


A Voyage with Giants

CAROLINE H. HUME MUSIC DIRECTOR EUN SUN KIM UNVEILS HER
NEW VERDI AND WAGNER INITIATIVE

BY ROGER PINES



This fall San Francisco Opera embarks on a glorious adventure, starring two of the greatest composers in operatic history: Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner. Beginning in 2023–24 with *Il Trovatore* and *Lohengrin*, Music Director Eun Sun Kim will conduct a Verdi and a Wagner opera every season well into the future.

No one is more excited about the Verdi/Wagner initiative than Kim herself. “It was my idea,” she explains. “After I debuted here with *Rusalka* (2019), we talked through other possibilities. When I accepted this position, Wagner was there from the beginning. I wanted to add Verdi as I planned my ongoing collaboration with the orchestra.”

Kim’s goal in that collaboration is to set priorities that will lead to the artistic growth of the Company. In considering how Verdi and Wagner can help in achieving that goal, she begins by comparing this project with a symphony music director’s cycles of Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann, or Mahler—“composers who showed enormous range within their own style as they developed.” It’s the same with Wagner and Verdi. Kim declares with great enthusiasm, “It will be wonderful to work with our orchestra on this repertoire on a long-term basis.”



Examining any Verdi or Wagner score is meaningful to Kim because “they have such depth musically, and you can’t detach the relationship between the music and the drama. The musical language simply *goes* with the drama! In bel canto opera, you have such beautiful melodies, but not necessarily with real drama behind them.” Wagner described his own works as “music drama,” but for Kim that phrase clearly applies to Verdi as well.

Initially, the Company will present better-known Verdi operas. (As a “prelude,” Kim led *La Traviata* last season.) The Verdi opera for 2023–24 will be a longtime audience favorite, *Il Trovatore*, written in 1853—the same year as *Traviata*—when the composer was mid-career. “I’m hoping we’ll move toward Verdi’s later works eventually,” says Kim, mentioning *Simon Boccanegra* as a work of particular interest.

Born in the same year (1813), Verdi and Wagner are described by Kim as “giants.” That designation comes, above all, from her feeling that “their music moves our hearts.” She’s also especially invigorated by the rhythmic vitality that makes Verdi immensely enjoyable to perform, both for singers and orchestral musicians. One word figuring prominently in Kim’s conversation is “nuance,” particularly vital in Wagner. “In a Wagner score, you can find nearly thirty measures within

which he might give only one musical indication, from *piano* to *crescendo*. How will you create the necessary nuances there? As opposed to Puccini, where in *La Bohème* he wrote four different musical indications in *one bar*.”

In addition to *Traviata*, Kim’s Verdi conducting to date has included *Rigoletto*, *Il Trovatore*, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, and the Requiem. In any Verdi work, she feels it is essential “to balance between bringing out the music’s virtuosity and making the drama happen.” She recognizes the excitement of the musically grand-scale, thrillingly impassioned episodes that abound in *Trovatore*, but she also appreciates the intimacy that Verdi makes possible: “His orchestra totally reflects the singers’ emotion, the *internal* voice of the characters—that’s what makes him one of the giants.”

In *Trovatore*, Kim can’t really pick a favorite moment, but she does especially relish the Manrico/Azucena duet in Act II, “which really *hurts* when you think about this story—it’s really *doloroso* [painful]. That’s a moment in the opera on which I am most concentrated. It’s not only *doloroso*, but also sensitive and delicate as well, in presenting the relationship between these two characters.”

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It's often lamented that there are few great Verdi singers nowadays, but the Company's *Trovatore* artists have been triumphantly successful internationally in Verdi roles. Kim has worked previously with Ekaterina Semenchuk and George Petean, but it will be a “first date” for her with the other three principals. Paraphrasing a quip from the legendary tenor Enrico Caruso, she notes that “I always joke that casting *Trovatore* is very easy—you just need to find the five best singers in the world,” adding, “I really think we have those singers on our team!”

As for Wagner, his music was new to Kim when she arrived in Europe from her native Korea to finish her studies. “In Germany, Wagner came into my life. I had to get over all the clichés about Wagner being long, boring, difficult.” Her first time conducting Wagner was an unexpected work, rarely heard today: *Das Liebesverbot*. “I don't feel I need to perform it again,” she said of the composer's first staged opera, written at age twenty-two, “but it was a great beginning in getting to know Wagner.” That production in Meiningen was followed by *Der Fliegende Holländer*, first in Bergen and then Frankfurt. It was a Bergen performance for students that showed Kim how Wagner could affect an audience. Her listeners, ranging in age from seven-year-olds to teenagers, were “so silent, so into the drama. At the end, it was like a rock concert—they went *crazy* over that music! Wagner speaks to kids, to adults, to everyone.”

Kim is clearly delighted to launch the Wagner portion of the Verdi/Wagner initiative with her first *Lohengrin*, the work with which Wagner began to find his own style. “With *Holländer* and *Tannhäuser*, Wagner was experimenting,” Kim notes. “*Lohengrin* is the first piece where he's on the way to getting rid of ‘numbers’ [distinctly defined, self-contained arias and duets].” When Wagner wrote about the *Lohengrin* Act I prelude, “he said he wanted it to be ‘*erstmalig, einmalig, neuartig*’ [as if for the first time, unique, new], and also *überirdisch* [unearthly, celestial]. That music is a perfect way to begin the opera.”

Wagner composed magnificently for the *Lohengrin* chorus. Kim hopes it will be clear that as they observe a scene and responds to it, “they're really just human beings like us.” Kim looks forward to working on *Lohengrin* with the Company's choristers: “In our rehearsals we'll work on details, nuances, and on how we'll drive the drama forward.”

Surprisingly, Kim finds *Lohengrin* relatable to contemporary lives. No matter that it was created nearly 175 years ago: “What makes us human beings hasn't drastically changed! Figures like Lohengrin, like Ortrud, are always present in our own time. As long as the storytelling is



caption. / CREDIT



caption. / CREDIT

strong and it works onstage, I think the audience can connect with the piece very easily.” She’s reminded in that respect of last season’s *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, where “you could feel the audience’s energy, how connected they were to the drama. That’s the power of a live performance, and why we all gather together to experience it.”

As with *Trovatore*, Kim can’t wait to collaborate with the *Lohengrin* cast. “I haven’t worked with [tenor] Simon O’Neill, but I’ve heard him perform a lot in Europe. There’s such clarity in his voice, and what he does with the text makes the storytelling meaningful. Heldentenor repertoire is physically demanding and the singer must pace himself, yet without letting the audience think, ‘Oh, now he’s saving his energy to get to the end.’ Simon understands this. I have huge respect for him.” Opposite O’Neill is Julie Adams, a former Adler Fellow singing her first Elsa. “I’ve been working with her on the role since last summer. We’re both people who are picky about the details—this work has been really exciting.”

Kim hasn’t seen the productions by Sir David McVicar (*Il Trovatore*) and David Alden (*Lohengrin*), but she conducted the McVicar *Rusalka* in San Francisco “and I admired its wonderful *Personenführung* [lit., “guidance of the characters”]. When seen in London, Alden’s

Lohengrin was hailed by *Bachtrack*’s critic as “provoking far more thought and tension than any *Lohengrin* I’ve ever seen.” Kim is “very, very excited to finally work with David Alden. Like David McVicar, he’s totally connected with the *music* as well as the drama in all his productions.”

In all the upcoming Verdi and Wagner repertoire, Kim knows that “what the audience gets from the live performances will always be different. For longtime subscribers, I hope experiencing these operas will be meaningful for them, and that they’ll realize how closely the orchestra and I are connected—that we’re a team. And for firstcomers, I hope these operas will be a special voyage of discovery. If one of our performances is a life-changing moment for them, what more can I expect?”

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