

Opera

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Eun Sun Kim steps up at San Francisco Opera

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EUN SUN KIM

ROGER PINES

Kim begins her music directorship of San Francisco Opera with this month's 'Tosca'

On the podium Eun Sun Kim is slight of figure, but her presence is galvanizing. There's no sense of superiority or domination—she's there to collaborate, above all, while glorifying the music, not herself. Check out a video on YouTube of the 2020 Concert de Paris at the Eiffel Tower, with Benjamin Bernheim singing 'Ah! lève-toi, soleil' under Kim's direction. It's impressive to witness how completely connected she is to Bernheim's interpretation in every phrase. In barely a decade on the international scene, Kim has truly made her mark, and this month she takes over as music director of the San Francisco Opera.

As a child in Seoul, Kim was lucky to have parents who encouraged an interest in the arts. Her father, originally a theology professor, later became a cultural minister and a close colleague of President Kim Dae-Jung. Kim's mother, a piano teacher, discovered her own daughter's musical talent very early on. Her developing piano skills enabled Kim to accompany school music classes. Eventually a high-school music teacher suggested she study music at university, and when she rejected the idea of being a performer, the teacher proposed composition instead. 'I didn't even know one could study composition,' Kim recalls. 'I was kind of shocked!' But at Seoul's Yonsei University she did indeed major in composition, while also gaining valuable experience playing for other students' lessons.

Intent on continuing her studies in Europe, Kim realized she would need languages—especially German, since she craved the chance to study classical repertoire at the source. 'One of the voice teachers [at university] said, "When you get to Germany, after you survive the winter and the crazy April weather, when it finally becomes May you will really know why [Heinrich Heine] wrote 'Im wunderschönen Monat Mai'." We have a wonderful March in Korea—the flowers are so beautiful—but when I came to Germany, I did realize why it had to be May in the poem, not April or March. You have to learn the language and enter into the culture.'

Kim had played for opera rehearsals at university, where a 90-year-old conducting professor persuaded her to reconsider her future in composition: 'You can still compose, but conducting you have to start now, when you're young.' Nonetheless, she began



exploring conducting ‘not because I wanted to become a conductor; it was just because I very much enjoyed learning about it’. Her professor was also realistic: ‘He said, “When you become a female conductor, your life could be difficult—more difficult than you ever thought.”’

The first stop in Germany was Berlin, where Kim spent nine months. ‘I wanted to hear performances by the Berlin Philharmonic, and I wanted to hear the language. I would jump on the U-Bahn and speak to grandmas and grandpas.’ Choosing not to study conducting in Berlin (‘I saw too many Koreans there’), Kim opted for Stuttgart’s Musikhochschule, where there had been no Asian student in the conducting class before she enrolled. The school made it possible for conducting students to lead professional chamber and full-sized orchestras twice a semester. ‘There is also a special scholarship for conducting students in Germany. If you pass the audition, you’re given many opportunities to take masterclasses with conductors, and with orchestras like the NDR and WDR.’

Kim led the Musikhochschule’s *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Dido and Aeneas*, while assisting on other operas. ‘I never thought about what kind of conductor I was going to be,’ she says; in Germany, as a rule conductors train in both operatic and symphonic repertoire. But then came the 2008 Jesús López-Cobos Competition in Madrid. Although she’d just accepted a job as a rehearsal pianist in Gelsenkirchen, she went to Madrid anyway. The competition’s winner—voted upon by the Teatro Real’s orchestral musicians themselves—would become that house’s musical assistant. After the second round, López-Cobos let Kim know that the orchestra already loved her. ‘He said, “There’s a big chance that you might win tomorrow, unless you make huge mistakes!”’ Kim felt panicked, not knowing how to cancel her Gelsenkirchen contract. She decided to compete in the competition’s final round, which she won. Then, when she called Gelsenkirchen’s Intendant, ‘He was really generous. He said, “It’s sad to let you go, but it means we got the right person—we saw a real talent.”’

In two years at the Teatro Real, Kim relished her contact with López-Cobos, the first star conductor she’d ever encountered. ‘He showed me that the work never stops. He was at every stage rehearsal, every piano rehearsal, working with the singers on all the details and making them feel comfortable. From him I really got the practical experience of being in a theatre.’ Also very helpful to Kim was the American soprano Deborah Polaski, who was appearing in the Teatro Real’s production of *Jenůfa*. ‘She called me and asked, “Eun Sun, do you have a manager?” I said, “No, do I need one?” I just had no idea! Deborah told me, “I really think you are special. You know voices well and you’re able to help singers.”’ Polaski introduced Kim to her own manager, who asked, ‘Do you have patience?’ ‘Yes, I do.’ ‘You’re a woman, you’re Asian, you’re very young, and you’re also small! In the real world, you’ll need to be four times better than everyone else just to get to the starting line—and there’s no guarantee that you’ll actually have a career. So I have to ask whether you can be patient.’

In 2010 Kim made her professional debut in Madrid, leading a cast and orchestra of young artists in *Il viaggio a Reims*. She followed that production with *La Bohème* in Graz. ‘In Austria and Germany, they play *Zauberflöte*, *Bohème* and *Traviata* every season. There were opportunities for young conductors like me who could do one or two performances without rehearsal, enabling the theatre to try out young talent.’

Kim was working as a freelance musical assistant for several eminent conductors when one of them, Bertrand de Billy, recommended her for another *Bohème*, a last-minute performance at Oper Frankfurt. ‘I got two hours of music rehearsal to give the cast the tempi I wanted—and to hear what they wanted—just so we could know each other a little.’ Despite having no orchestra rehearsal, she triumphed on the night. This led to more engagements in Frankfurt, beginning with a new *Sonnambula* and continuing with works by Puccini, Kálmán and Lehár, as well as a particularly momentous occasion for Kim: her first Wagner, *Der fliegende Holländer*.

The Berlin Staatsoper was the next company to recognize Kim’s potential. At the end of a rehearsal—in what amounted to unofficial auditions—the music director Daniel Barenboim would often ask young conductors to play through particular works with the orchestra. After hearing Kim lead the *Freischütz* overture, Barenboim invited her back to attend more rehearsals and ask him whatever questions she wanted. Some time afterwards, when a Staatsoper musician was present for a rehearsal Kim was conducting with the Berlin Konzerthaus orchestra, ‘she called Barenboim to say, “The Kim that auditioned for us has really grown up—she’s developed herself.”’ That really pleased Barenboim.’ Two years later Kim made her Staatsoper debut with *Un ballo in maschera*. She has since returned for more Verdi, plus operas by Puccini and Strauss.

Kim’s guest-conducting engagements have rapidly expanded to include ENO (*Die Fledermaus*, 2013) along with every major German house and those of Zurich, Stockholm, Oslo and Copenhagen. Clearly unafraid of a challenge, Kim introduced herself to Vienna audiences leading the Volksoper’s German-language *Carmen*—again, with no orchestra rehearsal. Since then she’s been back for *Hänsel und Gretel* and *Fledermaus*. ‘Of course, the Volksoper orchestra doesn’t need to rehearse *Fledermaus*—it’s in their blood. But when I did it, in the middle of the Pizzicato Polka in Act 2, the concertmaster was smiling at me. The orchestra just *got* it. They thought, “This girl

Eun Sun Kim with San Francisco Opera’s general director, Matthew Shilcock



really knows about this music!” Few if any other Asian conductors have exhibited Kim’s affinity for Viennese operetta. In rehearsal, she says, ‘I don’t discuss the tradition so much, but simply how we can create a real “Wiener Schmah” onstage—a Viennese spirit, a spirit of humour.’ Kim’s artistry in this repertoire can be savoured in the entrancing Oehms Classics recording of Lehár’s *Der Graf von Luxemburg*.

After Houston Grand Opera’s Patrick Summers heard Kim conduct in Europe, he proposed *La traviata* for her North American debut in 2017. But Summers reckoned without Hurricane Harvey. ‘Patrick asked if I was worried about debuting at the Convention Center [performances had been moved because of water damage in HGO’s theatre], but I didn’t care about the venue! In such circumstances, art just has to keep going.’ In the acoustically problematic space ‘there was no orchestra pit—the singers were singing out to the audience and I was conducting the orchestra behind them’. Maintaining ensemble wasn’t easy: ‘Sometimes it wasn’t at all together as we were hearing it, but for the audience it was together.’ Kim scored a great success, leading to her appointment in 2018 as HGO’s first principal guest conductor in 25 years, a contract set to continue through to the 2022-3 season.

Kim had visited California only as a tourist prior to her return for her 2019 San Francisco Opera debut leading *Rusalka*, ‘which was special from the start. When you’re with a new company, with 200 new colleagues, you figure out pretty quickly whether the chemistry is there or not. The company members had such passion for their jobs, and such commitment to what we were all doing.’

This month Kim begins her tenure as SFO’s new music director, becoming the first woman and the first Asian to hold that position with the company. She plans to spend half of each season there, and has made clear to her colleagues that she’s open to all repertoires. ‘We’ve talked about the *Ring*, which SFO has presented every five or six years. They said to me, “Do you want to do the next *Ring*?” Now we don’t know when that will be, because planning has changed due to the pandemic. But I want to develop my relationship with the orchestra by doing other Wagner operas, building up a unique language between us. It will be my first experience of creating this long relationship—this long journey—with one orchestra.’ She’s also hoping to devote considerable attention to SFO’s young artists.

When it comes to artists of international renown, Kim has had her share of memorable experiences. For example, she loved collaborating with the late Marcello Giordani for her Berlin Staatsoper debut: ‘He came to the first music rehearsal with his *Ballo* score and his pencil, saying, “Tell me everything you want”—and how many times had he sung *Ballo* by that time?’ The same was true of Violeta Urmana with *Trovatore* in Berlin, and also Ramón Vargas in LA Opera’s *Roberto Devereux*. Vargas hadn’t sung Donizetti’s opera in more than two decades, ‘but when he sang the aria, there was nothing to say! Spiritually we just seemed to be in the same moment, in the same space, speaking the same language.’

Kim truly cares about singers. ‘I visit their dressing rooms before every performance. They might tell me small things—“last time there was this or that moment, maybe we could take it just a little faster”. They show me that tonight’s performance really means everything to them, and together we give it our best.’

Along with Kim’s successes in opera there have been significant symphonic highlights, including performances with the orchestra of La Scala, the Orchestre de Paris, the

Orchestre National de France, the Los Angeles Philharmonic and the Cincinnati Symphony (which presented Kim's US symphonic debut, substituting for James Levine in the Verdi Requiem). Despite the acclaim she's received with these ensembles and many others, 'I'm not artistically satisfied after any concert. There's always something I should have done better!'

In Kim's generation we're finally seeing an abundance of gifted female conductors. Of course, the field remains unevenly divided between the sexes, 'but progress takes time. In many cultures, for so long women weren't seen as viable leaders—not in music, politics or business.' So what would Kim do to change attitudes? 'I'd say, "Close your eyes and just listen to the music I'm conducting." We're talking about art, and every artist has unique traits that shape their art. It's about someone's directness, their sensitivity, their individual style, and not their gender.'

Obviously, Kim can't hide that 'I'm not only a female conductor, but an Asian female conductor. When German musicians are sceptical before I come to the podium, they might be thinking, "Can she conduct *Ariadne* or *Holländer* well? It's *our* music—will she understand it?" But if you were to come to Korea and tell me, "I'm going to conduct Korean traditional music," I'd think, "Does he know Korean? Does he know our culture?" I'd be really sceptical as well! I don't think you can get rid of that. But in the end there is only the music, and it's my job to speak to people only through music.'

Kim lost many engagements due to the pandemic. During the free time, she studied scores, while also doing yoga daily via YouTube ('my nose is going to get to my knees in a year') and devoting much time to languages: 'That wasn't just for conducting. It's been my hobby since childhood. Even when I didn't understand a word, I loved listening to other languages—I enjoyed the sounds as if they were music. You get to know the culture

Take a bow: Eun Sun Kim in the pit of the War Memorial Opera House, San Francisco





Kim conducting the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra

student days in Germany, working with an orchestra, I would say, “Could we try that?” A violinist said, “Frau Kim, ein Vorschlag [a suggestion]. Just say, “Spielen Sie leise. Punkt. [Play softer. Full stop.]” But where I grew up, it’s all about being a group, a team. We always say “our family”, whereas in other languages I tend to say “my family”. So in that situation I’ll start from myself, but in Korean everything starts from “us”.

differently when you learn a few words, then one full phrase, then two phrases. You have to keep at it every day.’ Kim speaks Korean, English, German, Italian, Spanish and French. After SFO’s *Rusalka*, ‘I can’t say I speak Czech, but for the opera I learnt enough.’ She’s told SFO that she’ll conduct only operas written in languages she speaks herself.

Although she now seems very much a global citizen, Kim’s Koreanness remains a constant. ‘The biggest difference between Western nations and Korea is how you define yourself. In my

READERS’ LETTERS

Brexit wrecks it

How sad to encounter John Corkindale (Letters, p. 863) in the otherwise excellent July 2021 issue. He is unrepentant about the huge damage to the arts (and opera in particular) caused by Brexit and what the Editor accurately calls the Brexit government. Surely he must know? Perhaps not. The few Johnson supporters I encounter always say, ‘We are not political,’ when I attempt to point out that there is a connection between food bank collections and their voting choices.

From the outset of his stewardship Mr Allison has always insisted on the link between our cultural enthusiasms and our political stances. As newly qualified students and eminent conductors move away from

the UK and singers find performing abroad too expensive, even impossible, the dilution of provision here will become obvious. It is quite right that the so-called Brexiteers now disastrously in charge must be constantly brought to book in the publication I have been reading since the early ’60s. All strength to the editorial arm. More politics, not less!

Keith Richards
Finchley, London

In reply to Mr Corkindale, while Brexit was the choice of the majority of voters in England, I would bet that few of those who voted for it understood or cared what it would mean to those who worked in the performing arts. The idea that what is happening must be accepted simply because