



LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

**Q&A WITH RENÉE FLEMING ON CURATING A NEW OPERA FOR
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As Lyric's Creative Consultant, Renée Fleming is curating a world-premiere opera that will debut in the 2015-16 season. She recently discussed the selection process of the subject and creative team.

Q: You have chosen the novel *Bel Canto* for Lyric's opera commission. What inspires you about this book, and how does it lend itself to the stage?

RF: I imagined *Bel Canto* would work well theatrically because it's a multinational ensemble piece, which would logically take place in a unit set: the house in South America where the hostages are being held. My friend Ann Patchett often brings her characters to their highest calling, and in this particular story she creates a utopian society based on the power of music and the sense of community it creates. Most of us crave a cathartic emotional experience; we want to feel something when we're in the theater. I believe the story of *Bel Canto* has the capacity to do that. In addition, Ann's book is popular. It has sold more than a million copies and was on *The New York Times* bestseller list for months. Plus it has always been associated with opera.

Q: How did you find the composer for *Bel Canto*? This is such a plum assignment!

RF: Coming from the school of "leave no stone unturned" in my own repertoire choices, I examined the work of more than 100 composers. With *Bel Canto* specifically in mind for this commission, I ultimately decided to focus on finding someone who could evoke South America. After I narrowed the pool to a short list, I then played my choices for Sir Andrew. We were surprisingly and wonderfully on the same page in terms of our tastes and the musical direction we thought *Bel Canto* needed.

By the way, 100 composers is just a drop in the bucket – there are so many talented writers of all ages and nationalities.

Q: Why Jimmy López? This young composer is new to many of us. How would you describe his music?

RF: I was touring in Scandinavia with conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya, whom I asked specifically about Latino composers, and he suggested Jimmy López. I immediately loved the way Jimmy combines a new music aesthetic with an especially sophisticated use of orchestration. He has the aesthetic and the skill set from his terrific education in Peru, and at the Sibelius Academy in Finland. He then went to San Francisco because he wanted exposure to the California school of music to broaden his horizons. He is imaginative in his ability to find fresh colors in the orchestra, and he can immediately evoke a different place – a South American landscape, for example, as he does in *América Salvaje*.

Jimmy is also an extraordinary linguist. If you read what he writes in his blog and remember that English is a third language for him – he also speaks Finnish – one gets a sense of how serious and devoted he is to his education.

Q: Why did you ultimately decide on Nilo Cruz as your librettist?

RF: My role here was to help Jimmy, Anthony [Freud], and stage director Stephen Wadsworth compile a list of potential collaborators. The chemistry between the librettist and the composer is so important – it's a form of matchmaking. I'm excited about Nilo Cruz because he writes in a language that is already musical. My friend Carlos Armesto, who has his own theater company, Theatre C, in New York, recommended Nilo to me. Carlos is Colombian and spent a great deal of his childhood in Bogotá. Luckily, Stephen knew Nilo well enough to reach out to him.

Q: What is director Stephen Wadsworth's involvement in the creative process with the composer and librettist?

RF: Stephen has had this role often in other projects, where he's not just the director, but also the *dramaturg* – the one who helps to frame and shape the drama. Seattle Opera's *Amelia* is a recent example. I enjoyed working with Stephen on *Rodelinda* at the Met, and find him to be erudite, considerate, and thoughtful as a collaborator. Given that Jimmy is new to opera, it made sense to give him support by pairing him with an experienced director.

Q: Why wouldn't the author also draft the libretto? What special skills and qualities does a librettist bring to the table?

RF: First of all, Ann Patchett chose not to write the libretto given the demands

consistently made on her time. The librettists I've worked with in the past have told me that their job is largely about trying to figure out what *not* to write. Even when adapting a play for an opera, it's surprising how much text must be cut to make room for the music.

Q: Why aren't you singing the role of Roxanne Coss in the world premiere?

RF: It was my choice to not sing the role of Roxanne. If I were also singing in it, I would not be able to be objective in the same way. As curator of this world premiere, I find it so rewarding to be on the other side of the stage – involved in the creative process in a new capacity.

Danielle de Niese has the star quality, vocal charisma, and spunk of Roxanne. She sings beautifully, and her star is rising fast. We are fortunate to have enlisted her to premiere this work.

Q: You and Ann Patchett had not met when she wrote this book but have since become good friends.

RF: Yes, I have a long history with *Bel Canto*. Ann and I have been friends almost since the book came out eleven years ago, and I count her friendship as one of the great joys in my life. Not only is she a gifted writer, but her keen observations about people and situations make her a valuable confidante and astute judge of character. Many readers who are also opera lovers assumed that Ann had modeled the character of Roxanne Coss after me. But she didn't. We'd never met when she wrote the book, and she had never even read a profile on me. She did, however, listen to my recordings. What's fascinating to me is that she managed to create a particularly American singer in the form of Roxanne Coss – demanding and direct, and the only American in the book!

Q: What are your thoughts about contemporary composers and opera in our time?

RF: I've always tried to maintain a connection to contemporary music. I am heartened by the spirit of creativity among some of our youngest composers and their willingness to break down style and genre barriers. When commissioning new operas, I think it's important that we consider all of the changes that have occurred in music. We need to embrace not only our European tradition, but also expanded instrumentation, modern technology, contemporary theatrical values, and even some of today's popular music.

Nowhere are the challenges greater than those faced by a creative team contemplating a new opera. I've been involved in many premieres from *The Ghosts of Versailles* to *Dangerous Liaisons* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as well as many concert pieces. The

excitement of working with a composer and being able to be part of a new creation has been the most rewarding process in my career.

Q: Why is it important to be curating a new opera?

RF: Opera must evolve to stay relevant, and that evolution is dependent on new works. My career as a performer would have looked entirely different a century ago, because most of my work would have been in premieres. Ideally every opera company would make 21st-century music part of their annual presentation. We have a burgeoning audience for new music, albeit a different audience to some degree than the one that exists for grand opera.

Ultimately, however, it's the combination of the dramatic shape with the music that makes it live on. History tells us that this is a difficult formula to get right; another reason why I'd love to be in a position to help composers develop more works for the stage. Wouldn't it be great, for instance, if composers could both revise their work and have the opportunity to compose more than one opera?

Q: What is your wildest dream for this world premiere?

RF: Anyone who puts their heart and soul into creating a new work, and most especially in music's most challenging, long, and complex form – opera – dreams of a work of art that will survive. That's why our music is labeled classical. It has become classic because people still enjoy it years and even centuries later.

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