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The Canadian conductor and founder of San Francisco's Opera Parallèle foregrounds technological innovation, new works and deep community engagement

BY JOHN BENDER

Nicole Païement

NICOLE PAÏEMENT, the boundlessly imaginative founder and General and Artistic Director of San Francisco's adventurous Opera Parallèle (OP), might seem to have been a prophet least honoured in her home country of Canada.

Until recently, that is, when she conducted George Benjamin's *Written on Skin* in early 2020 'just before the pandemic' performances at Opéra de Montréal, a company to which she will be returning in 22/23. She hopes, "now the ice is broken," that further Canadian engagements may follow. In fact, she had to decline one such gig—an offer to conduct Calgary Opera's 2019 production of Joby Talbot's *Everest*, the staged premiere of which Païement led in 2015 as Principal Guest Conductor at Dallas Opera.

Everest is enjoying a unique online afterlife in the form of a digital graphic novel thanks to Païement and her long-term collaborator Brian Staufienbiel—an afterlife that speaks volumes about her fundamental commitment to the avant-garde and to new media. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Païement and Staufienbiel, OP's Creative Director, reimagined Talbot's work from scratch. Their medium is highly stylized in the manner of a comic book, or today's graphic novels. But as in film, they have come up with surprisingly expressive imagery derived from motion-capture devices that were stuck right on the performer's faces as they sang and acted in a recording studio. Talbot's score was rendered entirely with digitized 'instruments' based on audio samples of actual ones, before all the visible and audio elements were assembled into a homogeneous whole. As Païement says, "the score is absolutely all of the original music. No re-orchestration. We worked extremely hard to keep the soundworld the same. I conducted the 'electronic version' and we captured my *tempi* and my balance." The precise placement

of each relative timbre required hours of concentrated studio effort. A cartoon-based electronic opera for the television screen might seem sterile and technological, but the final work deeply touches the heart when encountered in large format with good sound (watch until Jan. 16th, 2022 at: <https://operaparallele.org/everest>).

Everest tells the story of the 1996 catastrophe in which eight people died on that graveyard of a mountain, including Rob Hall, an experienced New Zealand guide, and Doug Hansen, his American client undertaking a second attempt at ascent. In its digitized version, the opera, with libretto by Gene Scheer, fuses Rob (Nathan Granner) and Doug's (Hadleigh Adams) central story with that of Rob's pregnant wife Jan Arnold (Sasha Cooke) far away in New Zealand.

In the opera's finale, Rob, facing death on a frozen ledge, is brought together with Jan by satellite telephone for a deeply moving farewell. Talbot envelops it all with ghostly choruses of the many who have died on Everest, while anchoring the action in reality with sounds like short-wave broadcasts. The ending might seem sentimental, but the work engages hard ethical puzzles, as Rob, who possibly might have saved himself, weighs obligations to his failing client with those to his own family. The stylized visual form of OP's digital version paradoxically actuates these weighty moral concerns while also reinforcing the emotional impact of the work.

Paiement's creative response to the current pandemic conditions for working and viewing opera is typical of her varied and flexible approach to how the artform needs to reflect today's world experience. OP's 21/22 season includes two works that emerged from deep engagement with San Francisco's underserved communities, and treats questions dealing with human rights and immigration. As Paiement explained, "we had to decide the season in April, so we tried to find

projects that could be done in varied spaces, or digitally, if something happened with Covid-19."

Harriet's Spirit is OP's new opera for youth, with music by celebrated jazz bassist Marcus Shelby. Revised and newly orchestrated for the company's 21/22 season, *Harriet's Spirit* originated in a 2018 workshop production at San

Francisco's African American Arts and Cultural Society by Hands-On-Opera, a company which offers children the opportunity to create, and perform opera. The story centres on a young girl who confronts bullying, inspired by her discovery of 19th-century anti-slavery activist Harriet Tubman. The piece's OP premiere took place Nov. 2021 at the Bay View



Opera House, a 19th-century Masonic structure that is the city's oldest theatre, now a hub for African-American culture.

In winter 2022, OP will premiere *Sophia's Forest*, a new opera about a nine-year-old immigrant's imaginative adaptation to the traumas of civil war, presented in the vast spaces of San Francisco's landmark Grace Cathedral. Composer Lembit Beecher's

Top: Christabel Nunoo (Modesty) & Tiffany Austin (Harriet Tubman) in Opera Parallèle's *Harriet's Spirit*, 2018; bottom: Mark Simmons film still illustration from Opera Parallèle's *Everest*, 2021

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score on a libretto by Canadian playwright Hannah Moscovitch fuses string quartet and percussion with nine electronic sound sculptures that function as the chorus. Then, in summer 2022, OP will revive Philip Glass's 1994 setting of Jean Cocteau's libretto for *La Belle et la Bête* to celebrate the American composer's 85th birthday. OP's new hybrid version, authorized thanks to a thorny range of permissions, will surrealistically blur the boundaries between the Glass score for four singers even more than did Glass's original removal of the 1946 film's soundtrack.

Waiting in the wings after a Covid-19 postponement is a revision of *Harvey Milk*, composer Stewart Wallace and librettist Michael Korie's opera set in 1970s San Francisco, dealing with the 1978 double murder by city supervisor Dan White of gay activist and fellow city Board of Supervisor, Harvey Milk, and Mayor George Moscone. Following runs in Houston and New York, the opera reached San Francisco in 1996 after a reworking by composer and librettist, but it remained heavily scored, with substantial choruses. OP is streamlining the score into two acts and, in general, lightening its texture.

A defining hallmark of Paiement's company ever since its first production in 2007—a revised edition of Lou Harrison's *Young Caesar*—has been the re-scoring of, mainly, new or somewhat recent operas into versions for modest theatres, usually for smaller orchestras and often with fewer singers than the originals. The new version of Harrison's work, for instance, was orchestrated by the Canadian John Rea. Paiement is careful to gain the rights that will allow these new scores to be performed by other companies. Such ventures have included not only Modernist classics like Berg's *Wozzeck* and Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*, both also re-orchestrated by Rea, but also more recent works such as

John Harbison's *The Great Gatsby*, Bernstein's *Trouble in Tahiti*, and Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*. In my experience, the new *Gatsby* brought compactness and real energy to a work that originally had seemed rather dispersed.

Paiement began professionally as director of ensembles at the University of California, Santa Cruz, where she remains the Edward A. Dickson Emeritus Professor and winner of the Eminent Professor Award. Viewed in retrospect, her career seems to circle ever outward from Santa Cruz, towards her creation of Opera Parallèle in San Francisco, to a shower of local engagements and creations that include conducting the premiere of Jake Heggie's opera *If I Were You*, the first work ever commissioned by SFO's Merola Opera Program for young singers. This orbit includes a substantial presence at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where Paiement is the Jean and Josette Deleage Distinguished Chair in New Music.

The widening circle of demand for her conducting talents has extended from leading Mason Bates's *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* in Seattle, to Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* at Lyric Opera of Chicago, to Washington National Opera and the Glimmerglass Festival. Future international appearances will encompass Opéra de Montréal of course, but also English National Opera, London's Barbican Centre, along with concerts in Palermo. April 2022 will see her return to Dallas Opera for Bizet's *Les pêcheurs de perles*, which, if not quite part of the standard repertory, signals her wish to pay more attention to works from the more distant past—even a return to the field of her dissertation, Baroque opera.

When asked how she is received as a woman, often standing up in front of orchestras unfamiliar with her work, and more often than not, leading brand new operas with seemingly rebarbative scores, Paiement says simply that any conductor commands respect if she immediately



shows complete mastery of the pages before her. This means knowing these works by heart, written as they are with their varying clefs, representing notes and noises from across the entire tonal spectrum. The *maestra* says she usually finds herself immediately 'hearing' the sounds represented by the written notes of a complex score—with only very occasionally having to resort to her Yamaha baby grand.

For all of her current travels, Paiement remains solidly committed to Opera Parallèle and the San Francisco community. She does not wish to be a conductor who 'parachutes' into productions already prepared by assistant conductors and chorus masters—or, as in the older opera tradition, when famous singers stepped in overnight and became, in effect, their own conductors. Any successful conductor might say something like this, but Paiement's record of minute and sustained involvement in the preparation of the works she presents points to her sincerity. *Everest* depended upon

intense collaborative development and workshop engagement. She has been devoted for four years to *Harriet's Spirit*, including costumed workshops that led to significant revisions. *Sophia's Forest*, with its experimental sound sculptures and ecclesiastical setting, has involved continual workshop study, ongoing even now in a space with similarly ample resonance. OP's recently expanded administrative and musical staff will help free up Paiement to continue such intensive preparation, and to devise new repertory for the company.

For Paiement, art is a way of living with other people. Surely, her richly collaborative approach finds roots in her profoundly musical Québécois family. She learned to read notes before words. The piano her father gave her mother for their first anniversary centred their sparsely furnished household, and she often would retreat from dinner to join her sister in the four-handed playing her parents enjoyed. Popular songs joined those from

"la France profonde" in sing-alongs while riding in the car. Her father's favourite, "Auprès de ma blonde," dates back to the armies of Louis XIV fighting in Holland. She learned several instruments growing up, and considered studying architecture before moving onto conducting, though she says she still views a score as a kind of architectural rendering. On the advice of teachers, she entered the Eastman School of Music as the only woman in their conducting program. The president of Eastman took her "under his wing" and, when an advertisement appeared for her career launching post at Santa Cruz, he offered crucial encouragement. That she ventured west into the unknown says everything about her bold, open-minded, forward-looking embrace of opera. **OC**

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