The Queen in Me
Soprano Teiya Kasahara (BMus’07) on carving their own path in opera as a queer, multidisciplinary Japanese-Canadian performer
In their new play The Queen in Me, soprano Teiya Kasahara (BMus’07) liberates one of opera’s most iconic villains — and challenges the industry’s centuries-old prejudices

By Tze Liew

For more than two centuries, the iconic Queen of the Night from Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte has been thrilling audiences with her vengeful spirit, bloodthirsty drive, and volatile high Fs. Qualities that make her the ultimate villain, fated to eternal doom while the hero and heroine, demure as lambs, skip off to enjoy their happy ending.

But now it’s 2020 — and she’s sick of following the script. What if the Queen of the Night could actually tell her own story?

This is the idea that inspired soprano Teiya Kasahara (BMus’07) to create their groundbreaking new play The Queen in Me — tackling the prejudices that have been part of the opera industry since Mozart’s time. As a queer, non-binary Japanese-Canadian who’s tired of stuffing themself into the ill-fitting shoes of femme fatales and simpering heroines, they are determined to tell new stories that reflect real people, with complex identities.

In The Queen in Me, the Queen of the Night begins to sing her most iconic aria, “Der Hölle Rache,” like she would in any Magic Flute show. But midway through, she halts. “Stopp! Stopp die Musik!” she screams. Breaking the fourth wall, she laments the stifling act everyone’s come to see; one she’s been trapped in for over two centuries.

I wanted to give the Queen of the Night a voice. I had to tell her story — and then tell mine

— Teiya Kasahara

With unbridled honesty, humour and spirit, she begins to unravel the dark side of the opera industry: how it has stereotyped and oppressed many women like her — Turandot, Lady Macbeth, Medea — and all the opera singers who have embodied these roles.

Kasahara has always felt a special connection with the Queen of the Night. It was “Der Hölle Rache” that made them fall in love with opera at age 15, after seeing Ingmar Bergman’s film version of The Magic Flute. “I saw her perform and was like, Oh God, I want to do that,” they remember.

With this as their dream role, Kasahara dove headfirst into voice training, made it into the UBC Opera program, and honed their craft for four years under the tutelage of Prof. Nancy Hermiston — with the intensity and drive of an ambitious Queen. “I poured all of my energy into becoming the best singer, actor and stage animal I could be,” says Kasahara. “It meant that I didn’t get as much of a well-rounded life experience at university, but it made me very successful.” Fresh out of the program, they were recruited by the prestigious Canadian Opera Company. Everything seemed to be falling into place.

But when Kasahara finally got to play their dream role as the Queen of the Night — countless times in fact — they realized it wasn’t what they’d hoped for.

Read the whole story on the High Notes blog.

— Teiya Kasahara
From Aerosmith to Van Halen

Professor Nathan Hesselink uncovers the secret history of Little Mountain Sound, the UBC School of Music, and Vancouver’s heyday as a rock ‘n’ roll mecca

Here’s a little-known fact: Vancouver is the birthplace of some of the most important rock ‘n’ roll records of the past 40 years. Beginning in the late 1970s and continuing through the 1990s, acts like Van Halen, Aerosmith, Bon Jovi, Metallica, Blue Öyster Cult, INXS, and the Scorpions flocked to the city to record their iconic albums.

Even less known is the role the School of Music played in the city’s transformation from local hub to international rock mecca. That is, until recently: Prof. Nathan Hesselink stumbled upon this secret history while doing research for a project on rhythm and technology in rock music.

“I was talking to local sound engineers and producers and UBC kept coming up. As it turned out, our alumni had their fingerprints all over these great albums from that era,” he told High Notes recently.

Encouraged by fellow faculty member Sharman King (BMus’70) — whose long and successful career as a bass trombonist included a stint as a studio musician at Vancouver’s legendary Little Mountain Sound Studios — Prof. Hesselink tracked down and interviewed as many producers, composers, musicians, and engineers from back in the day as he could find. He pored through archives that hadn’t been opened in decades. His detective work took him on a journey back in time, from the heyday of the 1980s, to the launch of the Bachelor of Music program in the early 1960s, all the way back to Vancouver’s first jazz supper clubs and CBC Radio’s early experiments with live music broadcasts. His research culminated in an eye-opening talk at the School of Music this past February.

High Notes sat down with Prof. Hesselink and Sharman King to discuss the project so far.

For starters, can you describe the scene at its peak?

Nathan Hesselink: It’s no exaggeration to say that Vancouver was a rock ‘n’ roll mecca in the 1980s and 90s. Think about the really big albums of the ’80s and there’s a good chance they were produced at Little Mountain Sound: Bon Jovi’s Slippery When Wet, Aerosmith’s Pump, Van Halen’s Balance. Bold, important albums that sold tens of millions of copies internationally and came to define the hard rock sound of that era. The biggest bands in the world were coming to Little Mountain Sound Studios to record their music. Metallica, AC/DC, The Cult... pop acts like Bryan Adams and INXS, too. The list goes on and on.

Read the full interview on the High Notes blog.

ALUMNI MAKING WAVES

Awards, new shows, and a virtual orchestra for the COVID-19 pandemic

Legendary Canadian composer and School of Music alumnus Alexina Louie (BMus’70) was awarded the 2020 Governor General’s Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement, in recognition of her groundbreaking orchestral and chamber works, film scores, and more. In February, Louie returned to the School of Music for a composer residency, during which the UBC Symphony Orchestra performed her The Ringing Earth: Festive Overture at the Chan Centre for the Performing Arts.

Composer Jared Miller (BMus’10) received a 2020 Juno nomination in the category of Classical Composition of the Year for his album Under Sea, Above Sky. The work is an ode to our planet, representing “both Earth’s massive, majestic and wild side, and its incredibly fragility, as climate change continues to wreak havoc upon it.”

Indigenous cellist Cris Derksen (BMus’07) collaborated with Toronto playwright Evalyn Parry and Inuk artist Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory on Kiinalik: These Sharp Tools, an exciting new multimedia project that combines music, art, and Greenlandic mask dancing to address colonialism and sexuality, climate change, racism, reconciliation, and the plight of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Derksen performed the show’s live soundtrack.

Morna Edmundson (BMus’81), the artistic director of the Elektra Women’s Choir (EWC), teamed up with conductor/harpischordist/School of Music lecturer Alexander Weimann to create Women of the Italian Baroque, a joint EWC and Pacific Baroque Orchestra concert that showcases seven brilliant, little-known female composers from Baroque-era Italy.

Conductor Janna Sailor (MMus ‘08, DMPS ’12) and violinist Donovan Seidle brought together members of the Calgary Philharmonic and Edmonton Symphony orchestras to film a virtual performance of Elgar’s “Variation IX (Nimrod)” from the Enigma Variations — bringing beautiful music to self-isolating audiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Musicologist and French opera expert Dr. Hedy Law goes back to her Hong Kong roots with an exciting new course that explores the global phenomenon of Cantonese music, from opera to pop.

By Tze Liew

Dr. Hedy Law has always been aware of a certain irony at the heart of her academic career. An expert on 18th-century French opera and pantomime, she grew up immersed in a very different tradition: her mother was a Cantonese opera teacher.

The contrast wasn’t something she thought too much about, until recently. After more than a decade teaching Western music and theory, she found her attention wandering from the powdered wigs and tinkling harpsichords of Mozart to the phoenix eyes and plaintive erhu that she grew up with in Hong Kong.

Dr. Law realized that she was missing something: a connection to her own cultural roots. It was this feeling that inspired her to design and launch UBC’s brand-new Cantonese Music course, the first of its kind in North America, and a unique addition to the UBC Cantonese Language program.

“I had the huge realization that I’ve been teaching Western music for so long. I thought, if I only teach Monteverdi through Mozart, then I’ll never have a chance to teach Cantonese repertory within the curriculum here. And so I’m just like, really? That seems to be a really big opportunity lost,” she says.

Dr. Law’s course is a broad overview of major Cantonese music genres since the early 19th century, from Cantonese opera to Cantopop (Cantonese pop music) and everything in between.

It follows the footprints of a long and rich history, no smaller in scope than the Western music canon. Cantonese opera, for example, appeared in Guangzhou in the 13th century — about 400 years before opera was invented in Italy in the 1600s. Its flourishing in the 20th century sparked Golden Ages in Cantonese television and film from the 1970s to 1990s, lighting the fuse for the Cantopop explosion in the 1980s that left an indelible mark on Asian communities worldwide.

“Cantonese music is a global phenomenon. We have a huge Chinese diaspora that shares popular genres like Cantopop, musicals and TV dramas,” says Dr. Law.

Read the whole story on the High Notes blog.