



LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

MEET COMPOSER JIMMY LÓPEZ

Jimmy López has been commissioned by Lyric Opera of Chicago to write the score for the opera Bel Canto. Born in Lima, Peru in 1978, he is quickly establishing himself as one of today's most original voices in contemporary classical music. Over the past several years, López's music has been garnering international attention from performances at Carnegie Hall, the Aspen Music Festival, and by the Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Baltimore, and Seattle symphony orchestras, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Symphony Orchestra of Chile, the Helsinki Philharmonic, and the National Symphony Orchestra of Peru. López recently completed an orchestral piece commissioned by Radio France, to be premiered by the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France in 2012. Jimmy López is currently based in San Francisco.

The New York Times has described López as "an expert in orchestration" and the Chicago Sun-Times declared that he is "one of the most interesting young composers anywhere today."

Q: How does *Bel Canto* lend itself to operatic treatment?

JL: This is incredibly obvious as the book is about an opera singer and it's all about how opera can redeem these people who are together! On the other hand, it's incredibly difficult because the novel is full of music from beginning to end, like a musical soundtrack. (During her captivity, soprano Roxanne Coss sings various arias by different composers to her fellow captives and the terrorists.) So the challenge is to create original music for the opera and not a pastiche of great opera arias. I will probably quote one of the really essential musical milestones, and of course, this will not be the first time this has been done in opera. But it's the delicate line we will have to draw to create our own storytelling through music.

Q: What are some of the challenges you're facing in setting this book?

JL: The story has two highs: when the terrorists storm into the house, and at the end when the military storms. The challenge is to keep the interest and the tension through the middle. We cannot forget that the characters are in a dangerous situation. They do get lost in that ideal world where Roxanne is singing and all are listening and one character even says, "Wouldn't it be lovely if we could stay here forever?"

Q: What are the first steps in creating a new opera? The 2015-16 season is closer than it seems!

JL: The first step was finding a librettist. I had a meeting with Nilo Cruz, the Cuban playwright. He wrote *Two Sisters and a Piano* about two sisters living under house arrest in Cuba. The whole play happens within the house from beginning to end. This is what made me think Nilo might be the one, that he is someone interested in pieces with political overtones.

Q: How did you find Nilo?

JL: We took a long time to find the librettist for *Bel Canto*. The composer Kaija Saariaho has said that the most important thing is the chemistry between composer and librettist for a project of this kind to succeed. The suggestion of Nilo actually came from Renée [Fleming]. I wanted to work with somebody who could understand the complexities of Latin American society, so Renée put together a list of remarkable Latino and Hispanic playwrights. As soon as I met Nilo, I knew. At our first meeting we talked nonstop from 10am-5pm! He's a wonderful person and really communicative.

Q: Do you and Nilo envision Bel Canto as a multilingual opera?

JL: Yes, Spanish, English, and Japanese. Those are the languages that the main characters speak. Plus, we are thinking of writing one aria in Quechua, the native language of Peru.

Q: Tell us how opera is perceived in Peru. Is it popular? Does it have a long tradition and history?

JL: There isn't a big Peruvian opera cultural tradition, and no house solely devoted to performing opera. Lima is a city of eight million people – Juan Diego Flórez grew up there and he is now our famous tenor.

Q: Did you listen to opera as a child?

JL: I did not grow up with opera. As a teenager, I became fascinated in my very first contact with the symphony orchestra and with all of the colors. Those were my beginnings. But I've been interested in vocal music since writing a song cycle during my studies. My teacher in Peru, Enrique Iturriaga, liked to teach *Lied* because the structure of the poem gives the composer form – a basis to work from. I wrote my first cycle of three songs for tenor and piano in 1998. It was very early and a great learning experience. I would work with each word, each phrase, each verse, and I tried to push my harmonic language. Later I wrote a cycle of songs for a wonderful singer that I met.

Q: Are there singers who particularly inspire you?

JL: Besides Renée? Cecilia Bartoli. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Thomas Hampson...If I'm writing a piece for a singer, I like to know whom I'm writing for.

Q: The soprano Danielle de Niese will be singing the role of Roxanne Coss. Do you know her work?

JL: Yes, I'm really delighted. I went to see the HD broadcast of *The Enchanted Island* at the Met and she was just startling from beginning to end. She has this very athletic, humorous presence onstage and this impeccable voice. She's a great actress with the star quality that Roxanne Coss would bring. She will have the gravitas for the role of a renowned American soprano.

It's really noble of Renée that she's giving the space for another soprano to shine. Because Renée is behind this entire project, her presence will be there!

Q: You were in Peru at the time of the hostage crisis upon which the book is based. What was that experience like?

JL: I was 17 or 18 when it happened. It was on the news all the time, and it was long: more than four months. I would drive by, and there were media from all over the world surrounding the house during the crisis.

It was an inverted Stockholm syndrome. The terrorists started falling in love with the hostages. Many of the terrorists were only teenagers. They looked up to the hostages as adult, educated, cultured people who spoke many languages. One of the most notable hostages was the minister of foreign affairs. He was the highest-ranking political figure.

A funny detail: the embassy in real life – the residence of the ambassador – is a replica of Tara, the house used in *Gone With the Wind*.

Q: When did you learn that you were selected to compose the score to *Bel Canto*? What was your reaction?

JL: I was having lunch at a Thai restaurant and I got a call from my great friend, the conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya. He said, "You have to go home right now and upload your song cycle to YouTube so Renée can hear it."

"Renée who?"

"Renée Fleming!"

"Why?"

"She's looking for a composer for a project she's doing. I recommended you."

Later I had a meeting with Renée and Sir Andrew Davis at her apartment. She explained the opera – that the characters are mostly fictional but based on real characters from real life. She didn't know I had lived through the crisis as a teenager. I thought, "This really sounds like I'm the right person to write this."

Q: Conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya is a champion of your music. When did you first work together?

JL: I met Miguel so many years ago – 1994. He quickly became the most renowned Peruvian conductor and he has been promoting South American music. He and Gustavo Dudamel are bringing a lot of exposure to this kind of music.

When I was 16 (he's ten years older than I am) he established the Lima Philharmonic, and the rehearsals were at my school. I stayed every day to listen, became the librarian, followed the score. I was so excited that I started writing for orchestra. Miguel tried one of my pieces in rehearsal and recorded it. I hadn't studied harmony, counterpoint or orchestration yet. You can imagine my score: it was messy. I wrote 110 pages! And a piano concerto, marches...

Q: Where did you get your formal training?

JL: In 1995, I finished high school and for two years before entering conservatory [National Conservatory of Music in Lima] I began taking private lessons with two composers, including Iturriaga, the patriarch of Peruvian composers. He was my guru. Sometimes our lessons started at 2pm and ended at 10pm. He told me about Stravinsky and Copland and Honegger in Paris. He taught counterpoint and harmony and he was adamant on my having a very solid base. I brought things back to basics. I didn't go back to writing for orchestra for several years.

Students are given tools first, but never have a chance to discover on their own. The way I started out really helped me. My teacher said, "You are not scared of the orchestra." I'd been writing for orchestras for so many years at this point that I was already very familiar with them.

Q: From Peru you went to...Finland?

JL: I applied to the Sibelius Academy and flew to Finland – the first time I was ever in Europe. I was the only Latin American student in the whole academy of at least a thousand students, and I even learned Finnish! Finland gives huge support to contemporary composers, and there are 25 symphony orchestras in a country of five million!

My years there were filled with lots of travel and master classes in Europe, and a very disciplined, technical approach to composition. After seven years (Bachelor's and Masters), I realized that the high modernist European aesthetic isn't me. I decided on California because

for the past 50 years or so, they have had a very peculiar, idiosyncratic approach to composition – very free. I will complete my PhD at Berkeley in May.

Q: What is your compositional approach? Do you write in a linear fashion?

JL: I don't have a single approach. In some works I start by writing a short score and then orchestrate (*Lago de Lágrimas*, for example). But in others, like *Synesthésie*, I work straight to the score. I like the latter approach because it forces me to think about timbre and instrumentation immediately.

A short score allows me to work horizontally; by this I mean that it lets me see the global picture all at once instead of getting caught up in the details.

For *Bel Canto* I will take a mixed approach but will mostly work on a short score because the form is so large that one must have a global map of the piece for it to be structurally sound.

Q: Do you compose at the piano or computer or with another instrument?

JL: I use the computer program *Finale*.

Q: What music do you listen to?

JL: I'm really into classical contemporary music. I don't listen to pop music. I like the Austrian composer: G. F. Haas, some of the works by Finnish composer Magnus Lindberg, Swedish composer Anders Hillborg, and American John Adams. My tastes are pretty diverse...eclectic the way I like music – and write music.

It's hard to take Bach off the pedestal. My first pieces were all polyphonic and probably violated 100 rules! My music has a lot of counterpoint. Sometimes I write chorales into my scores.

Q: Who are your favorite composers of opera?

JL: Mozart, I find flawless. He's my ideal opera composer. His music feels effortless and comes out naturally. Being a contemporary composer I'm fascinated by Ligeti's *Le grand macabre* for his outlandish approach and extreme vocal treatment, although I wouldn't write that way myself. Stravinsky's *Rake's Progress* is a beautiful piece from beginning to end, and *Oedipus Rex*, which is more in the realm of an oratorio. Wagner for his masterful treatment of the voice and orchestra.

Q: Had you considered writing an opera before?

JL: Yes, I've been asked twice, but the librettos didn't entice me. When I read this story, it was different. I felt I definitely had something to say.

What I like the most in opera is the unified work of art, and the capacity to carry a message through so many levels. To be capable of integrating poetry, music, literature, scenic arts...no other form has this. That is so appealing to me.

I'm also interested in making this piece – *Bel Canto* – not that difficult to be done.

It's a great honor to be part of this. I'm really happy this is happening with Lyric!

Q: Last question: Have you met Ann Patchett?

JL: Not yet!

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Click here to listen to music by Jimmy López. <http://www.jimmylopez.com/showcase>.

For a complete list of works and performances, visit www.jimmylopez.com.