



Director
**FRANÇOIS
GIRARD**
stages the Met's
new *Fliegende
Holländer*.

By Adam Wasserman

PORTRAIT OF A DIRECTOR

FRANÇOIS GIRARD has arranged a perfect tableau in front of his laptop's webcam, and at the appointed time he has placed himself squarely at the center of its frame. Seated in front of overflowing floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in an office in his Montreal studio-home, a tousled but natty Girard is chatting via Skype in a poutine-gravy-thick Quebecois accent. The French-Canadian director of film, theater and opera has just returned home after a whirlwind promotional tour for his latest movie, *The Song of Names*, which he presented to seven international film festivals over the course of two months. But if Girard is beleaguered by the demands of travel, he isn't revealing anything to the camera.

This month, Girard returns to the Metropolitan Opera to direct the company's first new staging of *Der Fliegende Holländer* in thirty years. "I have a complete obsession with his music ... and it's only getting worse. It has become very clear to me that Wagner's music *is* a character, a narrator in the music. And the more of his work I direct, the more I encourage the singers to acknowledge that presence," the director says. In 2005, Girard staged a critically acclaimed *Siegfried* at Canadian Opera Company, but it was his revelatory production of *Parsifal*, first seen at the Met in 2013, that affirmed his aptitude as a director of Wagner's works. That production—with its anguished enactment of communal ritual amid an apocalyptic, Beckettian wasteland—proved the most affecting, deeply humane Wagner staging in recent memory and spotlighted Girard's willingness to grapple head-on with the substance of the composer's operas.

"*Parsifal* was probably the most transforming experience I've had in my professional life," Girard says. "The process really lasted seven years, and at the end, I felt like a survivor." *Holländer* can be the most vexing of Wagner's operas for a different set of reasons, the director notes. "After staging *Parsifal*, you open the score of *Flying Dutchman*, and when you finish the last page you're like—that's *it*? You don't find the depth in *Dutchman* that you have in other pieces. It's a young man's piece. Once I started to embrace the velocity and energy, it opened up. The more I've worked with *Dutchman*,



the more I realized that his genius is already there—he hasn't formalized his grand theories yet, but his harmonic drive is in place. The grand painter is already painting."



WHILE GIRARD IS KEEN TO WORK on the scale of Wagner's biggest musical and philosophical ideas, his career across theater, opera and film has shown his ability to engender performances of remarkable specificity. In *Parsifal*, the suffering of Peter Mattei's Amfortas seemed to shepherd the audience to the brink of spiritual cataclysm, and it's possible, watching Girard's 1993 omnibus film, *Thirty Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*, to confuse Colm Feore's performance of the legendary Canadian pianist with actual documentary footage. Girard says warily, though, that the character of the Dutchman, who will be sung at the Met by Bryn Terfel, is a "bit of a trap. This is something that all *Dutchman* directors have struggled with—the representation of the supernatural, especially nowadays, where we're submerged in whole iconography of ghosts and the *Pirates of the Caribbean*. That was probably one of the hardest things to tackle. I think we have a pretty ethereal response to it, and we've managed to stay away from the zombie clichés.

From top: Girard in rehearsal for *Holländer* in Quebec, 2019; Jonas Kaufmann in Girard's *Parsifal* staging at the Met, 2013



Der Fliegende Holländer in Quebec, 2019

“But my starting point in *Flying Dutchman* has a lot to do with being a filmmaker,” he continues. “Here’s a story of a young woman obsessed with a painting to the point that it becomes real, or she’s swallowed into it through her obsession. We’re talking about representational powers here. When we make a movie, we put a picture out there, and we say to the audience, ‘Hey! Get in there!’ I was fascinated with that transfer between the representation and the reality.”



IN BOTH HIS WORK BEHIND the camera and his work on the opera stage, Girard’s artistic vision is preoccupied with the rituals surrounding musicmaking. “I’m not chasing music themes in my films, but they are chasing me,” he says. Most of the director’s acclaimed films—including *The Red Violin* (1998), *Boychoir* (2014) and the experimental *Thirty Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*—propel their narratives by training their focus on the gravitas around classical music and the act of performance.

The Song of Names is an era-hopping melodrama chronicling the life of a brilliant Polish violin pro-

digy who’s separated from his parents during World War II and later abandons his surrogate family in London on the eve of a life-changing concert debut. Three years ago, when the movie’s producer first approached the director with the script, which had been adapted from the novel by critic Norman Lebrecht, Girard felt that the story covered well-trod territory. “I had a hesitation at the beginning. It was a bit too close to the *Red Violin*,” he recalls. “But when I read the novel and script again, I realized what the whole story was saying. I was called to make the film as a kind of a mission of remembrance.” The film makes diegetic use of virtuoso violin pieces by Wieniawski and Paganini, placing them alongside affecting vocalises composed in Jewish liturgical modes by composer Howard Shore.

One can’t help wondering if Girard experienced a bit of cognitive dissonance in directing a film about a Jewish musician displaced by the Holocaust in between his work staging two operas by Richard Wagner. “There *was* kind of a clash,” says Girard. “I remember doing research for *Song of Names* and having meetings in New York in 2018 when Howard Shore introduced me to choral conductor Judith



Clurman and Bruce Ruben, her husband, who is a cantor associated with the Hebrew Union College's School of Sacred Music. I had a dinner with them while I was rehearsing the *Parsifal* revival at the Met, and at the end of the dinner I asked, 'Well, would you guys be interested in seeing an orchestra rehearsal tomorrow with Yannick?' They all came. But thematically there might be a clash between what the film dramatizes and what some have made out of Wagner's work. There were moments where Howard [Shore] and I had to acknowledge the strangeness of that experience."



WHILE WAGNER HAS BEEN the main current running through Girard's work in opera, his other productions for the lyric stage have roamed outside of the canon. Girard's opera debut came in 1997, when he staged an acclaimed double bill of Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* and *Symphony of Psalms* for Canadian Opera Company; in 2006, he mounted another double bill, for Opéra National de Lyon, of the Brecht and Weill "radio cantata" *The Lindbergh Flight* alongside *The Seven Deadly Sins*; and the 2004 pre-

miere of the Bang on a Can oratorio *Lost Objects* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music was a dazzlingly elegiac consideration of memory in the wake of national tragedy. Despite the variety of the works he's brought to the stage, Girard says that his process starts the same way. "I just sit in front of the score," he says matter-of-factly. "That's where I find all my roots. The score has to be seen as more of a script than the libretto. Especially in Wagner, it's where we find all the answers."

While Girard's artistic efflorescence took place in the worlds of experimental theater and film, it now seems inevitable that the director would end up working on the opera stage. "From a very early age, I played piano. I'm self-taught, and I call myself a closet pianist—whatever music I produced was always very private," he says. "I did the soundtrack for a couple of plays I directed, but I wasn't even crediting myself in the program. But I wanted to be a film composer in my young teens. I realized that I was not going down that path, but all along music has been my own private garden."

The director's career-long oscillation between the worlds of film and opera has paid dividends, and in his most recent stage works and movies, it's hard not to feel that one is encountering an auteur approaching the peak of his craft. "I used to give the example of *L'Argent*, by Bresson—a film where you don't have any scoring. When I started looking at it, I saw that it's still a musical experience. It's got rhythms, events, colors in time, structural constructions," he says. "Eisenstein and Vertov, before there was sound in films, they were picking up composer's structures, formalizing the portions into a piece. They were very much into musical shapes. I don't think you can separate film and music. Film *is* music, and I don't think you'll ever find a director who will say to you, 'Music is not so important to me.' If you're not so interested in music, you're just not a filmmaker."

"What has become clear to me," Girard continues, "is the ancestry between opera and film, that opera is the mother of film—that Wagner's operas, as well as Italian operas, were the Hollywood productions of the nineteenth century, where you had major sets and costumes and thunders and grand music and extravaganzas. 'La Totale,' as Wagner called it, was a complete reunion of all aspects of representation. At the turn of the century, when film arrived and Chaplin comes around, a certain form of opera died." Girard pauses and stares out the window of his office. "There's a connection at that moment of death and birth. And as a filmmaker I've found in Wagner the perfect seeds of cinema. The people that come here to work in my studio for my films are the same people who do my operas. If you throw a script or a score in the middle of the table, we'll scratch our heads pretty much the same way, and then we're off." ■