



TAKING A BOW

As music director James Conlon prepares to leave L.A. Opera, he reflects on the two-decade career that he never saw coming. *by* LIBBY SLATE



HERE'S SOME EASY—but significant—math. L.A. Opera is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year. James Conlon has been its music director for 20 years. Which means that when he takes his final curtain call in that role for *The Magic Flute*, June 21 at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion downtown, he will have served as music director for half of L.A. Opera's existence.

More numbers: In those two decades, the maestro will have conducted 70 operas by 32 composers, a total of 519 performances; his milestone 500th performance



James Conlon-led productions include Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* and, above, *The Magic Flute*. Opposite: *Falstaff*, top, and Conlon



James Conlon leads last year's staging of *Così fan tutte*.

came during this season's opening production, *West Side Story*.

And then there's that nice round zero when it comes to Conlon's conducting cancellations thus far.

"I don't think I've ever canceled a performance," Conlon says in a phone interview, enjoying the February sun in his Los Angeles backyard. "I was thinking of that the other day—was I ever too ill not to do it? I have to fact-check that and get back to you."

And he does, confirming that impressive record. As for orchestra rehearsals, "I only missed two the entire time, when I had Covid."

Good health? Yes, but also the sort of devotion that audiences and colleagues have come to expect from Conlon, who shares his knowledge and enthusiasm for opera not only via his conducting finesse, but with popular pre-show talks—available for viewing on YouTube—program notes and podcasts.

But now he's moving on, having announced in March 2024 that he would be stepping down as music director at the end of the 2025-2026 season, to pursue other professional and personal opportunities. He'll be honored with—and conduct—a gala concert at the Pavilion April 24, and conduct two more operas, *Falstaff* (April 18-May 10) and the aforementioned *The Magic Flute* (May 30-June 21). Happily, he'll continue his association with the company as conductor laureate, a lifetime appointment, and return to guest conduct; Venezuelan-Armenian conductor Domingo Hindoyan succeeds him as music director.

"I never expected to stay 20 years," Conlon says. "I've had a great time, a great run. It's brought me to an age [76] where, you know, I don't feel I've got to do that anymore. I've been a music director now for 47 years of my life, simultaneously in Europe and the U.S., sometimes two

or even three places at once."

Conlon had had no particular connection to Los Angeles, other than a few conducting engagements, when Plácido Domingo, then L.A. Opera's general director, called and asked if he'd be interested in becoming music director.

A native of Queens, New York, and a Julliard graduate who knew at age 13 that he wanted to be a conductor, he had spent more than 20 years in Europe, as principal conductor of the Paris Opera, general music director of the City of Cologne, Germany and music director of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. Stateside, he'd conducted numerous times at the Metropolitan Opera and was deep into what would turn out to be a 37-year tenure as music director of the Cincinnati May Festival, the oldest choral festival in the United States.

"[The L.A. Opera offer] came out of the blue," recalls Conlon, whose

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official title is Richard Seaver music director, named for the late philanthropist and opera board CEO/president. "I didn't look for it; I didn't ask for it. I had to think about it, but I didn't have to think that long, because first of all, I knew and loved Plácido from a long time back. And he asked me a few questions—what I might want to do and what were my visions."

Conlon's ideas included performing Richard Wagner's epic, ambitious productions, which he considered a delineating marker of a music director's abilities, as well as continuing to be the kind of music director he'd grown up admiring, one who is responsible for a wide and varied swath of the operatic repertory.

That way, he says of the latter, "you can build the musical profile of the house, orchestra, chorus, singers, music staff—all of that, of course, in harmony, or sometimes disharmony, with stage directors. You can build [the company] into a strong musical institution."

When he arrived at L.A. Opera in 2006, succeeding Kent Nagano, "I immediately found the atmosphere congenial, both in the opera house and in L.A.," Conlon says. "I fell in love with L.A. Some of my fellow New Yorkers would

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find that idea anathema.”

While maintaining their New York apartment, he and his family also established a home base in L.A. His wife, Jennifer Ringo, is a former opera singer turned vocal coach, who worked on the recent Pasadena Playhouse production of *Amadeus*. Their older daughter Luisa is an award-winning documentary filmmaker; younger daughter Emma is an actress in London.

The company did present its first complete Wagner Ring Cycle in 2010, accompanied by the countywide Ring Festival

L.A., which examined the work’s cultural impact. Prior to that, in 2007, L.A. Opera had launched another of Conlon’s visions: Recovered Voices, which presents works by lesser-known composers who were silenced by the Holocaust.

He counts the program as one of the highlights of his L.A. Opera career. It has since expanded to become Music Restored: The Ziering-Conlon Center for Exiled and Suppressed Composers, based at the Colburn School downtown, of which he is artistic director. As a passionate advocate for the composers and their music, “It’s a moral man-



James Conlon at a pre-opera talk

date,” he says, “to restore to its proper place any art that has been sidelined or destroyed. We cannot give these composers back their lives, but we can revive their music and play it regularly. It is a form of remembrance.”

The works and their creators should also be included in music history

accounts, he adds, and artistically, “a lot of great and worthy music has simply remained neglected. This music is being played much more now, but not nearly enough.”

He’s immensely proud of bringing Benjamin Britten’s opera *Noah’s Flood* to Los Angeles in his first season, conducting

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it every subsequent year except during Covid, in which children and adult members of the community perform with professionals. This year, there will be two free performances (May 7-8) at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels downtown.

“It’s a great thing for the community,” he enthuses. “It is always full. You can’t imagine how many young people come up and say, ‘I was in *Noah’s Flood*,’ or ‘I sang at the Cathedral.’ That gives me great satisfaction, because I was bitten by the bug of being in the theater as a young teenager—in the children’s chorus of an opera company in New York—and I wanted to share it.

“At that age, it can be a gift for life.”

As for his Pavilion performances in his final season, “I chose two operas I love and revere, Verdi’s and Mozart’s last operas, *Falstaff* and *The Magic Flute* [respectively],” he says. “I chose to make the program of the gala Mozart, Wagner and Verdi, because I believe that those three composers still have to be the pillars of an opera house, and because they’ve been with me all my life. I want to share them in a last gala with our audience.”

Leaving is bittersweet, he admits. He has, he says, “a great sense of pleasure and satisfaction

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in what we did together.” But he will miss the L.A. Opera Orchestra members, with whom he’s developed a deep bond, the chorus and all the others without whom there would be no L.A. Opera. During curtain calls, “I wish I could bring out on the stage all the people who work backstage, in the costume shop and in administration, to take bows, too,” he remarks.

Similarly, while he acknowledges he played a role in the company’s four Grammy Award wins during his tenure—two each for John Corigliano’s *The Ghosts of Versailles* in 2017 and for Kurt Weill’s *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* in 2009—he’s quick to give credit to all those involved.

“I’m always happy to have recognition, and always grateful,” he reflects. “But to me, if you give a good or a great performance, if you move people, that’s the reward. The reward is in the doing.

“That is where I’ve lived my life, and that’s the way I would like to leave this job, feeling that I gave every ounce of what I had in me—my music, my intellect, my passion—to the audience, the performers and my other colleagues every night.

“That was my goal. That’s my reward. And when I leave and walk out at the end of June, that is the only reward that will mean anything to me.”

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