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MAESTRO MODERNE

*Native New Yorker **James Conlon**
loves living and working in Los Angeles.*



BY ADAM WASSERMAN

PHOTOGRAPHED
BY CORAL VON ZUMWALT IN
THE HOLLYWOOD HILLS

GROOMING BY TRACY MOYER







ON A SUNDAY AFTERNOON this past March, with Los Angeles weather conditions occasioning a frigid 60 degrees and a faint breeze blowing in from the north, Maestro James Conlon seemed on the verge of breaking the sound barrier. Twenty minutes before the curtain rose on LA Opera's new production of *La Clemenza di Tito*, the company's music director stood behind a sunlit lectern in the foyer of the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, performing a duet with his iPod in front of the thousand-or-so people who had turned up for one of his pre-performance lectures. Breathlessly skipping between tracks blaring through speakers, Conlon compared the orchestral introductions and tripartite structures of "Parto, parto" and "Come scoglio" while tossing off asides about Anton Stadler and the premiere of Mozart's clarinet concerto. "Listen to this explosion in the orchestra!" Conlon implored the audience while juxtaposing a descending motif sung by Vitellia with its minor-key cousin sung by the offstage chorus during *Zauberflöte's* Act II. "This type of writing is *apocalyptic*."

As both orator and conductor, Conlon has the unerring ability to seize on the precise idea that can make an opera relevant to an audience. So, three

days after Paul Manafort received the first of two federal sentences that might keep him imprisoned for the rest of his life, Conlon ended his lecture about *Tito* with some helpful context. "The concept of clemency and pardon is fundamental—but it is distinct from forgiveness. This opera is about both of those things," Conlon said. "Pardon may cancel a punishment for a crime, but it is a tacit recognition of a crime. Forgiveness cancels the offense." Mozart, "with his Roman Catholic roots and his Age of Enlightenment, Masonic tendencies," Conlon says, "believes in forgiveness deeply."

One could be exonerated for thinking of *Tito* as a work of top-shelf tunes sacrificed on the altar of half-baked drama. Yet when Conlon lowered his baton on the performance three hours later, I and most others emerging from the theater seemed convinced that we had witnessed some of the most incisive musical drama an audience could hope to encounter. Ten minutes after the curtain fell, and four hours after beginning his lecture, Conlon was back in front of an audience gathered in the Pavilion's foyer, looking fresh while interviewing Oscar-winning actor Christoph Waltz about his experiences directing and

attending operas. The California sun had already set, but Conlon showed no signs of slowing down.

AFTER SEVERAL EARLY and mid-career jobs leading top-tier orchestras and opera houses in cities such as Rotterdam, Cologne and Paris, Conlon, now sixty-nine, has not traded the *sturm und drang* of European *musikpolitik* for sunshine and good vibes by stretching into a leisurely tenure in Los Angeles. After thirteen seasons at LA Opera, and now in the fifth decade of an extraordinary career, Conlon, has tiptoed into what might be called his masterful late period. He has long been one of classical music's most compelling advocates, but somewhere along the way, Conlon has fully assumed the mantle of the most accomplished music director currently on the podium of an American opera house.

Which is not to say that career milestones don't remain. Next month, Conlon will make a belated Salzburg Festival debut conducting concert performances of *Luisa Miller* that will feature Nino Machaidze in the title role, Plácido Domingo as Miller, and Piotr Beczala as Rodolfo.

Meeting in his office the following afternoon, Conlon makes clear how close the work is to his heart. "See this beautiful girl?" he asks as he picks up a framed family photo from his desk and points to the older of his two daughters with former soprano Jennifer Ringo. "That's Luisa, with a 'u'—just the way it's supposed to be spelled. Central to Verdi's dramaturgy is the plight of the tragic father, or the conflictual relationship between the father and usually the son, but sometimes a daughter. The father is always essential in Verdi, and many of his fathers are troubled or aren't good fathers and blah, blah, blah. But to me, the ideal father is father Miller. I love him. I love what he espouses. He's Tito in his way. He is the liberalism of the end of the eighteenth century. He is the enlightened authority. So I said, okay, I'd like to be a father like Mr. Miller.

Fortunately, I got a daughter, so I suggested we call her Luisa." Conlon takes a beat. "If I'd had a son, we'd have had to call him Wurm!"

The Salzburg *Luisa* performances will put a bow on a remarkable span in Conlon's recent career. While he has always been one of the most protean conductors in opera—as adept at pacing works by Puccini, Mozart and Britten as those by Schreker and Zemlinsky—the past year has seen Conlon lead a series of Verdi works notable for its breadth and intensity. In June 2018 and January 2019, Conlon conducted *Falstaff* performances at the Vienna State Opera, before returning to the company in May for *Macbeth*; in October, as principal conductor of the RAI National Symphony Orchestra, he led the band in performances of the Requiem: "It's really Verdi's greatest opera," he says. At LA Opera, Conlon opened the season with *Don Carlo* in September and concluded it with June performances of *Traviata*; last month he conducted concert performances of *Giovanna d'Arco* at the Teatro Real.

"That's an accident. It just happened," Conlon says about the succession of works on his agenda. "Maybe it's part of getting older, but you start looking back on your life a little more. I started keeping statistics and records, and I didn't realize that I was getting up towards my five hundredth performance of a Verdi opera." Conlon gently lifts a fragile-looking book placed at the top of his desk. It's an antique *Falstaff* libretto. "This is beautiful," he says. "My younger daughter gave me this for Christmas. She found it in one of those little bookstalls in Rome."

Asked how kicking off his year of Verdi with *Falstaff* may have affected his approach to the composer's other operas, Conlon answers crisply. "Living with classical music is for me essentially a spiritual life," he says. "You just don't do music. You don't just perform, you don't just have a professional life or make appearances. I hate the word career. It's overused, and it's really not a beautiful word when it

From left: a rehearsal of *Nabucco*, 2017, with assistant conductor Louis Lohraseb, music assistant Ignazio Terrasi and bass Morris Robinson, in costume as Zaccaria; talking to students at an "Opera Prep" career workshop before an LAO dress rehearsal



describes something that is highly spiritual. When that becomes a part of your life, everything is with you all the time. Even though you are not dealing with all composers, all pieces at once, the fullness of the reality is always alive. Conducting *Falstaff* is the fruit of an entire lifetime. This year, almost in a row, I conducted the three works that I consider the most life-affirming—*Falstaff*, *Figaro* and *The Creation*. I'm not going to choose a favorite, but it was striking to me that day and night, during the rehearsals and for several days after I finished, I had this glow inside just from those works."

Pressed to explain how he dovetails transcendent music-making with the practical challenges of being a music director, Conlon pauses for a moment. "You can live in a spiritual place and still have a job to do," he says. "Buddhism says that you can't meditate all day. So what do you do? You make everything

From left: conducting Henry Mollicone's *Moses* at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, 2019; rehearsing the LA Opera Orchestra with concertmaster Roberto Cani at right

stage. In addition to pre- and post-concert lectures, Conlon teaches a free weekly class at the nearby Colburn School as part of his multidisciplinary "Recovered Voices" initiative, which educates the public about the music of composers stifled by the Nazi regime. And each spring, he leads a community opera that presents a work at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, located down the street from the Music Center. Conlon inaugurated the series in Los Angeles in 2007 with *Noye's Fludde*, and each year the company distributes more than 4,000 free tickets for two performances. In late March of this year Conlon led a cast and chorus of nearly 500 community members in the world premiere of Henry Mollicone's *Moses*. "Once we did it," Conlon says of the initiative, "everybody immediately saw the beauty of the company coming together with a wider audience—most of whom have probably never



a meditation. In that spiritual space, you're going to be drawn constantly with curiosity. That's what keeps me going. Does that bump up against having to do rehearsal schedules? Not really."

Addressing the crisis of diminishing audiences for classical music is another practical consideration for Conlon. "We are, I believe, in massive denial," he says. "The problem came from the abdication of arts education in the schools. That's not going to get fixed by a government. It's got to be fixed by us. There is nothing that replaces the grass-roots work of exposing children to music. In our little way, this is a kind of an environmentalist issue. If we don't get our act together, we're going to make the planet uninhabitable. It's urgent. Classical music survives by its activity. That's a spiritual mandate."

CONLON'S COMMITMENT TO AUDIENCE-BUILDING isn't just lip service, and his work in Los Angeles has grown to reach far beyond the company's main-

been in the opera house. It's an incredible experience. The pieces have hymns, just the way Britten's did, and the audience sings. We've found a way to impact young people's lives."

When queried about what he'd like to see happen at LA Opera in future seasons, Conlon's response is instantaneous. "Expand! I don't even have to inhale to give you that answer. Every decision is made or not made with the awareness that we have to be smart, responsible economically. We're a young company—we've only been here for thirty-three years, and I've only been here for thirteen. But I want to see the season expand so that the motor never stops. There is nothing we couldn't do with \$100 million. The financial pressures are what they are, but I live in eternal hope," he says. "I love this company. I love the people I work with. I love the atmosphere. I'm happier here than I could ever be—I've come to love Los Angeles. That's a big statement coming from a New Yorker." ■

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