

OPERA NEWS

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

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OPERA NEWS

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If you had any doubts about opera's status as a global art form, check out these twenty-five brilliant **YOUNG SINGERS**. They hail from all over the world, with hometowns ranging from Ningbo, China, to Appleton, Wisconsin. Their work in top conservatories and young-artist programs — as well as their victories in the most prestigious competitions — has already won them attention. They now stand ready to do exciting work on the world's great stages. F. Paul Driscoll and Brian Kellow report on opera's next generation of headliners.

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Photographed at Bathhouse Studios in New York
by James Salzano
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Adam Wasserman speaks to cutting-edge composers *Missy Mazzoli* and *Corey Dargel*.



HIS

▶ Two of the most compelling compositional voices to have emerged from Brooklyn in recent years are Missy Mazzoli and Corey Dargel, who each present their own brands of modern vocal music that are equally at home in the opera house, the concert hall and the performance-art space. Dargel composes delicate song-cycles that express their preoccupations (anxiety, illness, technology) with deadpan vocal style and an intricate chamber accompaniment. Mazzoli's palette is wider and more overtly dramatic, revealing an interest in strong female characters at the center of expansive sonic land-

scapes populated with ethereal electronics and organic instrumental dissonances. This month, Mazzoli's *Song from the Uproar*, about the radical life of Isabelle Eberhardt, plays at LA Opera, and she's currently at work on an opera adaptation of Lars Von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* for Opera Philadelphia, planned for 2016. Dargel moved to Austin, Texas, in 2015 after releasing his latest album of songs, *OK It's Not OK*; he's currently developing a new music-theater piece called *The Three Christs*. OPERA NEWS spoke with both composers this summer.

**PHOTOGRAPHED BY
DARIO ACOSTA IN NEW YORK**



► **OPERA NEWS:** Do you consider your compositions to be on the same continuum as traditional opera and art song?

COREY DARGEL: Opera has its place — it's a very important medium, and it's historically extremely relevant. But to me, if we want to attract younger and more audiences to see operas, then we need to start thinking in radically different terms about the way they're sung, the way they're put together, the way they incorporate theater. It's becoming an outdated, antiquated form. I think the operatic voice — that style of singing — is not always appreciated by younger audiences. We have the technology now to use microphones and to teach singers how to sing nonoperatically with microphones. If we do that, and if the music is well written, the communication is better, and we won't need supertitles. I think the operatic voice obscures words. It was created for a certain reason — because it had to be heard over a large orchestra — but now we have the technology to not have to do that anymore. I just wonder why

—
Mazzoli and
Dargel in
conversation
in New York City

twenty-first-century composers are still using the operatic voice.

MISSY MAZZOLI: I take much more of a middle ground. I don't think that the operatic voice is outdated. I do agree that it developed the way it did to be heard over an orchestra, and with microphones, that's no longer something that's required. But I do feel that there's tremendous power, and it's a thrill to hear a soprano hit a high C at a very dramatic moment. I think of that as something that's part of my toolbox, in addition to amplification and all different types of singing. Straight tone, singing that's more in a pop style — all of these things are tools at my disposal. The traditions of grand opera are a part of that, but composition is no longer limited exclusively to that very narrow type of working.

ON: Does collaborating with other musicians and performing your own compositions alongside them make for more interesting art?

MM: Absolutely, in my experience. It's just a more fun way to work — particularly for me in working



with singers. I'm not a singer, but I took voice lessons last year as part of my residency with Opera Philadelphia and had a very understanding teacher. But it was torture for me, because I finally realized the psychological hoops that you have to jump through when your voice is your instrument. Something about standing there in front of a mirror during a voice lesson and having to produce a beautiful sound felt like all of my crutches were gone. I couldn't hide behind a keyboard. That really gave me a lot of sympathy and understanding for what singers have to go through.

CD: I agree. Singing comes from a very, very vulnerable and personal place. And because you are using your body and your physical voice instead of a different instrument that you play, the piano or whatever, as some extension of you, your voice *is* you. I think singing in front of an audience and even singing in front of a mirror is a very brave act and can be very rewarding and can be very scary.

ON: How does each of you begin the compositional processes?

CD: I actually write the music first, before I know what the words are going to be. I compose the accompaniment, so to speak, because I want that to be interesting by itself — I want to give the performers something challenging and rewarding. I'll sit with the accompaniment for a while. If I decide I like it, then I write lyrics — but I don't write lyrics while listening to it. I'll try to fit those lyrics into a melody on top of the music that I've already composed. I'll really practice enunciating the words and finding ways of getting clarity when singing, and really communicating the words to the audience. I think that my way of composing, by putting the vocal melody in last, makes for some interesting, off-kilter rhythms and tricky prosody. So it's even more important for me to pronounce the words clearly and really communicate them.

MM: I start with the words, always. I think Corey's technique is much more unusual. Most composers start with

"I TRY TO NEVER DO THINGS THAT ARE QUITE ON THE NOSE." — MAZZOLI

the libretto and then write the music to fit that. But I'm also not writing my own words, so it's a completely different process.

ON: When you're composing a piece such as *Vespers for a New Dark Age* or a song cycle such as *Thirteen Near-Death Experiences*, how conscious are you of the history of those particular forms?

MM: For me, it's essential to know what came before you. If I'm going to write a piece called "Vespers," then I had better understand the

Monteverdi Vespers, the Rachmaninoff Vespers, and understand something about the traditional liturgical form. They are all tools for me. There are actually little quotes from Monteverdi and Rachmaninoff buried in that piece as little private jokes to myself that no one would ever know, until now.

CD: Plagiarizer. [Laughs]

When I'm writing a piece, I don't think about what came before. I wrote the piece *Thirteen Near-Death Experiences* for Pierrot ensemble plus percussion, with me singing. People kept telling me that I should go and listen to all these pieces that have been written for that instrumentation. But I don't want to be affected by that. It's sort of like the anxiety of influence. The more you know, the more you have to avoid doing or copying in some way.

Just to change the subject a little bit, is it true that when we were both asked by a journalist about the piece of music that inspired us most, we both answered *Einstein on the Beach*?

MM: Yeah. That's my go-to for opera in particular, but really for all music anywhere. The combination of seeing *Einstein on the Beach* and *Satyagraha* within three years here in New York really changed my life. They made me rethink my whole approach to opera and what you need to feed the audience and what they can get from the staging.

ON: How does each of you go about creating characterization in your music?

MM: I feel like my sense of a character really comes from actually writing the piece. A lot of my work is based on harmony, so I'll often find a chord that I feel fits with a character or a situation, or some sort of melody that is illuminating their psychological state at that moment. Then I'll find ways to develop it. Maybe it comes back, but the situation that's playing out onstage is different, so the melody has to be different. Or maybe there's some sort of unlikely juxtaposition of two elements from different parts of the opera that illuminate something that's

happening inside the character's head. Or maybe, like with Isabelle Eberhardt in *Song from the Uproar*, everything's swirling around her like a sort of fever dream.

CD: Is finding those chords and melodies an intuitive process, or is there some technical way that you will associate those elements with an emotion or a situation?

MM: I try to never do things that are quite on the nose. To me, the most interesting opera is never obvious. There's always something a little bit off or ambiguous or dreamy or surreal about it. I'm writing a very dark scene in *Breaking the Waves* right now, featuring some very sadistic characters. The entire thing is just major-key, glorious sort of music. To me, that is the more sinister option than just having a bunch of crunchy, dissonant chords. I love doing things like that that play against expectations. ■