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THE OPERA LOVER'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE

EUN SUN KIM

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and prepared

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Renata Scotto

Remembering the
timeless soprano

PLUS

- Down into the pit – life in opera orchestras
- Maria By Callas – Meeting Tom Volf, director of the iconic Callas film

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Main Stage Eun Sun Kim

We, not I

By Hannah Edgar

Eun Sun Kim is beloved among singers and instrumentalists alike for her egalitarian ethos. Her approach issues a provocative challenge to the conducting world

Conducting is a profession of first impressions. First: fly into a new city, perhaps one you have never visited. Convince a hundred-plus strangers to respect and, even harder, to trust you. Issue directives in a language you may or may not speak fluently. Then, in a few days or weeks – curtain. Fumble it, and you may not be back.

Even in this fast-paced industry, Eun Sun Kim's running starts are the stuff of legend. Fresh from her graduate studies, Kim won the 2008 Jesús López-Cobos Opera Conducting Competition, securing her an assistantship at the Teatro Real, Madrid; she was the orchestra's favourite by the end of the second round. Her Houston Grand Opera debut, in 2017, was forced offsite after Hurricane Harvey left the Wortham Theater Center flooded; her on-the-fly leadership of *La traviata* in a nearby convention

centre earned her the devotion of the company, which promptly named her principal guest conductor – a title she still holds to this day. In 2019, Kim was not yet finished with her debut run at the San Francisco Opera, in *Rusalka*, when that company began internal discussions to name her its next music director.

This season, sight unseen, Paris Opéra has entrusted her to lead its Maria Callas centenary gala in December. She will have celebrated her house debut just days before, in *Les contes d'Hoffmann*. After that come her highest-profile orchestral debuts to date, with the New York Philharmonic in February and Berlin Philharmonic in April.

To some observers, Kim's rise has seemed meteoric. At 43, she doesn't yet have stacks of commercial recordings under her belt, though the three out there – Léhar's *Der Graf von Luxemburg*

with Oper Frankfurt, a 2020 collaboration with Annar Follesø and the Norwegian Radio Orchestra, and a recent Pentatone recording with the National Brass Ensemble – make for luminous listening. Her San Francisco appointment was discussed with the kind of bemusement which trails a dark-horse pick. But to musicians who have worked with her, Kim's ascent is all but obvious.

'From the get-go, our orchestral sound was a really beautiful world to be in – what she was asking of us, what we were giving, and how alive and in-the-moment it was,' says San Francisco Opera concertmaster Kay Stern.

I first heard Kim live last season, leading *Tosca* at Chicago Lyric Opera. That production ranked among the most consummate live opera experiences I have yet witnessed. Under Kim's baton, 'verismo' was no mere genre tag but a lens through which she interpreted the score, her interpretation alert, toned, and sometimes desolate. At the same time, she approached singers with generous latitude, their arias – Michelle Bradley's time-stopping 'Vissi d'arte,' a somehow sympathetic 'Già, mi dicono venal' from baritone Fabian Veloz – whisking us into the character's inner worlds.

In August, Kim and I spoke over Zoom, our second conversation; she was calling from the War Memorial Opera House, during a rehearsal break for San Francisco Opera's *Il trovatore*. One question still nagged at me. *How?* What does Kim do in that very first, pivotal rehearsal to endear herself to musicians so quickly and completely?

Her answer is simple. No introductions. No small talk. No big talk, for that matter – about the metaphysics of the score, historical context, transitions to watch out for.

'The first thing I do is give my hand to the concertmaster. Then, I give the downbeat,' Kim says, smiling. 'I have never done it differently.'

When Paris Opéra general director Alexander Neef went searching for a good fit for *Hoffmann* and the Callas centenary, Kim's reputation preceded her. Neef had been impressed by her leadership in the English National Opera's *Die Fledermaus* in 2013, and in Oper Frankfurt's *Der fliegende Holländer* in 2015.

'Sometimes you encounter an artist you like, and you just have to wait for the right moment for everything to coincide,' he says. 'The engagement for *Hoffmann* happened [first], and then we scheduled the Callas gala. We thought this might be a great way for her to have a second project in that period. Obviously, because Callas is a very important female artist, there was a desire to build a large team of other female artists to present this homage to her.'

Media coverage of Kim has made much of her gender and race – notable to be sure, as Kim is the first Asian woman to lead a major opera house not just in the US but anywhere. But for as many well-

meaning references hit the press, just as many carry the stale odour of tokenism.

'It's a hard job, it's a big job, whether you're a woman or a man. I want to be seen just as a conductor,' she told the *New York Times* in 2021.

It is no wonder that line of questioning does not interest Kim much. What she does on the podium, and how, manages to be even more noteworthy. In interviews with colleagues current and former, one word crops up again and again to describe Kim: collaborative.

They describe a musician who balances deference to her colleagues and the score with her own clear-eyed creative vision. Again and again, she refutes the received wisdom that podium despots achieve the most fine-grained musical results.

'She is fearless, she is humble, she respects composer intention,' says soprano Rachel Willis-Sørensen, who starred in the San Francisco *Rusalka* and reunites with Kim for *Hoffmann* at Paris Opéra. 'I've never worked with a conductor that was more prepared.'

At the time she sang Leonora in that San Francisco *Il trovatore*, Angel Blue had not worked with Kim before. But the same qualities Willis-Sørensen describes likewise stand out to her almost immediately.

'Yesterday, I noticed she let the assistant conductor start the rehearsals,' she says. 'Every time we moved to a different scene, she was in the back of the house listening to the levels. One time, she came forward and she said, "Okay, the second [violins] need to come out a little bit more; I need to do more of the bassoon and offstage harp". It's very special that she makes the time for that, and it takes a bit of humility, I would say, to give your baton to the assistant conductor.'

Just a few days into *Rusalka* rehearsals, in 2019, buzz about the production's guest conductor reached >

Conducting Puccini's
La bohème at the
Metropolitan Opera,
New York





‘The first thing I do is give my hand to the concertmaster. Then, I give the downbeat. I have never done it differently.’

Above: Eun Sun Kim’s debut with *La bohème* at Wiener Staatsoper in 2022

Inset: Kim at the opening night of *Turandot* at Houston Grand Opera



HOUSTON GRAND OPERA

San Francisco Opera’s general director Matthew Shilvock. Unusually, the excitement around Kim came not just from musicians but from stagehands and staffers. Shilvock, intrigued, sat in the pit for a subsequent *Rusalka* performance, something he had never done in his career.

‘There was an inclusiveness of music-making that invited everybody in,’ says Shilvock. He adds that he often catches Kim flashing a subtle thumbs-up to musicians during performances, a gesture he considers one of her ‘signatures.’ ‘Maybe a problematic passage they’ve been working on in rehearsal gets locked in. Eun Sun affirms when things go right in the moment, as opposed to someone who might sooner point out when things go wrong.’

San Francisco Opera concertmaster Kay Stern says: ‘There’s a feeling that we matter—that the result of this beautiful music-making is not just some guy on the podium. She understands the language, and even how the vowels and our bowings could be in unison.’

Make that many languages. A polyglot, Kim famously declines invitations to conduct operas in languages she does not herself speak. That

repertoire shrinks by the year: to date, her second languages include English, Spanish, German, Italian, French, and serviceable Czech. (Russian would be next, should Kim ever find herself with copious spare time.) She internalises each by listening to radio programmes around the clock and reading translations of Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays with Morrie*, a book she knows well enough to use as a reference point.

‘I can understand not only what the translation is but how the language [presents] the sentence differently,’ says Kim. ‘Like, “I hope this email finds you well” in English – I always laugh when I see that, because you could never translate that literally into other languages.’

Kim sometimes wonders if her team-player ethos has a linguistic root, as well. In Korean, she says, one would never say, for example, ‘my brother’ as a first-person possessive, at least in a literal translation. ‘It almost doesn’t exist. It’s always “our brother, our dad, our mom, our friends.” Our culture is really integrated: It’s about us. In that sense, it was very natural that I was saying, “Can we do this?”’

Her mindset doesn’t always translate. Kim cited an early podium appearance in Germany, when she was still a student, as an example. She would fastidiously translate and prepare her rehearsal phrases ahead of time, always using the most polite German form possible. During one rehearsal break, a ‘very friendly’ violinist told her the orchestra responded better to imperatives. ‘He said, “Miss Kim, you keep asking, “Can we do it? Or could we do it? What would you do if I said no?”’ Kim recounts the story with an uproarious laugh. Still, it registered as an important lesson. ‘In that moment, I learned it’s also a different culture.’

Kim insists she never had grand designs on being a conductor. While an undergraduate at Yonsei University, she was a rehearsal pianist for a student production of *La bohème* when a professor, Seung-Han Choi, insisted she try her hand at conducting. (In a full-circle moment, *Bohème* became the vehicle for her Wiener Staatsoper and La Scala debuts last season.) Kim’s early struggles with stage fright had already swept a solo piano career off the table. >

Main Stage | Eun Sun Kim

CORNWALLER



DEWALTZER

Kim leading the San Francisco Opera in its production of *Il trovatore*

Inset: Kim with John Adams and Paul Appleby at the world premiere of *Antony and Cleopatra* at San Francisco Opera in 2022

At the time Choi plopped her on the podium, she was studying composition but becoming disenchanted with that, too. ‘At that time, the style in our university was atonal and very abstract. I couldn’t find myself in that music,’ she said.

Kim still doesn’t know what Choi saw in her, only that he was right. Dispositionally, conducting was an immediate fit. She went from Seoul to Stuttgart for graduate work, from there assisting at the Teatro Real and the Opéra National de Lyon and becoming a regular guest at Oper Frankfurt and Staatsoper Berlin. To her, conducting requires less ego than a solo career, not more. ‘On the podium, it’s about the score and music-making with the experts, the professional musicians. So, it’s not about me.’

Before Stuttgart, Kim lived in Berlin for nine months. Attending concerts at the Philharmonie was a crash course in its own right. She still remembers her first, in early 2005. She was 24; the Berlin Philharmonic played Schubert’s Fifth Symphony. ‘I really couldn’t believe what I was hearing sound-wise. It was just like the CD I used to have in Korea, but in 3-D,’ she says, still awed by the memory. When she makes her debut with the same orchestra, in the same hall, in April, Choi, her conducting teacher, will be in the audience.

Kim is already making her mark in San Francisco, as close to a ‘home’ as her peripatetic career allows.

She has pledged to conduct one Wagner and one Verdi opera per season, which she will balance with the house’s taste for new titles, like John Adams’ *Antony and Cleopatra* last year. Since arriving at San Francisco Opera, she has also raised the pit in the War Memorial Opera House to better aurally integrate singers and orchestra.

But Kim is not at capacity yet. Asked if she would be interested in a symphony orchestra directorship in the near future, she answers swiftly and reflexively, like a downbeat. ‘Oh, yes, of course. I really try to balance between symphony music and opera. Working with orchestras is maybe more intimate, in a way, because it’s a very fast process.’

‘In opera, you have six to eight weeks. What fascinates me about the symphony is that you meet [the musicians] for the first time, then you do the concert within two days. You have to find that connection within that short time. Yet – it works.’

For many of us, when Kim’s on the podium, it does a lot more than just that. **ON**