

MEETING MAESTRA KIM

As music director of San Francisco Opera, Eun Sun Kim is confidently setting out her own calm, collaborative style with her fellow artists

BY JENNA SIMEONOV



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As trailblazers go, Eun Sun Kim – the South Korean conductor who started her tenure as music director of San Francisco Opera (SFO) in August 2021 – doesn’t fit the usual mold. Yes, she is the first woman and first Asian to lead a major American opera company, and was tapped for the coveted San Francisco post before turning 40, but it is Kim’s calm, collaborative approach to leadership that is making a mark.

Kim’s professional brand is subtle: she lacks the obvious calling cards of her conductor contemporaries – the fresh-faced energy of The Metropolitan Opera’s Yannick Nézet-Séguin, or the volatile mop of curly hair on the LA Philharmonic’s Gustavo Dudamel. Although she studied under the greats, Kim’s calm humility and easy laugh are a stark contrast next to the stoic air of old-guard maestros that include Daniel Barenboim, Riccardo Muti, and Herbert von Karajan.

“I really appreciated how attentive she was to the needs of singers, and her calm presence was reassuring,” says acclaimed French tenor Benjamin Bernheim, who sang with Kim at a 2020 Bastille Day concert under the Eiffel Tower. The pandemic-complicated concert brought “specific, unique challenges,” Bernheim adds. “Maestra Kim was able to adapt to these challenges and provide friendly and decisive leadership.”

BUILDING TRUST

When Kim takes the podium at the world’s major opera companies – from the Vienna State Opera to New York’s Metropolitan Opera – she does it with quiet confidence. Kim, dubbed by *The New York Times* as Classical Music Breakout Star of 2021, conducts with a clean and collaborative style, one that suggests deep trust between maestra and musicians. Admirably, she aims to only conduct operas written in languages she speaks – certainly no hard limitation for Kim, who speaks Korean, English, French, Spanish, Italian, and German, and who briefly considered a career as a translator.

Kim was so focused on making a top-notch SFO debut in 2019 that she didn’t even realize the gig was a major audition in disguise. “That was funny,” Kim smiles. She admits she’s never been the type to keep tabs on where her colleagues are working and what jobs might be up for grabs – including the fact that Nicola Luisotti, after a decade as music director, had stepped down from SFO in 2018.

As guest conductor for David McVicar’s production of *Rusalka* – the Czech opera that shares a story with *The Little Mermaid* – Kim was surprised when SFO General Director Matthew Shillock offered her the position between performances. “All the guest conductors after Luisotti left were possible candidates for music director. But I had *no* idea about that.”

Maybe her charming professional unaffectedness gave her an edge, freeing up that extra bit of brain space to focus on conducting an excellent show. Or maybe Kim really did have a sense that a big job was waiting for her, and she’s better than most at keeping her cool under pressure. But when a still-young conductor finds herself offered one of the biggest jobs in the American opera world, it signals a kind of simple power that many conductors work at and rarely achieve: an unwavering ability to do her job very, very well.

For Kay Stern, concertmaster of the SFO Orchestra, Kim’s sense of “generous collaboration” makes all the difference.

“The mutual respect she has for her role as music director and ours as an orchestra is obvious and it creates an enthusiastic desire to work together in a positive environment,” says Stern. “She has a strong, clear vision and together we will produce groundbreaking performances.” ▶

From left:
Eun Sun Kim
conducting
Tosca at SFO;
Kim leads a
rehearsal of
Rusalka at SFO



AN INNATE TALENT

Kim studied piano from a young age, her talents spotted early on by her mother, a fellow pianist. Her adult training started at Yonsei University in Seoul, where she studied composition. Conducting came slightly later, almost on a whim.

“Studying conducting was really out of curiosity,” Kim recalls, crediting one of her teachers with the suggestion to try it out. Even if she didn’t do it at a professional level, they explained, she would have the basic skills to rehearse her compositions.

The whim turned into a revelation. Though Kim was plagued by stage fright as a solo pianist, she made an important discovery: “I’m not nervous on the podium.”

It was 2008 when Kim first put her conducting skills to the test, in the López-Cobos International Opera Conductors Competition in Madrid, named for acclaimed Spanish conductor Jesús López-Cobos.

“They played in the way I was really imagining,” Kim remembers of her European debut, conducting the Madrid Symphony Orchestra. “I thought, OK, they understand me, obviously, and the communication is really going well.”

Armed with well-studied scores and almost no spoken Spanish, Kim’s first-prize win came with a coveted two-year spot working under López-Cobos as assistant conductor of the Teatro Real, making her the first woman to conduct at the company.

By the end of her first decade as a professional conductor, Kim had debuted at major opera houses in Frankfurt, Vienna, London, Oslo – nearly every major European house worth putting on her résumé. And when she made her North American debut in 2017, conducting *La traviata* at Houston Grand Opera, she was invited back as the company’s Principal Guest Conductor, a post that Kim still holds through 2023.

A MAESTRO MENTOR

She’d also earned coveted face time with star maestro Daniel Barenboim, music director of the Berlin State Opera and famed mentor of up-and-coming conductors. “He made me really think differently [about] how to read the score,” Kim says. After inundating him with her own technical questions, Barenboim challenged her to find answers to a new question: what did the musical notes mean?

“I was kind of ashamed of myself, that I was not even able to think about that. I never thought about it,” Kim recalls. “I asked him, ‘Maestro, why do you know everything?’”

She remembers Barenboim’s answer: “You’re too young to know all of that. At your age, I also didn’t know all about that. Now I’m 70. So, don’t worry about that, just carry on.”

Kim carried on indeed. Her 2022–23 season at SFO is the company’s centennial, and she’ll kick it off by conducting *Antony and Cleopatra*, the world premiere opera by John Adams (*Nixon in China, Doctor Atomic*). “Beethoven or Mozart or whoever . . . they were all contemporaries in their time. So, I think it’s really important that we bring our contemporary composers to the stage as well and support them.”

Kim is also unique among SFO music directors in the attention she gives to the company’s young artists, including her plans to conduct this season’s annual concert showcasing the Adler Fellows – SFO’s in-house group of emerging singers and pianists. It’s rare for a music director to perform with their



Kim with SFO
General Director
Matthew Shilvock

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young artists, but it’s a progressive move that signals Kim’s equal respect for both SFO’s mainstage output and its future.

“I’m just grateful [for] the way I was supported by the older generation,” says Kim, nodding to her teachers in Korea, and European mentors like López-Cobos and Barenboim. “I just want to give to the next generation.”

Now a high-profile face of an ongoing shift in classical music, Kim is finally making waves. Artists like Kim – not European, not male, humble, hardworking, and keen to pay it forward – have for a long time been enmeshed in the opera industry; but following Kim’s example, they are becoming more likely to assume leadership positions.

“It helps keep this art form alive and a part of today’s world and communities,” says Bernheim of diversity in opera, from the top down. “Inclusion and representation lead to better art.”

Even in 2022, it feels like a big deal for a small-statured woman of color to earn a job like music director of SFO by being a team player and making excellent music. But Kim swears by it, and her company returns the respect.

“When you’re a young leader in front of professional people, it’s not really about whether you know better than they do, but it’s more about how to get the best sound,” says Kim. “That’s really, I think, what I want to be as a conductor – to have the orchestra musicians play their best.”