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CLASSICAL SINGER

Into the Fray
Jennifer
Johnson Cano

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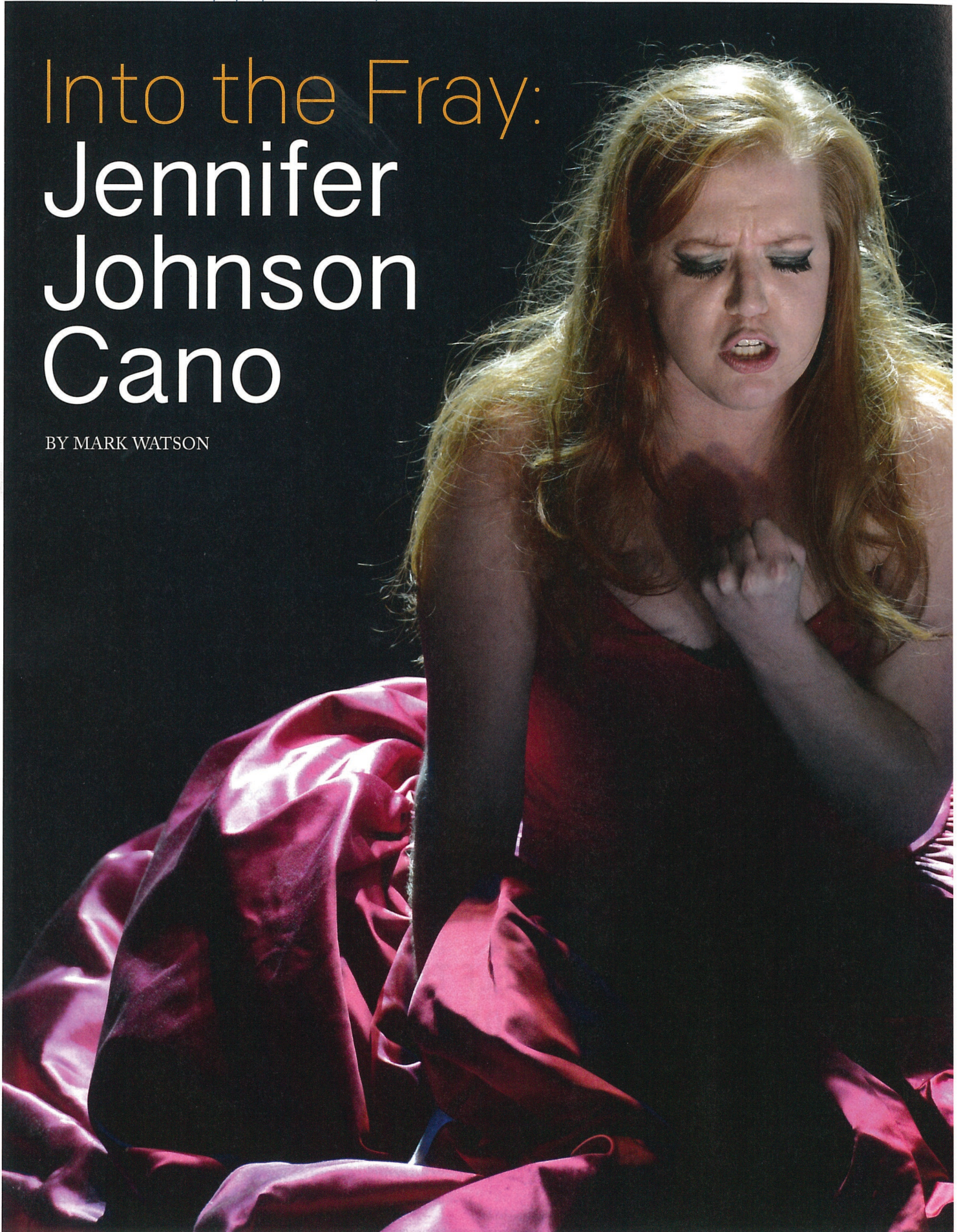
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Into the Fray: Jennifer Johnson Cano

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

Jennifer Johnson Cano and Christopher Cano's 2014 album *Unaffected*



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. ©S

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.