. It's an assault on the senses, to be sure, though it certainly succeeds in immersing the audience deep into the world of the opera. Mercè Paloma's costumes seem geared toward flattering the male figure rather than the female; clad in loud, bargain-basement ensembles, the women's costumes appear to wear the performers rather than the other way around. The men, by contrast, are set-off well in form-fitting military uniforms and suits. The effect privileges the beauty of the male figure over that of the

female; in a plot that revolves around the violence of a man maddened by the allure of a woman, the aesthetic choice—intentional or not—seems somewhat counterintuitive, though certainly intriguing.

Bieito reveals a cinematic sensibility in his penchant for creating visually striking stage pictures; in a particularly thrilling moment, the 70-strong crowd of bullring spectators charge a just-strung rope line in time with the orchestra as it swells, leading up to the iconic toreador march in "*Les voici! Voici la quadrille!*" As the spectators cheer, we experience the parade of bullring heroes not as a literal depiction, but rather as reflected in the faces of the bloodthirsty, sport-maddened crowd.

Less successful scenes include the "moon-baptism" that opens the third act, during which a young toreador strips naked and exposes himself to a bull as a superstitious ritual before the bullfight. According to the directors, this added sequence has its origins in actual Spanish custom; in the context of the production, however, replete as it is with constant reminders of primal male sexuality, it comes across at best as unnecessary and at worst as baffling. Indeed, to anyone who didn't pore over the program notes, the sight of a dimly lit nude man slapping his thighs before a giant silhouette of a bull reads more as an allusion to a Spanish version of *Equus* than anything to do with the story at hand.

Bieito takes great pains to depict Ceuta as a realm of unfettered primal instincts; in keeping with his reputation, sometimes he goes too far. In a show in which soldiers rush a phone both in order to trap their sexual prey, then tie and hoist a scantily clad female up the phallus/flagpole, it seems unnecessary that the lieutenant must then thrust his groin repeatedly into the ground or that the troops need to massage their nether-regions as they survey women leaving a cigarette factory. I would imagine than anyone naïve enough to miss the point at that juncture is probably too young to

attend the performance in the first place.

Jennifer Johnson Cano brought a dark, Horne-esque mezzo-soprano and an understated insolence to the title role. Her somewhat emotionally distant Carmen holds something back from her lovers, offering all of her body but only bits and pieces of her heart. It's an atypical take on this hot-blooded siren, perhaps more in keeping with Franz Wedekind than Prosper Merimée, yet not ineffective in this context. Johnson Cano seemed almost haunted at times; lying on the ground facing away from the desperate Don José in Act II, she seemed determined to live in a world all her own, untouched by and perhaps protected from her lover's frantic pleas.

Roger Honeywell made a nontraditional choice as José, a green young man—a mama's boy, even—experiencing the throes of uncontrollable passion for the first time. A mature stage presence, Honeywell comes across as the type who would have been too sensible to succumb to Carmen's charms if it weren't for the fact that the libretto tells him to act otherwise. Though the tenor boasts an emotionally engaged sound—*“La fleur que tu m'avais jetée”* particularly touched us—his José made a strikingly pathetic figure onstage. Whether by default or directorial design, the doomed soldier-turned-gypsy reads as perpetually ineffectual, both as a lover and as a member of Ceuta's toxically masculine culture. To wit: in Bieito's staging, José mounts Carmen during their Act IV confrontation—seemingly about to commit rape. Overcome by despair and perhaps momentarily stricken by conscience, he gets up and backs away, unable to possess the object of his desire even by force. In this amoral, testosterone-infused landscape, perhaps it makes a kind of oblique sense to José that the only way to save his pride is to end Carmen's life, thus spoiling her for anyone else. It is a shame that Johnson Cano and Honeywell were not able to muster enough tension for this scene to be truly riveting; to be sure, the bare

stage does not help them—Carmen hardly seems trapped in such a wide open space—though the confrontation made for a rather lackluster close to an otherwise high-energy evening.

Soprano Chelsea Basler, an admirable Micaëla, boasted a sweet, warm timbre in her middle and low registers and a brilliant, steely top. Basler's exceptionally well-sung Act III showpiece, *“Je dis que rien ne m'épouvante”* alas felt somewhat marred by the excess of stage business Bieito, Rechi and associates insist on giving her. (Micaëla's scene with José in Act I was similarly burdened, including a moment in which the couple got a cheap laugh by taking a selfie—the second time I have seen this superfluous reference to contemporary culture on the operatic stage in the past three months.) Less saintly than in other productions, this Micaëla brought a competitive sensuality of her own, making an “in your face” gesture at Carmen as she leads José from the gypsy camp in Act III.

The cartoonishly masculine, granite-jawed Michael Mayes brought a shyster's swagger and a robust sound as Escamillo. He and Johnson Cano beautifully matched as a musical and theatrical pair so much so that it seemed obvious that Carmen and José had been wasting time on each other from the beginning; Johnson Cano shared chemistry with Mayes to a degree that was never even hinted at in her interactions with Honeywell. The melding of Mayes' dark chocolate baritone and Johnson Cano's caramel mezzo only confirmed that the toreador and the gypsy were made for each other. Standouts among the supporting cast included Liam Moran's Zuniga, whose every action simmered with the promise of imminent violence. Of all the male actors, Moran best embodied the volatile world of unfettered sexual rapacity that Bieito seeks to portray. With the additional power of his vigorous bass sound, Moran's palpably animalistic stage presence seemed to pose a genuine threat to the physical safety of any

female onstage. Actor Yusef Lambert, a colorful addition, embodied anarchic glee as the gypsy Lillas Pastia. Bieito's choice to add a prepubescent girl (Lily Waters) to the gypsy band was an inspired touch; the wide-eyed young actress served as a kind of apprentice to the trio of Carmen, Mercèdes and Frasquita, with the clear implication that the child's fate is as cruel and inescapable as anyone's in this harsh landscape.

David Angus led the Boston Lyric Opera Orchestra in a spirited, technically precise account, though one yearned for a bit more fire here and there throughout their reading of one of Western music's most unabashedly sensual scores. The superb ensemble, under the direction of chorusmaster Michelle Alexander, acquitted themselves with energy and aplomb, giving strong vocal and dramatic performances despite the abundance of active stage business required by the production.

Given Bieito's track record for *Regietheater* gone wild it would have been easy to accuse BLO of choosing spectacle for its own sake as a means to generate buzz around its new season; 2016-2017 not only represents the company's 40th anniversary, but also its debut at the Boston Opera House, a the

former vaudeville palace in which opera had such a brief run in Caldwell's days. It is a move that bodes well for the genre's future in our city; as *Opera News* noted in 2013, our city has had a conflicted relationship with opera, achieving the status of a true international hub for limited periods throughout the past century. True to its current name, the former Keith Memorial Theater provides a natural habitat for the opera genre; though *Carmen* is its only such engagement in the venue this season, one hopes that BLO will eventually be able to return "home" permanently. A nationally recognized company deserves—and indeed, requires—a larger, more acoustically alive space than BLO formerly suffered at the relatively cramped Shubert. Moreover, though my seat in the third row on Friday night all but guaranteed a perfect view of the stage, previous experience of the tall, open Opera House allows me to state that the venue's sightlines from any vantage point are vastly preferable to those at the Shubert.

In all, BLO's choice to marry newly expanded real estate opportunities with artistic daring is a choice that pays off; it would appear that its fifth decade is off to a strong start.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



September 27, 2016

Love and Death in the Afternoon: Calixto Bieito's *Carmen* in Boston

By Kevin Wells



Bieito-bashing has become a popular pastime in the operaverse, creating a strong confirmation bias. Calixto Bieito's productions are often automatically dismissed – frequently sight unseen – as Eurotrash, assumed to be replete with gratuitous nudity and a Tarantino-like reveling in sex and violence. Haters gonna hate, as they say, but they might want to take a close look at his production of *Carmen* which opened Boston Lyric Opera's 40th season and,

along with an earlier run in San Francisco, marks his American debut. Freed from the usual Disney World of folkloric clichés, with most of the spoken dialogue cut, Bieito sets the action in a remote military outpost in colonial North Africa in the immediate post-Franco era. His *Carmen* is primal, feral, raw and lightly leavened with comic relief. A stifling, oppressive machismo threatens violence and persists from the outset as Moralès cracks a drafting whip, herding his squad, while a soldier



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stripped to white briefs and combat boots runs punishment laps, porting arms, until he collapses. Left unsupervised, the troops reconnoiter the cigarette girls in waves, sniffing and fainting like a pack of wild dogs in heat. They treat Micaëla similarly, Morals making lewd and suggestive use of his whip. The smugglers kick, stomp, and slam Zuniga with the door of a Mercedes, leaving him for dead center stage as the curtain falls on Act II. A huge silhouette of a bull, familiar as the logo for Osborne sherry, dominates Act III, suggesting that the real bullfight in the opera is the one between Escamillo and José. During the *entr'acte*, a soldier strips naked and, in the bluish half light, performs the *torero's* night-before-the-fight ritual of the "moon baptism" seeking to absorb the animal's energy. Even Don José is volatile and violently obsessive, proving more than capable of holding his own in Act III's knife fight. The only miscalculation in this respect came when marauding soldiers hoist a cigarette girl, stripped to black underclothes, up the flagpole by her wrists. The intent was clear, but the execution so hectic and clumsy that the stage picture intended to ring down the Act I curtain had no time to register. Credit to fight director Andrew Kenneth Moss, though, for making all the violence graphic and believable – Act I's cigarette girl riot in particular, a tumultuous hair-pulling, bitch-slapping brawl which roiled across the stage. Carmen may seem confident in this man's world, but she is vulnerable as well as dangerous, yet sufficiently aware of her appetites to control and exploit them, manipulating the randy men around her and surviving on her own terms. Her final encounter with José is a nuanced dance of death rather than a snarling, clawing fracas. She doesn't hurl José's ring, but presses it with a hint of regret and resignation into his free hand as he holds a knife to her throat. Jennifer Johnson Cano,

voluptuous and Titian-tressed, moves confidently and seductively, matching her chiaroscuro mezzo to the action. She avoids the pitfall of many Carmens by allowing the music to speak for itself, only coloring the words and refraining from over-interpreting. Act IV was a lesson in how to blend singing and acting to achieve a layered portrayal.

Roger Honeywell was, unfortunately, not himself. His tenor was uncharacteristically dry, tight and short. Whenever the voice managed to briefly ring free, it gave a hint of what he can do with José when he's at his best. Micaëla is often nothing more than a chirping plot device. In this production she's a bold woman who doesn't hesitate to flip off Carmen. Chelsea Basler made the most of the unique opportunities Bieito provides and shone singing the best aria Gounod never wrote, "Je dis que rein ne m'épouvante". Michael Mayes, a tall, lantern-jawed baritone, was stretched thin by some of the lowest lying notes in "Vôtre toast". Otherwise, his Escamillo dominated whenever he was onstage. The rest of the characters were as strongly and colorfully cast as the three principals. David Angus managed the tricky acoustics of the Opera House (built in 1928 for vaudeville) and attentively supported his singers. He and the orchestra luxuriated in the *Prélude* and *entr'actes*.

Bieito's is a very physical, high energy production, The demands it puts on the chorus, augmented by a squad of brawny shirtless extras, are prodigious. They surround and mount a phone booth, brawl, cavort, swarm a Mercedes and rock it mercilessly, wave, gesticulate, bust moves, and jump up and down like soccer fans, all while singing seemingly effortlessly. Breathtaking... literally.

If you think you know *Carmen*, think you know Calixto Bieito for that matter, then you definitely should head to the Opera House and have your eyes opened on both counts.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERA NEWS

July 21, 2016

Orphée et Eurydice(7/2/16)

DES MOINES

Des Moines Metro Opera

Des Moines Opera celebrated their forty-fourth season with a trio of productions that offered an impressive level of depth and detail as well as some genuine theatrical thrills. DMMO's 466-seat theater seems tailor-made for Baroque opera, but until 2016 the oldest work in the company's repertory was Mozart's *Entführung*. This was put to right with a first-rate mounting of Gluck's *Orphée et Eurydice* on July 2 (which also happened to be the composer's 302nd birthday). The 1859 Berlioz edition was utilized; thus we had Furies and Blessed Spirits, a French text, and a mezzo protagonist who was granted the bravura of "L'espoir renaît dans mon âme." Chas Rader-Shieber's illuminative production, with its graceful white-on-white designs by Jacob A. Climer, represented this creative team at their best. Orphée was discovered mourning before a classically rendered cemetery wall. The Dance of the Furies came dangerously close to gang rape (it was definitely not for the faint-hearted) while Eurydice was resurrected through an ethereal wash of rose petals. Jennifer Johnson Cano delivered a fine Orphée. Her mezzo-soprano gleamed like a laser, and she fielded some seemingly effortless plunges into a booming chest resister that were quite exciting. "J'ai perdu mon Eurydice" was movingly rendered. Susannah Biller's lovely lyric soprano made for a comely, sympathetic Eurydice; no doubt several men in the audience would have braved hell for her. Soprano Cree Carrico was a roguishly spirited Amour. Conductor Gary Thor Wedow led an idiomatic account of the score, though a somewhat brisker reading might ideally have been desired, particularly in Act I.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

The New York Times

January 22, 2013

A Master Singer Transmits Her Artistry **Marilyn Horne's Protégés in 'The Song Continues'**

By Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim

Four rising vocal stars took the stage of Zankel Hall on Saturday evening, joined by one established headliner in a varied recital of songs, the most obvious common denominator being an unapologetically hedonistic delight in the human voice. Another was gratitude: the singers were all paying homage to their mentor, the mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne, who hosted the evening at the end of "The Song Continues," a weeklong festival of master classes and recitals presented by Carnegie Hall's Weill Music Institute.

The tenor Timothy Fallon opened with carefully nuanced renditions of four Strauss songs that revealed his elegant sense of phrasing and luminous tone. "Three Browning Songs," by the American composer Amy Beach, further showed off his sure-handed control of timbre, from velvety pianissimos to bright, confident top notes.

Kelly Markgraf brought his round, erotically charged baritone to five songs

by Charles Martin Loeffler, atmospheric settings of poems by Paul Verlaine in which the pianist Keun-A Lee and the violist Paul Neubauer were eloquent chamber music partners.

The mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano demonstrated emotionally concentrated musicianship in three songs by Liszt, with fervent piano accompaniment by her husband, Christopher Cano. Her voice seems to come out of a happy nexus of heart, soul and brain that lends an authoritative weight to every note.

A selection of songs by Verdi and Rossini made the most of Simone Osborne's keen dramatic instinct. Her soprano has a creamy, sweet top register and an arrestingly dark lower range. Piotr Beczala, a star tenor who also studied with Ms. Horne, ended the recital with impassioned performances of songs by Strauss and the Polish composer Mieczyslaw Karłowicz.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano



May 2, 2015

Fine singing lifts BLO's feminist retooling of "Don Giovanni"

By David Wright



Jennifer Johnson Cano and Duncan Rock in Boston Lyric Opera's production of Mozart's "Don Giovanni."

Fortunately, this production has in Jennifer Johnson Cano a singer who lives up to her enhanced billing. No longer a mere scold and nuisance—as Don Giovanni, and some other productions, see her—Elvira took on new dimensions Friday night as Johnson Cano took full advantage of the musical resources Mozart provided, tailoring her clear, versatile voice from the spitting fury of her first rage aria “Ah! chi mi dice mai” to the excited ambivalence of “Ah, taci, ingiusto core” and the resigned forgiveness of “Mi tradi quell'alma ingrata.” Elvira is the only character in this drama who evolves noticeably during the action, and Johnson Cano, in an auspicious debut with this company, made sure the evolution was noticed.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

THE PLAIN DEALER

December 4, 2015

Cleveland Orchestra's 'Messiah' emerges as holiday program not to miss

By Zachary Lewis

The burden of deciding which holiday concert to attend just got a lot lighter. Make it the Cleveland Orchestra's "Messiah."

A treat in multiple respects, the rendition of Handel's beloved oratorio now being presented at Severance Hall deftly draws on the best of competing interpretive viewpoints, reaching out to both purists and traditionalists alike.

To those who prefer their Handel historically informed, director of choruses Robert Porco Thursday offered a lean, meticulous orchestra and a Cleveland Orchestra Chamber Chorus at its lightest and most nimble. And yet the conductor also followed his nose when it came to expression, welcoming guest vocalists from outside the early-music realm and shaping the famous music with flexible, modern sensibilities and an ear for the dramatic.

The workhorse in every "Messiah" is the chorus, and the roughly 60-member group assembled Thursday made its yoke sound easy. Whether the mood of the moment was joyous or enraged, solemn or anguished, the singers conveyed it with resonant, iridescent gusto. "All We Like Sheep" and the final "Amen" registered every bit as deeply as the majestic "Hallelujah" Chorus.

Great was this company on the technical front as well. No matter that Handel's writing for chorus in

"Messiah" is notoriously florid and often highly complex contrapuntally. The group prepared by Porco negotiated it all with poise, sustaining buoyancy, luminous textures, and a sense of theatricality. None who heard "And He shall purify" or "He trusted in God" Thursday will soon forget the experience.

The orchestra, too, played its part beautifully. The small force led by Porco proved a deft, articulate ensemble, offering a lovely overture and interlude and supplying the chorus and guest vocalists with gentle, nuanced support. Principal keyboardist Joela Jones was an animated presence at the harpsichord and principal trumpet Michael Sachs joined bass-baritone Timothy Jones in a vivid (though somewhat unbalanced) evocation of the resurrection.

The guest vocalists were perfectly satisfactory. All four were attractive and equal to the music in technical matters, but only one, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, was truly stellar. She, in fact, was the complete package, a voice agile and forceful, spacious and laden with emotion. Whether proclaiming "good tidings to Zion" or distilling the anguish of Christ's rejection, she was a poignant medium.

Soprano Yulia Van Doren was a close second. Musically, one couldn't have asked for an instrument of greater



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purity or suppleness, or a more tasteful flair for ornamentation. This listener, however, wished at times for a bolder, more emphatic interpretation.

That opinion applied to Jones and tenor John Tessier as well. To the score's lyrical and plaintive dimensions, both were uniquely well suited, and both soared smoothly and decisively through even the most intricate of passages. Neither, though, succeeded in mustering ferocity or

conjuring the mystery their music often calls for.

But these are quibbles. On the whole, this is a worthy performance no lover of Handel or great choral music will want to miss. "Messiah," in terms of subject matter, may align best with Easter, but in terms of Christmas music offered this year by the Cleveland Orchestra, this is surely the program to behold.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



November 22, 2014

Alsop, BSO deliver a riveting program of Bernstein and Beethoven

By Tim Smith

Leonard Bernstein spent a good deal of time confronting age-old existential questions of life, religion, identity. He was determined to discover definitive meaning and purpose. But, as the famed conductor-composer wrote in 1960, "I have two answers to everything and one answer to nothing."

In much of his music, Bernstein can be heard wrestling with himself, the equivalent of Tevye in "Fiddler on the Roof" constantly considering "on the other hand" possibilities. Two examples can be found on a rewarding Baltimore Symphony Orchestra program conducted by Marin Alsop.

Symphony No. 1, a 1940s work subtitled "Jeremiah," suggests a struggle to believe in God and keep any faith in humankind. The enraged voice of the prophet — the finale contains excerpts from the Book of Lamentations, intoned by a mezzo-soprano — decries a myopic world losing its way.

The "Chichester Psalms," commissioned in the 1960s by England's Chichester Cathedral, contain its share of warning and worry. But Bernstein tilts the argument this time toward the side of hope, seeing a chance for "brethren to dwell together in unity."

On Friday night at Meyerhoff Symphony

Hall, Alsop approached both compositions with great sensitivity, tapping deeply into the emotion and poetry of each.

"Jeremiah," being recorded at this weekend's concerts for a set of Bernstein symphonies that will be issued on the Naxos label, received a taut, engrossing account.

The conductor drew a dark sound and vivid phrasing from the BSO in the opening "Prophecy" movement. The subsequent "Profanation" passage emerged with a seductive charm (Bernstein makes misbehaving sound like a lot of fun).

The finale benefited from the riveting contributions of soloist Jennifer Johnson Cano. Her deep, velvety mezzo and impassioned phrasing gave Jeremiah's warnings such startling immediacy that I wouldn't have been surprised to see people in the hall ducking under their seats. Alsop shaped the concluding orchestral measures emerged with a particularly poignant power.

Throughout "Jeremiah," the BSO demonstrated admirable clarity and cohesion, as it did in the "Chichester Psalms." Alsop had that score's jazzy bits crackling wonderfully and gave the



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lyrical side considerable expressive nuance.

Except for a few uneven balances, the Cathedral Choral Society from Washington National Cathedral delivered the psalm texts with admirable polish, not to mention character.

The singing by boy soprano Nolan Musslewhite in the 23rd Psalm was notable for its purity of tone and simplicity of expression. He won an extra roar from the audience during the bows.

Alsop balanced the two works by Bernstein, her mentor and friend, with Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, the last piece he conducted before his death in 1990. That performance was notable for Bernstein's broad tempos and weighty

phrasing; Alsop's was notable for uplifting drive and a contagious sense of joy.

The conductor did ease up on the propulsion to let the second movement's bittersweet quality emerge tellingly. Everything else bounded along to terrific effect, reaching a downright rip-snorting level in the finale, and Alsop's keen attention to little shifts of dynamics ensured expressive variety along the way.

The opening chord could have been cleaner, but the orchestra went on to deliver extraordinarily polished, high-voltage playing. No wonder there were so many smiles onstage afterward. Lots of smiles in the house, too.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The Boston Globe

September 8, 2014

Hearing a voice on the rise: Jennifer Johnson Cano

By David Weininger

Every so often, a concertgoer has a chance to encounter special performers in close quarters, before their career has propelled them exclusively into larger venues. Such was the case at Saturday's concert by the outstanding young mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano, with her husband, Christopher Cano, at the piano. The recital, in the Electric Earth Concerts series, took place in tiny Bass Hall.

The intimacy of the room offered a magnified picture of Jennifer Johnson Cano's gifts. Her voice is radiant and intense, rich in the lower part of her range, bright and precise at the top, with astonishing evenness throughout. For such a commanding singer she also cuts a remarkably approachable persona on stage, and has an uncanny ability to discern and embody the character of each song.

The concert's sole drawback was that the power of her voice, along with her husband's occasionally strident accompaniment, overwhelmed the small room at times. After a selection of Canteloube's "Songs of the Auvergne," I left the third row for the back of the hall, where the sound was less overpowering and could be better appreciated.

The Cantaloube was the opening of a program divided neatly between folk and art songs. The boundaries between these are fluid, as was apparent from

Cantaloube's florid and sophisticated piano writing, which Christopher Cano managed with aplomb. Jennifer Johnson Cano brought to her singing a natural sense of drama and wit that never became trite. Similar flashes of nonchalance were strewn through de Falla's "Seven Popular Spanish Songs," along with a smoldering sense of anger in the final "Polo." But the deepest impression was left by "Asturiana," a melancholy song whose subject is sorrow itself. Here Cano seemed to cast aside vocal shadings and reveal something steely and pure. The effect was devastating.

Alternating with these were two sets of songs for voice, piano, and viola, with Electric Earth codirector Jonathan Bagg joining the duo. Brahms made this combination famous in his Two Songs, Op. 91, although Saturday's performance seemed somewhat unpolished, the balances often askew. More successful were three songs by Frank Bridge. The freighted texts ask after memory, life, and death, and Cano managed to invest each word with consequence without losing her immaculate sense of phrasing.

The two streams came together in Dvorak's "Gypsy Songs," in which approachability and refinement exist in equilibrium. Over her husband's muscular accompaniment, Cano



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unleashed the full dynamic range of her voice, from the sentimentality of “Songs My Mother Taught Me” to the tempestuousness of “May the Falcon’s Wings.” There was a glorious sense of abandon at the end.

The pair offered a bittersweet encore, John Jacob Niles’s “Go ’way From My Window.” Cano brought the same elegance and honesty that distinguished everything that came before.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

A PUBLICATION OF THE METROPOLITAN OPERA GUILD
OPERA NEWS

January 2014

Jennifer Johnson Cano & Christopher Cano

By Judith Malafronte

On October 25, Jennifer Johnson Cano brought commanding artistry to a recital of largely twentieth-century works, along with a Schubert set she delightfully described as seasonally appropriate spooky music. With husband Christopher Cano at the piano, Johnson Cano filled Weill Recital Hall with a luscious sound that was always in service to musical and dramatic expression.

The duo leapt into four songs by Erich Korngold that showcased the mezzo-soprano's wide-ranging, resonant voice and brilliant top notes in the dipping, stretching lines of "Sterbelied" and the surging "Das eilende Bächlein." Johnson Cano's own program translations highlighted her expressive, wrenching confession in "Mond, so gehst du wieder auf," while an alert harmonic ear enlivened "Alt-Spanisch," a folk-song-inspired piece from an Errol Flynn swashbuckler film.

Johnson Cano's story-telling skills are irresistible, and it's refreshing that she takes vocal risks in putting a song across. Delicate effects toward the top of her range are occasionally hit-and-miss, and controlling long-breathed lines seems to be a work in progress, but Cano lives and communicates each moment of a song brilliantly, making these quibbles minor matters.

Poulenc's *Banalités* suits Johnson Cano to a tee, and while the lethargic smoker of "Hôtel" seemed too innocent and

active, both artists handled the waltzy "Voyage à Paris" and especially "Sanglots" expertly.

Schubert's "Der Tod und das Mädchen," "Der Zwerg" and "Erlkönig" were perfect vehicles for Johnson Cano's narrative naturalness and coloristic use of her beautifully projected voice. Death comes in a different guise in each song, and Johnson Cano's charming, youthful voicing of the Erlkönig's lines, in contrast with the initially pompous father and the anxious child, was particularly terrifying. At the piano, Cano's virtuosity found myriad colors and textures to propel each story.

In contrast to her sunny stage manner, Johnson Cano seems drawn to the darker side of songs; she digs from a place deep within, bringing complexity and depth where it might not be expected. This was especially true of her startlingly raw, deeply felt interpretation of the second encore, John Jacob Niles's "Go away from my window." Dreaminess and pain united in Britten's "Corpus Christi Carol," while she eloquently captured the moment as well as its implications in Vaughan Williams's delicate "Silent noon."

A Russian set, especially Rachmaninoff's "Spring Waters," brought out Johnson Cano's gleaming top and glamour phrasing, with Cano again providing magnificent color and drama at the piano.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERA NEWS

May 17, 2014

The Cunning Little Vixen

By Alan Montgomery



Professionally performed opera has returned to Cleveland! For Ohio's north-coast city this is important news. The opera was *The Cunning Little Vixen* (Příhody lišky Bystroušky) by Leos Janáček, presented by the Cleveland Orchestra on May 17 (and continuing through May 24) in a multimedia production devised by Yuval Sharon that gave stellar new meaning to the term "concept opera."

Vixen does not rise to the shattering climaxes of some of Janáček's other operas, but the work is incredibly

beautiful. Janáček created his own libretto for *Vixen*, and his score follows the natural rhythm of the Czech language particularly brilliantly. Those rhythms, however, are quite different from other Western languages, and many singers (and instrumentalists) have difficulty assimilating them. The orchestral colors are a feast for an ensemble of caliber, and Cleveland Orchestra rose to the challenge of this fascinating score superbly. The music that closes Act II was spectacular, with the choirs stationed throughout the balconies in Severance Hall. The three



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act opera was given with no intermissions.

In *Vixen*, animal characters converse with each other and with human characters as well. Ideally, these conversations should blend seamlessly, somewhat like a Walt Disney cartoon. Cleveland Orchestra's production actually takes a major step toward Disney by employing a digitally-animated scenic and dramatic concept. The front of the stage held the sizeable orchestra and the back of the stage had a wrap-around screen (in three panels) on which the animation was projected and through which singers put their heads (much like the carnival cut-outs of old) and sang, some with half-masks to give them their animal snouts and ears. The human characters acted on a small stage in front of that screen. That is what it was it looked like, but nothing can adequately describe the effect of the concept. The drawing style was something akin to well-illustrated children's books. The projections moved from panel to panel, somewhat like the old Cinerama projections, but the images seemed almost three-dimensional. The mosquito flew at the audience, becoming huge as it looked at us. It was these delightful touches that kept the audience totally engrossed. A human portraying a dog, scratching because of fleas, would lack humor, but in animation, it was clever and not distracting in the least. The famous scene in which the foxes wooed one another became a feast for the eyes while the orchestra bathed us with the stirring music. Even the curtain calls showed ingenuity, particularly when an animated Franz Welser-Möst took his bow, the real conductor placing his head through the appropriate hole in the screen.

Animation for the production was by Bill Barminski and Christopher Louie of the Walter Robot Studios; projection and lighting design by Jason Thompson; and

costumes and makeup were by Closs-Farley, all held together by Sharon's inspired stage direction. Welser-Möst led the Cleveland Orchestra in a tight rendition of the work: animation and music stayed together miraculously well. The cast was headed by Martina Jankova as the Vixen "Sharp Ears." The Czech soprano's voice soared through the high music seemingly with no effort, and she sounded completely committed to the text and her character. Bass-baritone Alan Held sang the Forester to perfection. His final scene was filled with the kind of humanity Janáček must have envisioned. The Fox was Jennifer Johnson Cano, who also assailed the high register easily. Her scene with Sharp Ears was always engaging and never just cute. Raymond Aceto sang and acted Haraschta (the poacher) quite well; animations helped clarify the action here, as Haraschta prepared to trap and then shoot Sharp Ears. Julie Boulianne sang Dog with great charm. Dashon Burton was both the Parson and Badger; his full bass-baritone could be easily heard, and he actually kept the priest a dimensional character. Tenor David Cangelosi, who was the Schoolmaster and the Mosquito, built the drunken scene (aided by projections that produced mild vertigo in the audience) to a beautiful climax.

Local singers, many of whom have sung major roles in Opera Cleveland and other local opera productions, filled out the cast, among them Brian Keith Johnson, who sang the Innkeeper with firm and vibrant tone, and Marian Vogel who took on several characters, memorably the Chief Hen and the Blue Jay. The involved singing of the Cleveland Orchestra Chamber Chorus and Cleveland Orchestra Children's Chorus filled Severance Hall. The capacity audience gave the production an immediate well-deserved standing ovation. Bravos were numerous — as were a few expressions of "Wow."

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The New York Times

May 3, 2011

Virginia Woolf's Words, a Singer's Voice

By Zachary Woolfe



Jennifer Johnson Cano The mezzo-soprano, accompanied by Christopher Cano on piano, at Merkin Hall.

"At intervals some emotion broke in." This astringent line, about Thomas Hardy's funeral, is from the diary of Virginia Woolf, and also from Dominick Argento's classic 1974 song cycle, "From the Diary of Virginia Woolf."

When the line was sung by the young mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano on Monday evening at Merkin Concert Hall, no observation could have seemed further from the truth. Emotion — not over-the-top sentiment, but true, sincere emotion — suffused every

moment of her eloquent, impassioned New York debut recital.

She met with elegance and confidence all the challenges of a varied program, presented under the auspices of Young Concert Artists. Her voice was full and even but with a tantalizing flinty core. She summoned a radiant calm for "Alto Giove" from Nicola Porpora's 1735 opera, "Polifemo," accompanied by her husband, the pianist Christopher Cano. In Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer" she captured the potent mixture of rage and



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sadness at the end of “I Have a Gleaming Knife” and soared with ease into the final section of “The Two Blue Eyes of My Beloved.” She brought to the cycle’s complex, multipart songs a sense of structure and scale, a way of guiding you through their architecture.

With long, flowing red hair and an open face that registers the slightest shift of feeling, Ms. Johnson Cano, who comes from St. Louis and is in the Metropolitan Opera’s young artists program, conjures a vision of the heartland, even the frontier. When she sat on a low stool next to the excellent harpist Gwyneth Wentink for Ravel’s “Five Popular Greek Melodies,” she had the intimate, conversational quality of singing by the fireside.

Ms. Johnson Cano is effortlessly likable, but in both her voice and her manner there is also a hint of something steely, even intimidating. She has the qualities Joan Didion ascribed to people with self-respect: “a certain toughness, a kind

of moral nerve; they display what was once called character.” Character — individuality, a taste for risk — is the attribute some find lacking in young American singers, but Ms. Johnson Cano has it: an honesty and assurance so impressive that you want to call it bravery.

Hers is better than a good voice; it’s an interesting one. It’s not a perfect voice, at least not yet. She can lose control at the top of her range, where her tone sometimes becomes whitened and pressured.

But in the Virginia Woolf cycle she was extraordinary, rising to the lyrical heights of “Fancy (February 1927)” and “Parents (December 1940).” In 1919 Woolf wrote that her goal for her diary was “something so elastic that it will embrace anything,” words Ms. Johnson Cano sang with hope and a premonition of melancholy. Those words are also the perfect description of this singer’s own prodigious, exciting talent.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

San Diego Story

August 22, 2013

Bach and Brahms: Songs of Faith and Songs of Love at SummerFest

By Ken Herman

La Jolla SummerFest's Bach and Beyond III program (Wednesday, Aug. 21) drafted the human voice to consider both the trials of love and the trials of faith. Love was ably represented by Johannes Brahms' effulgent song cycle "Neues Liebeslieder Walzer," Op. 65, and faith was covered by J. S. Bach's Sacred Cantata No. 99, "Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan."

For consolation from those proverbial slings and arrows of love, Brahms turned to European folk wisdom and the poetry of Goethe. Not surprisingly, for spiritual consolation Bach turned to the flinty theology imbedded in a Lutheran chorale. For its quartet of robust voices to carry out these ministrations, SummerFest turned to the Metropolitan Opera's roster of up-and-coming singers.

And what a quartet of singers! Last week we heard mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano brilliantly illumine John Harbison's new song cycle "Crossroads," so it was no surprise that she mined the dramatic subtext of a Bach recitative with flare (and opulent German!). Nor was it astonishing in her "Liebeslieder" solos that she moved from temptress to shy maiden with aplomb, her warm, freely-produced voice always hinting that there is much more power in reserve, should the occasion warrant it. Carmen, Amneris—watch out for this mezzo!

Tenor Matthew Plenk, a spitfire with a

ringing top range, tore into his Brahms' solos in full operatic armor, yet proved he could successfully navigate the craggiest vocal line in his Bach Cantata aria. When the vocal quartet sang together, it was his voice that gave the ensemble vibrancy. Haeran Hong, an assured Mozartean soprano, proved a more contained soloist, yet it was easy to admire the seamless flow of her voice throughout the compass of her range. Singing with Cano, she held her own, and the two singers made their Bach Cantata duet enchanting, even though its text was didactic and utterly charmless.

Evan Hughes' edgy bass-baritone displayed bite and snarl. Add that vocal quality to his height and dark complexion, and I predict that opera directors will be lined up outside his door eager to sign him up for those many Satanic roles with which the repertory is blessed.

Providing the vocalists luxurious and deftly appointed support in the Brahms, pianists Joseph Kalichstein and Orion Weiss gave the composer his due. Piano four-hand can easily become turgid, but these performers kept their touch light and textures immaculate.

Conducting Bach Cantata No. 99 from the harpsichord, Michael Beattie rolled chords for the recitatives, but otherwise used his hands to keep his forces together rather than realizing all the bass lines on the harpsichord. Strings from the SummerFest roster along with



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flute soloist Catherine Ransom Karoly and oboist Peggy Pearson gave a cogent account of Bach's effusive instrumental score, while Krishan Oberoi's Sacra/Profana choir sang the cantata's opening and closing movements. Well-disciplined and articulate, the 16 voices of Sacra/Profana produced a powerful, Nordic sonority, responding adroitly to Beattie's precise direction and his odd crescendos at cadences.

Bach's Cantata No. 99 brought SummerFest's annual single-composer series within the festival to a resounding climax, although I must add that Sherwood Auditorium is one of the last San Diego venues in which I expected to hear a Bach sacred cantata.

Beattie also presided over J. S. Bach's Concerto in A Major for Oboe d'Amore, BWV 1055, with Pearson again as soloist and members of the Linden String Quartet and bassist Nico Abondolo supporting her. This concerto proved unusually sunny for the Leipzig maestro, and Pearson turned out those endless, serpentine solo lines with great finesse.

Abondolo, who also supplied the contrabass line for the Bach Cantata, always proves miraculous in his supporting role, a part of Baroque performance that is easily overlooked. A SummerFest regular since the earliest years of the festival, Abondolo is one of the most inventive and eloquent bassists I have experienced in nearly four decades of reviewing. Bravo!

Pianists Kalichstein and Weiss opened this concert with Claude Debussy's two-piano arrangement of Robert Schumann's "Six Canonic Etudes," Op. 56. Originally written for piano with a pedal clavier, these etudes are sometimes played by organists because that is the only extant instrument that parallels the now extinct pedal piano. I say organists *occasionally* perform selections from Op. 56 because they are innocuous, to say the least. Although Kalichstein and Weiss lavished great care and solid technique on these mellifluous etudes, I still think they are just this side of soporific.

Jennifer Johnson Cano **The New York Times**

February 14, 2013

At New York Philharmonic, a Night to Celebrate China

Philharmonic, Led by Long Yu, Salutes China at Fisher Hall
By Vivien Schweitzer



New York Philharmonic The singer Yan Wang performing a Beijing opera excerpt as part of a Chinese New Year celebration at Avery Fisher Hall.

Doomsayers have long proclaimed the demise of classical music, although given the myriad high-quality concerts almost every night in New York, it seems the genre must be dying elsewhere. The graveyard is certainly not in China, which has seen a surge of interest in Western classical music in the last decade. The New York Philharmonic has

paid tribute in recent years to this enthusiasm with a gala event celebrating the Chinese New Year.

On Tuesday evening at Avery Fisher Hall festively attired patrons, including women in long red dresses, were serenaded with traditional and contemporary Chinese music. Long Yu conducted the Philharmonic, some of whose members were wearing brightly



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colored outfits instead of the usual black, in an energetic rendition of the lively opening selection, Li Huanzhi's lyrical folk-infused "Spring Festival Overture."

Hsin-Mei Agnes Hsu, host of a History Channel series about China, spoke briefly about the ensuing pieces, which included "Der Einsame im Herbst" ("The Solitary Person in Autumn") by Mahler, from "Das Lied von der Erde" ("The Song of the Earth"), in which Jennifer Johnson Cano wielded her dark-hued mezzo to expressive effect as the soloist. In this cycle Mahler set German translations of texts from a book called "The Chinese Flute," the same poems that the composer Ye Xiaogang used for his own cycle, also called "The Song of the Earth" (2005). Mr. Ye, vice president of the Central Conservatory of Music in Beijing, told The China Daily that "while Mahler's work is full of disillusion and agnosticism, my work is more of a liberated attitude toward life." The soprano Ying Huang was the soloist in "Imitation of Old Poem: Long Autumn Night," the third of its six movements.

The jazz pianist Herbie Hancock joined the Philharmonic for Chen Qigang's "Er

Huang" for piano and orchestra (2009). Mr. Chen said he had found it hard to write for the piano, which lacks the microtonal intervals integral to Chinese music. "It is far more difficult for a person from the East to express his feelings on the piano than on the violin or on wind instruments," he has said. The most rewarding element of the introspective and somewhat bland work, based on a Beijing opera, was Mr. Hancock's improvised cadenza, a free-spirited virtuosic whirlwind.

The expressive facial expressions and stylized movements of the singer Yan Wang, clad in an ornate costume, helped convey the story of a woman stood up by her lover in selections from "The Drunken Concubine," a traditional Beijing opera.

The evening finished on a vivid note with a performance by the Snow Lotus Trio, a folk ensemble featuring three sisters from a Tibetan region of Sichuan Province. Dressed in traditional outfits with fur hats, their impassioned, high-pitched vocalizing proved arresting in songs of Tibetan vistas and young romance.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The New York Times

October 25, 2012

A Mass to Console in Troubled Times Like Haydn's, Like Ours

Kent Tritle and Musica Sacra in Haydn's 'Lord Nelson' Mass

By Vivien Schweitzer

Haydn's "Mass for Troubled Times" seems a fitting work for these tense pre-election weeks. Also known as the "Lord Nelson" Mass, Haydn wrote it in 1798 shortly after Horatio Nelson defeated Napoleon at the Battle of the Nile. Haydn composed the work without winds, since Nikolaus II, Prince Esterhazy, his patron, had dismissed the wind players in the court retinue because of financial woes.

Kent Tritle, one of New York's busiest choral conductors, led the Musica Sacra Chorus and Orchestra in an exemplary rendition of the mass at Alice Tully Hall on Monday evening. The choir sang with beautifully shaped phrasing and dynamics throughout, sounding particularly lovely in the Sanctus.

The soprano Susanna Phillips and the mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano were the radiant soloists in the work. In vocal elegance and expressivity, the women outshone the men soloists, the bass Charles Perry Sprawls and the tenor John Tiranno.

Ms. Phillips, who will sing Donna Anna in "Don Giovanni" at the Metropolitan

Opera this season, also offered an exquisite performance of Mozart's "Exsultate, jubilate," essentially a concerto for vocal soloist. Singing with agile coloratura and impressive high notes, she shaded phrases with myriad colors and imbued this showpiece with an intimate intensity. Mr. Tritle seemed genuinely thrilled as he gazed at Ms. Phillips as she took her bows to enthusiastic applause.

Anna Shelest brought a fiery sensibility and warm touch to the piano solo opening of Beethoven's "Choral Fantasy," whose theme evokes the famous melody of his Ninth Symphony, composed 16 years later. Soloist and orchestra collaborated effectively for an energetic rendition that highlighted the improvisatory character of the work.

This fantasy is often derided as second-rate Beethoven, especially in light of the far superior Ninth Symphony. But the esteemed British musicologist Donald Francis Tovey took a more favorable view, asking, "Why should one not feel kindly to the child who is father to such a man?"



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Jennifer Johnson Cano

OPERA NEWS

September 2012

Mozart's Mass in C Minor

NEW YORK CITY

Alan Gilbert & The New York Philharmonic, New York Choral Artists

By Fred Cohn

Anyone who left at intermission of the New York Philharmonic's June 20 all-Mozart concert might well have decided the orchestra and its music director, Alan Gilbert, have no business performing the works of this particular composer. The Philharmonic's members may be among the world's best instrumentalists, but in the Piano Concerto No. 22, they didn't band together in a focused corporate effort. The marvelous work of the soloist, Emanuel Ax, gave the performance shape, buoyancy and purpose. But the orchestral playing was slack and even tentative.

The orchestra's work in the program's major offering, the Mass in C Minor, was on a different plane altogether. The reading was taut and muscular, but not at the expense of the work's considerable lyricism. Although this was by no means an exhibition of historically informed practice, the transparent orchestral textures suggested that the musicians have listened attentively to the efforts of their early-music peers. Joseph Flummerfelt's New York Choral Artists, wonderfully precise and well-tuned, exhibited a similar clarity, the inner voices always manifestly a component of the aural picture.

The roster of vocal soloists put an accent on youth, with four singers all in the first years of their professional careers. Jennifer Zetlan took the first soprano part. She is a vivid performer in contemporary opera, but she was curiously lackluster here. On the opera stage, Zetlan's lively presence and sharp pointing of text carry the day. But this assignment demands an almost abstract kind of beauty, and Zetlan's voice didn't have the warmth or the range of color to deliver it.

Although the Mass's other female role is listed as "Soprano II," it was here taken by a mezzo, Jennifer Johnson Cano. Her fresh, fruity tone was a pleasure to hear; so was her effervescent phrasing. She rather gilded the lily with her "joyful" deportment in the Laudamus Te movement: the smile in her voice so completely expressed the sentiment that no special gestural emphasis was needed. The male soloists have much less to do in this piece, but the "Quoniam tu solus" trio displayed the bracing clarity of Paul Appleby's tenor, and baritone Joshua Hopkins delivered his brief contribution to the Benedictus with the authority of a veteran.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano **The New York Times**

December 19, 2011

Just Wait Until You See What's on the Menu

By Steve Smith



Hansel and Gretel, featuring Aleksandra Kurzak, center, as Gretel, is at the Metropolitan Opera.

From my seat on the aisle in the orchestra section at the Metropolitan Opera House I saw only one family get up and leave during the third act of Engelbert Humperdinck's "Hansel and Gretel" at its season premiere on Friday night. That seemed noteworthy because onstage, in a kitchen filled with lost children baked into gingerbread, a frumpy, gluttonous witch was compelling a little girl to help fatten her brother for the oven, between unsubtle hints that the girl was destined for the same fate.

Brrr. Grimm's fairy tales are hardly kids'

stuff: a point that Humperdinck's buoyantly luscious music, Adelheid Wette's slightly softened libretto and David Pountney's quippy English translation don't disguise. Richard Jones, the director, cleverly based his imaginative 2007 production around the relatable notion of gnawing hunger; two acts set in kitchens frame a central scene set in a haunted forest that magically transforms into a whimsical dining room.

That second act, with its animated trees, pudding-faced chefs and dignified fish waiter, probably held the most charm for the scores of children on hand. A

cheer also went up when the Witch — played to the hilt by the tenor Robert Brubaker — was booted into her own oversize oven in the end.

You had the sense that the cast knew its audience well. The mezzo-soprano Kate Lindsey, as Hansel, and the soprano Aleksandra Kurzak, as Gretel, sang beautifully and well. The Polish-born Ms. Kurzak's lightly accented English earned mostly top marks.

But it was the way these singers inhabited their roles physically that made this show such a joy. Ms. Kurzak flitted around the stage with endearing gracelessness: part childhood ballet training, part unsteady ankles. Ms. Lindsey, lean and long-limbed, affected a boyishly gangly clamber and sprawl, her dance moves often suggesting a pubescent riff on Elvis Presley.

Michaela Martens was a rash but sympathetic Gertrude, the siblings' overwrought mother; Dwayne Croft was a virile Peter, their father. Jennifer Johnson Cano, hidden behind the Sandman's wizened mask and hunched stature, sang with her characteristic luster. Ashley Emerson, a late substitute as the Dew Fairy, was pert and charming if sometimes difficult to hear. In the last

act the Met's children's chorus sang with focus and spirit.

Down in the pit another kind of fairy tale was unfolding: Robin Ticciati, a baby-faced British conductor recently named music director of the Glyndebourne Festival Opera, had an impressive Met debut. At 28, Mr. Ticciati is among the youngest maestros to work at the Met: Thomas Schippers holds the record for his debut at 25; James Levine began just a few weeks shy of his 28th birthday.

Compared by some critics to Gustavo Dudamel for his youth and his mop of tousled black hair, Mr. Ticciati is closer in demeanor to his chief mentors, sharing something of Simon Rattle's lucidity and Colin Davis's poise. Here he found exactly the right balance between the clotted-cream richness of Humperdinck's Wagnerian inheritance and the soufflé-light airiness that much of this particular work demands.

The audience — the children, especially — ate it all up.

"Hansel and Gretel," which will be repeated on Wednesday, runs through Jan. 7 at the Metropolitan Opera, Lincoln Center; (212) 362-6000, metopera.org.

Jennifer Johnson Cano

The Washington Post

April 12, 2011

Mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano's talent has depth

By Cecelia H. Porter

Those who missed Monday's recital by the young mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano at the Kennedy Center Terrace Theater lost a rare opportunity to hear a fine talent with a promising future right at her doorstep. She has already appeared twice with the Metropolitan Opera and will soon debut with the New York Philharmonic under Alan Gilbert.

For this final event in the season's Young Concert Artists series, Cano followed Nicola Porpora's "Alto Giove" from his opera "Polifemo" with Mahler's "Songs of a Wayfarer," Ravel's "Cinq Melodies Populaires Grecques" and Dominick Argento's "From the Diary of Virginia Woolf." With the first notes of Porpora's ultra-baroque homage to Jove, it was obvious that Cano has a voluminous voice with remarkable agility in her higher range and a molten contralto quality lower down, gliding between these registers with seeming ease. Trills and other melodic embellishments were controlled yet supple.

Cano knows how to gauge tone quality to match Mahler's multi-layered emotional depths: acid irony, bitter resentment and optimism gone sour. Some may have wished for the luminous orchestral setting that Mahler originally intended, but pianist Christopher Cano, the mezzo's husband, captured Mahler's despair and nostalgic longing for nature's beauties with a thousand gradations of touch. Ravel's settings of Greek folk songs transport the listener to a far different realm, and Cano delivered a full measure of the songs' rapture tinged with sadness.

The concert ended with Woolf's pathos cast in Argento's 20th-century expressionist atonality. Cano transformed his anguished song cycle into high drama fit for the opera stage. Her sweeping gestures, expansive dynamic range and myriad tonal colors reflected Woolf's most intimate confessions, giving them an immediacy directly felt throughout the theater. It's a pity that the house was only half-full.



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Disc Reviews

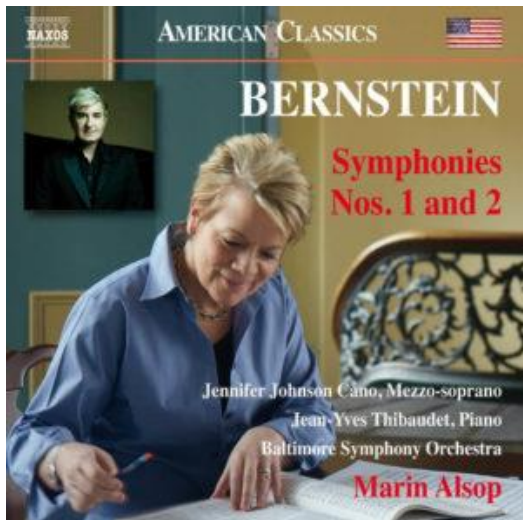
Jennifer Johnson Cano

GRAMOPHONE
THE CLASSICAL MUSIC MAGAZINE

March 2, 2017

BERNSTEIN Symphonies Nos 1 & 2

By Edward Seckerson



A disc of two halves, for sure: a somewhat sober “Jeremiah” and a scintillating “Age of Anxiety”. Perhaps there is simply no reply to Bernstein’s feverish intensity in both his recordings of the former; the latter, of course, has the poetic Jean-Yves Thibaudet as protagonist and he is very much a chip off the Bernstein block. There’s a chemistry, too, with Marin Alsop that is tangible throughout.

Both pieces deal with self-doubt – or if you prefer, a crisis of faith – in differing ways, though the First Symphony’s self-confidence could hardly have been greater, asserting itself for all to hear just months after Bernstein’s unexpected but sensational New York Philharmonic debut in 1943. A double whammy. Its rather filmic immediacy requires a degree of abandon and assurance in the way it is delivered and my impression of this performance with

Alsop’s Baltimore Symphony is one of too much objectivity – a step back from what was clearly so personal a motivation for Bernstein.

There is nothing wrong with it, per se – it unfolds with direction and dignity. But you notice something withheld at the big climaxes, not least the pulverising pedal note which moves us towards that of the first movement, and even the paganistic scherzo (notwithstanding brave trumpets) tenders a somewhat muted profanity. Jennifer Johnson Cano brings depth of tone and a noble resolve to the concluding Lamentation and just for once Lenny’s cathartic pay-off is deafeningly quiet.

Never was our innate solitude as human beings more tellingly invoked than in the two-part clarinet counterpoint which opens the Second Symphony. The inspiration for it was W H Auden’s staggeringly virtuosic poem The Age of Anxiety – a nocturnal odyssey which Bernstein ingeniously chronicles as a dark night of the soul expressed in variation form as “The Seven Ages”. But the trick of having each variation evolve from some aspect of the preceding one makes not only for a sense of “destination unknown” but a chain-reaction of new beginnings. Thibaudet is our “everyman” exhibiting great flair and resilience on the journey – with the keenest partners in Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony – and in the extraordinary and quite unexpected “Masque” where Bernstein takes a cut



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cabaret song from his first Broadway musical "On the Town" and folds it into a jazzy divertissement for piano and percussion the Frenchman, with great lightness and piquancy, has his fingers skipping across the keys like yet another dance routine for the New York based show. But it is in the work's most reflective pages at the start and towards the finish that Thibaudet unlocks the loneliness in us all. Never be deceived by his flamboyance. He is the most soulful of players. His introverted solo just prior to the work's apotheosis is just SO beautiful.

And, of course, there can be no more vivid manifestation of Bernstein's need for catharsis than the final pages anticipating as they do Marlon Brando's courageous walk into cinema history at the close of *On the Waterfront*, Bernstein's only movie score.

"The Age of Anxiety" is a cracker of a piece and this excellent performance, splendidly engineered, amplifies that view in every way. Symphonic form, like musical theatre, is always hungry for a new direction.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



March 22, 2017

Leonard BERNSTEIN (1918-1990)

Symphony No. 1 'Jeremiah' (1942) [24:14]

Symphony No. 2 'The Age of Anxiety' (1949, rev. 1965) [35:18]

Jennifer Johnson Cano (mezzo-soprano) (No. 1)

Jean-Yves Thibaudet (piano) (No. 2)

Baltimore Symphony Orchestra/Marin Alsop

rec. live, Joseph Meyerhoff Symphony Hall, Baltimore, Maryland, 21 and 23 November 2014 (No. 1), 27-28 September 2013 (No. 2) DDD

Hebrew text and English translation included

NAXOS 8.559790 [59:32]

By Leslie Wright

Leonard Bernstein's reputation as a composer rests largely on his works for the musical theatre. They have overshadowed his so-called traditionally "serious" classical compositions, such as the two symphonies on this new recording. Bernstein composed three works in the genre, all of which contain theatrical elements and cannot be considered "symphonies" in the purely formal sense. Much of his serious music has a strong basis in his Jewish heritage and faith. This includes the Symphony No. 1, the Chichester Psalms, and the Symphony No. 3 'Kaddish'. Other works have a literary or philosophical origin, such as the Symphony No. 2 and the violin concertante piece, *Serenade after Plato's Symposium*.

The Symphony No. 1, subtitled 'Jeremiah,' was Bernstein's first important work. The symphony is in three movements: *Prophecy*, *Profanation*, and *Lamentation*.

Bernstein composed the last of these first, with a text from the *Lamentations of Jeremiah*, in 1939. He later prefaced this movement with two others and

entered the composition in a competition in 1942. It did not win, but as in many such competitions, became much more famous and performed than the actual winner, Gardner Read's Symphony No. 2, which is now altogether forgotten. The 'Jeremiah' Symphony is a well-constructed work of considerable power. I think many would agree that it is the best of his symphonies and the most memorable. One can hear the later Bernstein in some of the lyrical themes in this work, while Aaron Copland is also not far away—especially in the *Lamentation* movement. *Profanation* with its jazzy rhythms sounds most like the Bernstein of the theatre and contains a beautiful, contrasting theme that could have come from one of his more famous musicals.

Bernstein made at least two recordings of the Symphony No. 1. The earlier of the two with the New York Philharmonic has remained the touchstone. Naxos issued a disc in 2004 with the New Zealand Symphony under James Judd that did honour to the symphony and was very well recorded, even if it was no substitute for Bernstein himself. That



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CD also contained a much later and weaker work, the Concerto for Orchestra 'Jubilee Games,' which is a real mishmash of styles and is structurally disjointed. Marin Alsop and the Baltimore Symphony are at least as good as Judd in the symphony and are given even better sound. She seems to find more depth in the music and the orchestra than anyone since her mentor, Bernstein. Her second movement may not be as punchy as Judd's, which is slightly swifter, but her performance has plenty of power and her orchestra is superior both in the woodwind and string departments. In fact the orchestral playing is outstanding throughout and really gives Bernstein a run for his money. I prefer Jennifer Johnson Cano to Judd's Helen Medlyn in the Lamentations of Jeremiah, though it is a close run thing. Jennie Tourel was the original soloist on Bernstein's recording and her voice is not as fulsome as either Cano's or Medlyn's. Cano can be very dramatic, as required, but then her soft singing in the second section of this movement, Chapter 1, 8, is exquisite. With superb sound, I am confident that this new recording will become my first place to go to for this wonderfully moving symphony.

I have had a harder time getting to know and appreciate Bernstein's Second Symphony. He based the work on W.H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*. As Frank K. DeWald notes in the CD booklet, Bernstein was "stunned by 'one of the most shattering examples of pure virtuosity in the history of the English language'." The composer decided to write a symphony that would parallel the structure of the 80-page poem, the theme of which is a series of conversations between three men and a woman in a New York bar. Although the symphony contains a prominent piano part, it is no way a piano concerto. The work is in two parts. Part I consists of a brief *Prologue*; a section of seven variations, *The Seven Ages*; and another

such section, *The Seven Stages*. Each of the variations is a very short. Part II is made up of three longer movements: *The Dirge*, *The Masque*, and *The Epilogue*. The *Prologue* begins with a clarinet duet and leads by way of the flute to the solo piano and the first variation. Some of the variations recall Prokofiev (No. 4) or Shostakovich (No. 5) in their rhythmic playfulness and Britten (No. 8) in its passacaglia on a six-note theme. A passage from his Piano Concerto also comes to mind there. *The Dirge* in Part II is quite dissonant, with the piano given a tone row, but creates a positive impression. *The Masque*, which follows, is typical of Bernstein in his jazzy mode and likely the most memorable part of the work. This section is much lighter and happier than the rest of the work and owes at least a small debt to Copland's *Music for the Theatre*. The beginning of the *Epilogue* continues where the previous movement left off, but within seconds becomes dark and pensive in the strings and woodwinds before the piano enters with a melancholy theme. At one point the orchestra reaches a climax that, according to DeWald, in its "near-cinematic fervor" anticipates Bernstein's music for the film, *On the Waterfront*. Originally, the piano was absent in this section until the end, but Bernstein decided to give it a greater role in his revised version of the work.

Bernstein also recorded this symphony twice and it is his second recording, with composer Lukas Foss as pianist, which is considered definitive. I have not heard that for many years, but I doubt it is better played or recorded than this new one with Jean-Yves Thibaudet. It may take me a while to warm to this symphony, but this account has given me a greater appreciation for what the composer was attempting to accomplish. At any rate, the disc is worth its modest price for the *Jeremiah* Symphony alone and can be warmly recommended.

Jennifer Johnson Cano



January 5, 2017

Alsop Channels Bernstein In Bernstein

By David Hurwitz



Artistic Quality: 10

Sound Quality: 10

It's great to see this music being played with such conviction. We all know that Alsop is a superb Bernstein conductor, and Naxos already has a terrific account of the First Symphony from James Judd and the New Zealand Symphony, but this newcomer is, if anything, even

finer—certainly sonically—and conducted with even more pizzazz. In the central Profanation movement, Alsop really does outdo Bernstein himself; the playing of the Baltimore Symphony here is sensational, and in the finale Jennifer Johnson Cano sings with great sensitivity and a beautiful tone. The tragic climaxes hit you right in the gut.

In the Second Symphony, Jean-Yves Thibaudet offers a first class account of his solo part. The Masque is especially outstanding—virtuosic but at the same time nicely “cool.” Prior to that, in the opening variation sets, Alsop knits the music together expertly, ensuring that the glum bits never bog down, and that the entire first part builds inexorably to its exciting conclusion. The following Dirge is is a barn-burner, and somehow after all of this the Epilogue never turns hollow. Again, I don't think that Bernstein could have done better, and as suggested above the engineering is also rock solid and brilliant by turns. A marvelous release by any standard.



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Jennifer Johnson Cano



November/December 2011

Marlboro Music Festival

RESPIGHI: *Il Tramonto*; **CUCKSON:** *Spirit of the Storm*; **SHOSTAKOVICH:** *Hebrew Folk Songs*

Benita Valente, s; Jennifer Johnson, Glenda Maurice, mz; Jon Humphrey, t; Luis Battle, p; Ida Levin, Yonah Zur, v; Beth Guterman, va; Sacunn Thorsteinsdottir, vc; Zachary Cohen, db; Sarah Beatty, cl; Angela Cordell Bilger, hn; Sivan Magen, hp

Marlboro 2—62 minutes

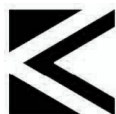
Marlboro Music Festival has put out three new releases for their 60th anniversary: this is the second. All are concert recordings, and are of very good quality. Respighi's *Tramonto* is a setting in Italian of Shelley's poem *The Sunset*, a sad poem about a young lady, Isabel, who loses her lover to death; "and that she did not die, but lived to tend Her aged father, were a kind of madness, If madness 'tis to be unlike the world". Respighi's writing (for mezzo and string quartet) is restrained for the subject matter, if you consider how turbulent it would be had a German of the time (1914) composed it. It's a slow-paced, affecting piece, and Jennifer Johnson is a treat to hear. She has a rich voice that's expressive and free of annoying quirks, and a good clear tone that's consistent up and down her range. Her diction is a little better in the Cuckson, but not bad here.

Robert Cuckson set five Yiddish poems for voice and eight instruments (clarinet, horn,

harp, string quartet, and double bass) in 2003, calling the cycle *Der Gayst Funem Shturem*; the texts come from Binem Heller's pen. The cycle is fascinating, warm and approachable, dramatic and deep, and written with intelligence. The instrumentation is unusual but supplies the perfect colors. And every time I listen to them, I'm even more impressed with Cuckson and Johnson.

Shostakovich's cycle was recorded in 1967; at the time, the only edition of the music had the text in German, and thus it is here. Valente and Maurice are stellar; Humphrey is a little too pleasant-sounding for the piece, but he's musical—and he's not too much lighter than the tenor the composer himself accompanied, Alexei Masslenikov, on a Monitor LP. Battle, the pianist, plays well; indeed, the whole cast is very polished. It's Western-sounding, but still a solid performance, and it doesn't have the Andrews Sisters-like swoops on the Monitor record. I don't know why this set isn't sung more—especially since there's a German edition available. The sound is clear, with just the right ambience; the audience is mostly quiet (and appreciative). Notes are in English, with transliterated texts and translations.

ESTEP



KIRSHBAUM
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Jennifer Johnson Cano Discography

SUPERTRAIN

8.559790 **Complicité** (Jennifer Johnson Cano, mezzo-soprano; Simone Dinnerstein, director and piano; et al.)

REFERENCE RECORDINGS

Beethoven: Symphony No. 0 (Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra; Manfred Honeck, conductor; Jennifer Johnson Cano, mezzo-soprano; Christina Landshamer, soprano; Werner Güra, tenor; Shenyang, bass-baritone; Mendelssohn Choir of Pittsburgh.)

BCMF Records

Winds of Change (Live performances of the music of Haydn, Bunch and the World Premiere of Paul Moravec's "A New Country. "Jennifer Johnson Cano, mezzo-soprano, et al.)

NAXOS

8.559790 **Bernstein Symphonies Nos. 1 & 2** (Jennifer Johnson Cano, mezzo-soprano; Jean-Yves ThiBaudet, piano; Marin Alsop, conductor; Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.)

HOWE RECORDS

2016 **A Palace Upon The Ruins** (with players of the Bridgehampton Chamber Music Festival.)

SONY CLASSICAL

88985308909 **Otello – Live in HD (DVD)** (Jennifer Johnson Cano, Meg; James Levine, conductor; Metropolitan Opera Orchestra.)

DECCA

88985308909 **Fallstaff – Live in HD (DVD)** (Jennifer Johnson Cano, Emilia; Yannick Nézet-Séguin, conductor; Metropolitan Opera Orchestra.)

SELF RELEASED

20141216 (2014) **Unaffected: Live from the Savannah Voice Festival** (with Christopher Cano, piano. Works by Canteloube, Dvořák, de Falla, and more)

DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON

- 10055653 (2012) **Twilight of the Gods – The Ultimate Wagner Ring Collection** (Conductors: James Levine, Fabio Luisi; Production: Robert Lepage; Artists: Bryn Terfel, Deborah Voigt, Stephanie Blythe, Jonas Kaufmann, Hans-Peter Konig, Jay Hunter Morris, Eric Owens, Gerhard Siegel, Eva Maria Westbroek; Orchestra: Metropolitan Opera Orchestra; Ensemble: Metropolitan Opera Chorus)
- 10055651 (2012) **Der Ring des Nibelungen (DVD)** (Conductors: James Levine, Fabio Luisi; Production: Robert Lepage; Artists: Bryn Terfel, Deborah Voigt, Stephanie Blythe, Jonas Kaufmann, Hans-Peter Konig, Jay Hunter Morris, Eric Owens, Gerhard Siegel, Eva Maria Westbroek; Orchestra: Metropolitan Opera Orchestra; Ensemble: Metropolitan Opera Chorus. *Grammy Award for Best Opera Recording*)
- 10055654 (2012) **Wagner's Dream (DVD)**

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC

- (2012) **Mozart: Piano Concerto No. 22, Mass in C Minor**
(New York Philharmonic, Alan Gilbert, Emanuel Ax, Jennifer Zetlan, Jennifer Johnson Cano, Paul Appleby, Joshua Hopkins & New York Choral Artists)
- (2011) **Mendelssohn: Elijah**
(New York Philharmonic, Alan Gilbert, New York Choral Artists, Joseph Flummerfelt, Twyla Robinson, Alice Coote, Allan Clayton, Gerald Finley, Jennifer Johnson & Benjamin P. Wenzelberg)

ST. LUKE'S COLLECTION

- (2012) **Mahler: Das Lied von der Erde**
(George Manahan, conductor; Jennifer Johnson Cano, mezzo-soprano; Paul Groves, tenor; St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble)

ARKIVMUSIC

- 80002
(2010) **Live from the Marlboro Music Festival: Respighi, Cuckson & Shostakovich**
(Ida Levin, Beth Guterman, Yonah Zur, Jennifer Johnson, Saeunn Thorsteinsdottir, Sivan Magen, Sarah Beaty, Angela Cordell Bilger, Zachary Cohen, Benita Valente, Jon Humphrey, Glenda Maurice & Luis Batlle)



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Jennifer Johnson Cano
List of Repertoire

Operatic Repertoire:

Aldridge

Sharon Falconer in *Elmer Gantry*

Barber

Erika in *Vanessa*

Bellini

Adalgisa in *Norma*

Romeo in *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*

Berlioz

Marguerite in *La damnation de Faust*

Bizet

Mercédès in *Carmen*

Carmen in *Carmen*

Britten

Kate in *Owen Wingrave*

Lucretia in *The Rape of Lucretia*

Hermia in *Midsummer Night's Dream*

Nancy in *Albert Herring*

Cavalli

Diana in *La calisto*

Donizetti

Giovanna Seymour in *Anna Bolena*

Dove

Minkswoman in *Flight*

Giordano

Bersi in *Andrea Chénier*

Gluck

Orphée in *Orphée et Eurydice*

Handel

Rinaldo in *Rinaldo*

Déjanira in *Hercules*

Heggie

Sister Helen in *Dead Man Walking*

Holst

Savitri in *Savitri*

Humperdinck

Hansel in *Hansel and Gretel*

Janacek

Sharp Eared Fox in *Cunning Little Vixen*

Varvara in *Katya Kabanova*

Massenet

Charlotte in *Werther*

Parséis in *Esclarmonde*

Mozart

Ramiro in *La finta giardiniera*

Vitellia in *La clemenza di Tito*

Sesto in *La clemenza di Tito*

Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni*

Dorabella in *Così fan tutte*

Idamante in *Idomeneo*

Offenbach

Nicklausse in *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*

Périchole in *La Périchole*

Purcell

Dido in *Dido and Aeneas*

Ruders

Offred in *The Handmaid's Tale*

Strauss

The Page in *Salome*

Komponist in *Ariadne auf Naxos*

Octavian in *Der Rosenkavalier*

Verdi

Emilia in *Otello*

Flora in *La traviata*

Meg Page in *Falstaff*

Wagner

Wellgunde in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

Waltraute in *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

Weill

Emma Jones in *Street Scene*

Orchestral Repertoire:

Adams

El Niño

Argento

Casa guidi

Bach

St. Matthew Passion

Christmas Oratorio

Mass in B Minor

Bates

Afterlife

Beethoven

Symphony No. 9

Mass in C Major

Missa solemnis

Choral Fantasy

Berg

Sieben Frühe Lieder

Berlioz

Les nuits d'été

La damnation de Faust

Bernstein

Symphony No. 1 "Jeremiah"

Brahms

Alto Rhapsody

Britten

A Charm of Lullabies

Phaedra

Spring Symphony

Bruckner

Te Deum

Canteloube

Selections from Chants d'Auvergne

Copland

Selections from Old American Songs

Durufié

Requiem

Elgar

Sea Pictures

The Music Makers

The Dream of Gerontius

Falla

Siete Canciones populares Españolas

Three Cornered Hat

Handel

Messiah

Haydn

Arianna a Naxos Hob.XXVIb:2

Nelson Mass

Liebertson

Neruda Songs

Mahler

Symphony No. 2

Symphony No. 3

Symphony No. 8

Rückert Lieder

Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen

Selections from Des Knaben Wunderhorn

Das Lied von der Erde

Mendelssohn

Elijah

Mozart

Ch'io mi scordi di te? K.505

Coronation Mass K.317

Requiem Mass K.626

Pergolesi

Stabat Mater

Ravel

Cinq melodies populaires grecques

Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé

Schéhérazade

Respighi

Il tramonto

Rossini

La regata veneziana
Stabat Mater

Schubert

Mass in G Major

Verdi

Requiem

Wagner

Wesendonck Lieder

Wolf

Kennst du das Land

Chamber Repertoire:**Berio**

Folksongs

Brahms

Vier Gesänge Opus 17
Drei Duette Opus 20
Liebeslieder Walzer Opus 52
Vier Duette Opus 61
Neue Liebeslieder Opus 65
Zwei Gesänge Opus 91
Zigeunerlieder Opus 103

Bridge

Three Songs for Mezzo, Viola and Piano

Britten

Canticle Number 2 Abraham and Isaac

Busch

Drei Lieder Opus 3a

Chausson

Chanson perpétuelle Opus 37

Cuckson

Der gayst funem shturem

Falla

Siete Canciones populares Españolas

Harbison

Crossroads

Loeffler

Four Poems Opus 5

Mahler arr. Schoenberg

Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen

Das Lied von der Erde

Ravel

Cinq Mélodies populaires grecques

Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé

Respighi

Il tramonto

Schulhoff

Drei Stimmungsbilder Opus 12

Schumann

Drei Gesänge Opus 95

Minnespiel Opus 101

Shore

A Palace Upon the Ruins

R. Strauss

Alphorn Opus 29

Song Repertoire:**Argento**

From the Diary of Virginia Woolf (Complete Cycle)

Barber

Three Songs Opus 10 (Complete Set)

Beggar's Song

There's Nae Lark

The Daises

Sure on this shining night

Berg

Sieben Frühe Lieder (Complete Set)

Berio

Quattro canzoni popolari (Complete Set)

Berlioz

Les nuit d'été (Complete Set)

Bolcolm

Amor

Over the Piano

Angels are the highest form of Virtue

Satisfaction

Brahms

8 Songs Opus 57 (Complete Set)

Verrat

Verzagen

Britten

Charm of Lullabies (Complete Set)

Corpus Christi Carol

Canteloube

L'Antouèno

Pastourelle

La delaissádo

Lou coucut

Copland

At the River

Zion's Walls

Falla

Siete Canciones populares Españolas (Complete Set)

Foster

I Dream of Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair

Oh Susanna

Beautiful Dreamer

Hard Times come again no more

Dvorak

Gypsy Songs (Complete Set)

Elgar

Sea Pictures (Complete Set)

Gavrilin

Ophelia's Songs

Gurney

Sleep

Hahn

Le Rossignol des lilas

À Chloris

Hoiby

Lady of the Harbor

Jabberwocky

Where the music comes from

Winter Song

Howells

King David

Ives

The Housatonic at Stockbridge

Dreams

The Circus Band

The Things our Father's Loved

Songs my Mother taught me

Korngold

Sterbelied

Mond, so gehst du weider auf

Das eilende Bächlein

Alt-Spanisch

Liebertson

Rilke Songs (Complete Set)

Liszt

Pace non trovo

Der du von dem Himmel bist

Oh! quand je dors

Mahler

Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen (Complete Cycle)

Rückert Lieder (Complete Set)

Selections from Des Knaben Wunderhorn

Ich ging mit Lust durch einen grünen Wald

Das Irdische Leben

Urlicht

Niles

Go 'way from my window

The Lass from the Low Countree

Poulenc

Banalités (Complete Set)

Purcell

Music for a while

Quilter

Music when soft voices die

The Lass from the Low Countree

Rachmaninoff

Spring Waters

Ravel

Five Greek Songs (Complete Set)

Rorem

The Lordly Hudson

To a Young Girl

Rossini

La regata veneziana (Complete Set)

Schubert

Auf dem Wasser zu singen

Die Forelle

Fischerweise

An die Musik

Der Tod und das Mädchen

Erlkönig

Der Zwerg

Schumann

Frauenliebe und leben (Complete Cycle)

3 Gesänge, Opus 95 (Complete Set)

Du bist die Ruh

Sviridov

The Virgin in the City

Tchaikovsky

Again, as before, alone

Vaughn Williams

Silent Noon

Wagner

Wesendonck Lieder (Complete Set)

Wolf

Mignon Lieder (Complete Set)

From the Italienisches Liederbuch

Ich hab in Penna

Schweig einmal still

Du denkst mit einem Fädchen

Wie lange schon

Mörike Lieder

Selbstgeständnis

Gesang Weyla's

An die Geliebte









