

Bel Canto

Music by Jimmy López

Libretto by Nilo Cruz

Based on the novel by Ann Patchett

Scenic design for *Bel Canto* by David Korins

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Bel Canto

Opera in two acts in Spanish, English, French, Japanese, Russian, Italian, German, Latin, and Quechua

By Jimmy López
Libretto by Nilo Cruz, based on the novel by Ann Patchett

CHARACTERS

Roxane Coss, an American soprano..... Soprano
Katsumi Hosokawa, the chairman of an electronics corporation
in Japan Bass
General Alfredo, the leader of the revolutionary organization MRTA Tenor
General Benjamín, second in command of MRTA Bass
Joachim Messner, a representative of the Red Cross Baritone
Gen Watanabe, Mr. Hosokawa's translator Tenor
Carmen, a young member of MRTA Mezzo-soprano
Christopf, Roxane's accompanist Tenor
Rubén Iglesias, the vice president of Peru Tenor
Father Arguedas, a Catholic priest Baritone
César, a young member of MRTA Countertenor
Simon Thibault, the French ambassador Baritone
Edith Thibault, his wife Mezzo-soprano
Victor Fyodorov, a Russian diplomat Bass
Ismael, a young member of MRTA Tenor
Beatriz, a young member of MRTA Soprano
German woman, a diplomat Soprano
The Spanish ambassador to Peru Tenor
A soldier of the Peruvian army Baritone
Chorus of MRTA revolutionaries
Chorus of hostages

SETTING

A stately two-story mansion in Lima, Peru, 1996.

THE STORY

ACT I

SCENE 1

Diplomats, government officials, and executives are gathered at the home of the Peruvian vice president, Rubén Iglesias, to celebrate the birthday of Katsumi Hosokawa, head of a large Japanese electronics company ("Peru, real and unreal"). Mr. Hosokawa arrives and greets the vice president with the help of his translator, Gen Watanabe. His entrance is followed by the elegant Roxane Coss, a world-renowned soprano—and Mr. Hosokawa's favorite singer—hired for the evening's entertainment. The guests gather as Mr. Hosokawa thanks them ("Mr. Hosokawa's gratitude"). The vice president introduces Roxane's performance, and she sings a piece composed especially for the occasion ("You were destined to come here").

Midway through the performance, there is an explosion. A priest, Father Arguedas, begins reciting the Lord's Prayer as the frightened guests rush to the windows. A band of guerrillas storms the room and orders everyone to the floor ("The assault"). The vice president tries to call for help on his cell phone but is caught and severely beaten. Generals Benjamín and Alfredo demand to see the president. The vice president explains truthfully that he stayed home to watch his soap opera. Deprived of their intended hostage, the guerrillas inform the partygoers that now they are all the property of the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement ("We are the guerrilleros"). Searchlights play across the windows as sirens and helicopters are heard.

SCENE 2

Morning. The hostages, who have spent the night on the floor, are awakened by a muffled announcement from outside demanding that the rebels

Synopsis

release the hostages ("A voice from outside"). Mr. Hosokawa shakes Gen awake to translate.

Joachim Messner, a Red Cross emissary, arrives. Reluctantly, the rebels allow him entry. The vice president and the other hostages urge the rebels to heed Messner and free them ("Joachim Messner, the messenger"). After airing their demands of a better life for the poor and the liberation of a long list of imprisoned comrades, the captors agree to let the injured, infirm, and elderly hostages go with Messner ("Listen to him"). Though very ill, Roxane's accompanist Christopf refuses to leave her, and Father Arguedas and one of the young soldiers gently help him to a sofa.

Intrigued by the young soldier, Gen initiates a brief conversation that leaves him feeling uneasy—and full of desire. Meanwhile Mr. Hosokawa, infatuated with Roxane and feeling responsible for the entire incident, tries to apologize to her without the help of his translator. Despite the lack of words, they begin to communicate. Meanwhile, Gen's fascination with the young soldier increases as they converse again. Time begins to take on new meaning for the four of them ("Momentary words").

SCENE 3

A week has passed. Chairs are stacked in front of the windows. General Benjamín adds a new stroke to a rude tally he's been keeping on the wall, counting the days since the siege began. In their imaginations, hostages and captors alike picture life outside the walls of the mansion ("Beyond").

Messner enters and tells the generals they need to put aside their ideals and be practical. They refuse ("Messner's return"). General Alfredo, frustrated, trains his gun on Roxane and orders her to sing. Her song entrances all, including the young soldier, whose secret long hair comes undone during the performance, captivating Gen again ("Without words"). Suddenly, General Alfredo breaks the spell, angrily ordering Roxane to cease her beguilement.

Messner pleads for a temporary solution, but General Alfredo digs in his heels with a diatribe intended in part to inspire his soldiers ("We're not temporary warriors"). Messner, joined variously by Roxane, Gen, Hosokawa, and even the young soldier, argue for the release of at least the women. During the argument, General Alfredo addresses the young soldier by name—Carmen—revealing that she is a woman.



Photo: Andrew Cioffi

The Bel Canto set during tech rehearsals, summer, 2015.

Unexpectedly, General Alfredo relents and orders the women and Father Arguedas to leave. Father Arguedas insists on staying with the hostages. As the women begin filing out, General Alfredo roughly pulls Roxane from the line and announces that she must stay. Christoph, delirious, attacks him and is shot and killed by one of the soldiers. The generals are furious, for they had ordered that there be no shooting.

Carmen prays in Quechua, the indigenous language spoken by most of the rebels; Father Arguedas prays in Latin. Hostages and captors alike express their shock, and the hope and sorrow that is Peru ("There is no death").

ACT II

SCENE 1

General Benjamín adds another stroke to the wall, indicating another two weeks have passed. Hostages and captors engage in ordinary activities: hanging laundry, reading the paper, conversing.

A fog the Peruvians call *la garúa* settles over the mansion. Father Arguedas explains that *la garúa* has been worshiped as a sacred visitor since the time of the Incas. All solemnly welcome the fog ("La garúa").

The mood is broken when the rebels begin a rowdy game of soccer in the living room ("The game"). Roxane muses with Mr. Hosokawa about the days they have lost in captivity ("Lost days").

Another day passes. A frustrated Messner arrives with supplies to find Mr. Hosokawa playing chess with a soldier, General Alfredo selecting newspaper clippings, and Roxane at the piano. Among the supplies is sheet music for Roxane. There has been no progress in the standoff. Another day passes.

Outside the mansion, the women hostages released earlier hold a candlelight vigil ("Libertad"). Carmen says a prayer ("Santa Rosa de Lima"), then goes to Gen and begins to caress him.

Another day. Mr. Hosokawa plays chess with General Alfredo. With Gen interpreting, the Russian hostage Victor Fyodorov awkwardly professes his

love to Roxane ("An art book"). Mr. Hosokawa watches and muses on his own love for Roxane ("Waking to her voice").

Another stroke on the wall. Searchlights shine through the windows and a muffled megaphone is heard. A worried Messner confesses to General Alfredo that the negotiations are going nowhere ("They're making threats"). Furious, General Alfredo slaps him, and Hosokawa intervenes. Messner asserts his neutrality ("Diplomacy").

The next day, the soldiers Ismael, Beatriz, and César hear a report on the radio news and argue about the effectiveness of their mission ("The news").

Frustrated, César leaves the others and, alone, remembers his former life in the jungle and the day he discovered his ability to sing ("La voz de los arboles/The voice of the trees"). Roxane overhears his singing and is drawn to his voice. When he realizes she is listening, he runs to the door, embarrassed. He flings it open, and the room is flooded with light. The fog has lifted.

SCENE 2

A month later. Messner, looking disheveled and overworked, enters with supplies and fresh clothes. He finds the generals and one of the soldiers playing cards with Fyodorov. Father Arguedas is cutting bread, the vice president is mending a military jacket, Beatriz is decorating her rifle with flowers. Meanwhile, Roxane gives César a singing lesson with Gen translating and Mr. Hosokawa looking on. Messner is aghast that all are complacently going about their lives despite the untenable situation ("Entering Utopia").

He tries to shake them from their stupor, warning that the government is just biding its time ("The end of Utopia").

Saying he's failed everyone, Messner tears off his Red Cross armband and implores the generals to save themselves and give up the siege ("Save yourselves"). He collapses, shivering, and some of the captors gently help him to bed.

Synopsis

Father Argueda calls everyone together for prayer, and the group sings a Gregorian chant. With Gen translating, Roxane surreptitiously asks Carmen to bring Mr. Hosokawa to her room that night ("A prayer").

Later, in the dark of night, Roxane and Mr. Hosokawa fall into each other's arms in Roxane's room ("Night takes form"), as do Carmen and Gen in a pantry by the kitchen ("Love in the china closet").

SCENE 3

Morning. Father Arguedas and the vice president serve coffee to the hostages. Messner, who has spent the night, tells Roxane they're at the point where only a miracle can bring about a peaceful solution ("Another day").

General Alfredo signals for the hostages to clear the floor so the soldiers can play soccer. Roxane protests that it's time for César's singing lesson. General Alfredo agrees to take the game outdoors ("A reckless game").

With halting attempts to speak each others' languages, Mr. Hosokawa and Carmen conspiratorially agree that the previous night was unforgettable. César warms up his voice with Roxane accompanying him at the piano ("The coming attack").

Rumbling arises from inside the house, and three Peruvian soldiers burst up through the floor. César tries to flee and is shot. A frantic Mr. Hosokawa tries to protect Carmen, but both are shot. Chaos ensues as more soldiers storm the room, hostages flee, and gunfire is everywhere. The vice president orders the soldiers to cease fire. Roxane rushes to Hosakawa, but he is already dead. Gen finds Carmen, and she dies in his arms ("Don't leave me").

The dead are carried off, and everyone exits except Roxane, who is left kneeling on the floor in the wake of the violence ("You're not gone").

THE END

**My pain, my pain, has now rehearsed.
It has resounded in my heart,
and now summons me to sing.
For I have met terror on this land,
but also kindness, humility,
deliverance and love.
I must move forward and ahead...
I must, I must move forward
Like the movement of the days...**

*– The last lines of the opera, from Roxane's final aria
"You're not gone."*

Photo: Andrew Cloffi

Detail of the Bel Canto set; the tally of days.

The Architecture of Music: **Jimmy López**

Jimmy López remembers sitting at the piano with his father every night after dinner. “He didn’t only listen to me play,” López says, “He...gave his opinions about this or that composer and gave me suggestions on how to improve my own little compositions. He did all of this without having any idea of what he was talking about, by the way, but what’s funny is that he was actually right a lot of the time.... He used to say that architecture and music had a lot in common, and now I see what he meant.”

López was born in Lima, Peru, in 1978 to an architect and a teacher. He grew up listening to “Top 40” until he discovered classical music at age twelve. When that happened, he says, “I couldn’t let it go.” He decided he wanted to be a composer. In 1994, the newly founded Lima Philharmonic held rehearsals in López’s school auditorium. López’s father convinced conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya, the orchestra’s founding music director and conductor, to take the teen on as an assistant librarian. The young composer made copies, delivered flowers, and most importantly, attended rehearsals and performances. At age sixteen he wrote his first orchestra piece “without having studied harmony, counterpoint or orchestration—working solely...on my intuition.” At twenty, he entered the National Conservatory of Music in Lima, followed by the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, where he earned a Masters in Music. López completed his Ph.D. at the University of California-Berkeley.

Eager for his work to be heard, López co-founded kohoBeat, a Finnish non-profit dedicated to promoting the music of new composers by organizing classical and contemporary music concerts in Finland and abroad. “Music is written to be listened to,” he says. “So one must always make an effort, especially when young, to have one’s music played.”

In 2010, López was sitting in a Thai restaurant with his partner (now husband) Heleno when Harth-Bedoya called, asking López to post all the vocal music he had on his YouTube channel. Renée Fleming was looking for a composer for a new project. Several months after that, López found himself in Fleming’s Manhattan apartment. When Fleming mentioned the source material, López felt “the stars were aligning.” He remembered firsthand the events that inspired the novel. “Ann Patchett never says it takes place in Lima, but



Photo: Andrew Cioffi

Jimmy López in the Civic Opera House for tech rehearsals, July, 2015.

she makes several references that any Peruvian would understand...I told Renée...I had a very personal connection with the material, even without having read the book.” López was eighteen when the hostage crisis began and remembers, “The whole country was glued to their TVs.”

In terms of the technical aspects of composing his first opera, López draws a comparison to his father’s profession. “My father is an architect—I understand how they think. You have to plan the whole structure first, make sure the base is solid and strong enough to support weight equally, make sure the ground is stable...I never write chronologically,” he says, “If you want a solid foundation, you have to go back and forth. The first thing I did was write the most important arias, which are the pillars of the story.”

The past few years have been a whirlwind for López. His works have been performed by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, the Helsinki Philharmonic, and the National Symphony Orchestra of Peru, among many others. He recalls a late-night work session last year spent revising orchestrations with Harth-Bedoya in preparation for recording the first album dedicated entirely to López’s orchestral works. At a table cluttered with pencils, erasers, and sheet music, López was struck by the memory of a similar scene 18 years before, when he was working at the Lima Philharmonic. “At that moment,” he says, “I felt as if a whole episode of my life had come full circle. Here I was, no longer a teenager but a composer in his mid-thirties, sitting with Miguel and working together on my own music for a recording with a top orchestra in Norway...One never knows what the future has in store for us, and sometimes it surpasses our expectations.”

A Poetry of the Theater: **Nilo Cruz**

Nilo Cruz was born in 1960 in Matanzas, Cuba, a city with a rich literary and artistic heritage. In those early post-revolution days, Cubans were emigrating in droves. Cruz says his parents, Nilo Sr. and Tina, had at first been pro-revolution, but as the movement grew more Marxist, "they thought it was time to go." When Cruz was a toddler, his father was imprisoned for attempting to emigrate to the U.S. Finally, in 1970, Cruz and his parents would make it to Little Havana in Miami, Florida, on a Freedom Flight, leaving behind his two older sisters who had to stay because their husbands were of military age.

Cruz remembers Miami as being rife with racial tension. The family worked at adjusting to life as exiles. Cruz's mother found a job in a factory, his father at a shoe store. Cruz went to school, learned English, and began writing poetry. When he was a teenager, his mother told him, "You're a writer," and gave him a typewriter.

Theater, he says, "sort of fell in my lap." He tagged along with friends to a theater course at a community college and started writing his own scenes to perform in class. The professor suggested he might be a playwright. Later, he met playwright Maria Irene Fornés, who invited him to her Intar Hispanic Playwrights Laboratory. "From then on," he says, "my life changed." He got an MFA from Brown University and became a member of New Dramatists in New York.

In 2003, Cruz became the first Cuban-American playwright to win a Pulitzer Prize. *Anna in the Tropics* is set in a 1929 cigar factory in which a lector entertains

the workers by reading *Anna Karenina*. *Anna in the Tropics*, says Cruz, "is about the power of art and how art can actually change your life." Many of Cruz's plays deal with the immigrant experience, the struggles of those who are oppressed and displaced. It was his play *Two Sisters and a Piano*, about siblings living under house arrest in Cuba, that convinced Jimmy López that Cruz was the librettist for *Bel Canto*: "The whole play happens within the house from beginning to end," said López, "This is what made me think Nilo might be the one."

Cruz has built a reputation for writing that is lush and poetic. John Williams of *American Theatre* magazine called his plays "imagistic dramatic poems...rich in myth, symbol, and metaphor." Director Emily Mann, who has staged several of his plays, says Cruz has "a kind of poetry of the theater that Tennessee Williams had, a language that spins a beautiful atmosphere."

Cruz remembers his uncle reciting poems by Cuban poet José Martí in the midst of a party. "Everybody made it a point in the old days to learn songs," he says, "but more than anything to learn poetry. I remember actually what got me started writing was reading a poem by Emily Dickinson when I was ten years old here in exile, and I remember reading that poem and saying, 'I want to do this. I want to write.'" Poetry, Cruz says, has always been a part of his life: "I think that you can find poetry everywhere...I see words, I see language for the stage as music."

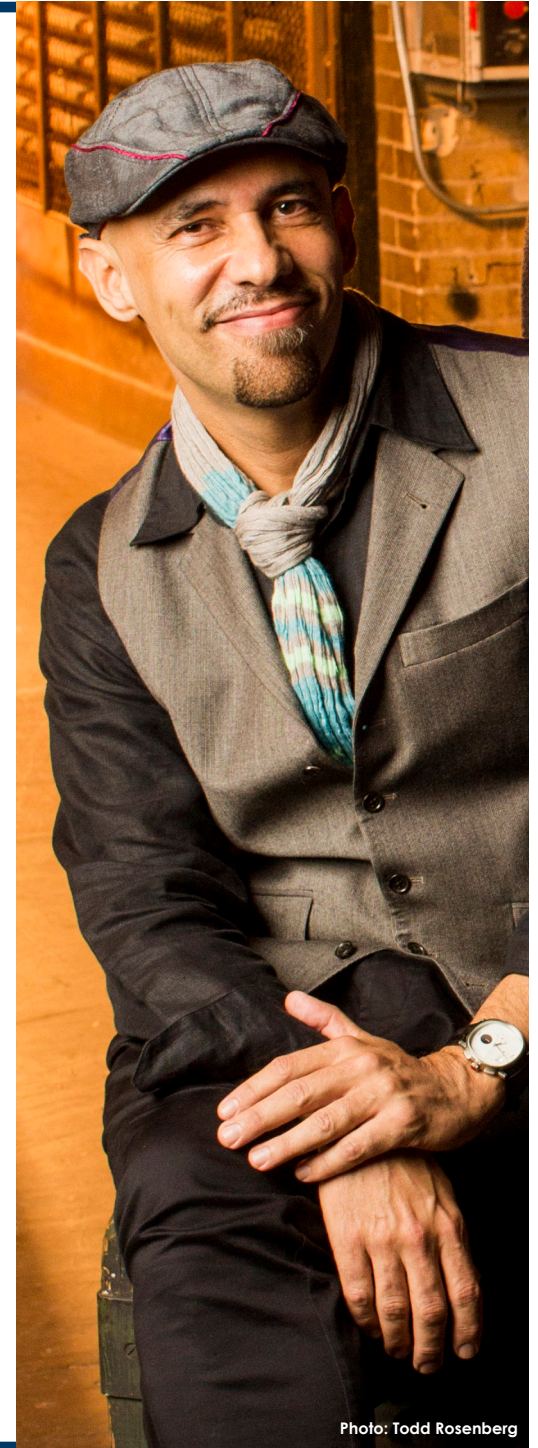


Photo: Todd Rosenberg

A Collaborative Endeavor

Composer Jimmy López, librettist Nilo Cruz, director Kevin Newbury, creative consultant Renée Fleming, music director Sir Andrew Davis, soprano Danielle de Niese, general director Anthony Freud, and many others. As with every opera, many hands, minds, and voices have come together to bring *Bel Canto* to the Lyric stage. And, as with every opera, each step of the way has involved intense collaboration.

Even Ann Patchett's writing of the novel became a collaboration of sorts. Although she based the character of Roxane on a friend who was an opera singer, it was Renée Fleming's voice that she listened to while she wrote: "I would pick the piece that [Roxane] would sing in a particular scene...and then I would line it up on the stereo and just have it replay 20 times while I would write the scene and try to write in the feeling of the music."

While Patchett set the novel in an unnamed South American country, Jimmy López wanted to introduce a dose of history into the libretto. His idea was "to throw in a phrase here and there, suggesting what's going on in the negotiations, or...the interests of each character. We have a lot of little hints that complement the story, for anyone interested in...further research, they will understand those references. That adds to the wealth of the libretto."

In their partnership, López and librettist Nilo Cruz shared a commitment to, in López's words, "put [their] egos aside." There was give and take as composer and librettist worked side by side. "I gave him ideas of what I wanted for Carmen, for example, and then he wrote an aria for Carmen at my request," says López, who would sometimes memorize Cruz's lines and then take a walk and imagine the music that would bring them to life.

There was a similar exchange between López and stage director Kevin Newbury, and even between López, Cruz, and Danielle de Niese who will sing Roxane. After listening to de Niese sing, Cruz suggested extending her aria, and de Niese had some suggestions of her own. López also relied on what he called Fleming's "global understanding" of *Bel Canto*. Initially,



Photo: Todd Rosenberg

Left to right: director Kevin Newbury, librettist Nilo Cruz, set designer David Korins, Lyric music director Sir Andrew Davis, costume designer Constance Hoffman, composer Jimmy López, Lyric general director Anthony Freud.

he says, he'd thought the penultimate scene was going to be very dark harmonically. Fleming suggested López shift the mood of the scene to one of joy and hope to heighten the contrast with the tragic events that follow.

In López's words, "With everyone working on this project, we've always had a similar mindset in terms of what we want to achieve. Some people might say 'too many cooks,' and so forth—I don't think so. What you're going to hear is a very collaborative endeavor, the epitome of what collaboration is."

If there is one remaining group of collaborators in *Bel Canto*, it is all of us—the audience. At one point in the novel, the Russian diplomat Fyodorov says, "It is a kind of talent in itself, to be an audience, whether you are the spectator in the gallery or you are listening to the voice of the world's greatest soprano." Patchett agrees: "I believe literature takes place between the writer and the reader. You bring your imagination, they bring theirs, and together you make a book.... Fyodorov was acknowledging the talent of the audience, the importance of the person who listens, reads, sees. I believe this absolutely. He makes a case of the audience member who has trained himself to understand, to more fully appreciate the art."

An Exchange with **Jimmy López**

During the summer of 2015, writer Maia Morgan and Lyric audience education manager Jesse Gram sent *Bel Canto* composer Jimmy López a series of questions. Here are the results.

MM: What music did you hear growing up? What were your early experiences with music? What are your biggest musical, cultural, or literary influences as a composer?

JL: One could say that, in my case, there's before Bach and after Bach. My first encounter with Bach's music was in 1991, when I listened to a music teacher playing his two-part invention No. 13 in A minor at my school. Until then I was only listening to regular mainstream pop music, but after that I started listening almost exclusively to classical music. I started playing the piano when I was five but I was not really serious about it; my sister was taking lessons and I liked it so I decided to do it as well, but it was only after my encounter with Bach that I started to consider dedicating my life to music.

I've had several influences at different stages of my career. After Bach, from whom I learned polyphony, I started to discover Mozart's melodic genius. I then went on to admire Beethoven's motivic discipline, and in my late teens, I discovered Stravinsky's revolutionary rhythmical structures. His orchestral music in particular struck a chord with me because, at about the same time I discovered his music, the Lima Philharmonic Orchestra (which used to rehearse at my high school's auditorium) was founded. You can imagine what a luxury it was for a young, aspiring composer to be able to listen to three-hour-long orchestra rehearsals almost every single night.

Also around that time, I cemented my knowledge of harmony with Peruvian composer Enrique Iturriaga, who taught me all about it using Schoenberg's *Harmonielehre*. Later on, when I moved to Finland, I studied Debussy's refined orchestrations and Sibelius's architectural formal thinking. In my early and mid-twenties I was truly fascinated by Gérard Grisey's monumental *Les Espaces Acoustiques* and with Krzysztof Penderecki's early period. The list goes on, with composers such as John Adams, Georg Friedrich Haas, John Corigliano, Magnus Lindberg, Anders Hillborg, and several others making a deep impression on me.

JG: Are there other opera composers who've inspired you?

JL: It's interesting how we tend to categorize composers as "opera composers," "film composers," "concert music composers," etc. Even though those categories make total sense, I don't listen to music that way. It is true that certain composers specialize in a specific genre and are invariably associated with it, such as Rossini (opera), Chopin (piano), and Herrmann (film), but I tend to prefer composers who have transcended those labels, like Mozart, Beethoven, Debussy, or Stravinsky. They wrote in practically every genre available to them and were mostly successful at it, so I'd like to follow their steps. But let me explain what I mean when I say that I don't listen to music that way.

A composer like Wagner can be justly categorized as an opera composer, but within his operas there is so much great symphonic music that when I listen to him, I just hear great music, regardless of whether there are words involved or not. Sibelius never wrote an opera and he is mostly known for his symphonies, but he



Photo: Todd Rosenberg

An Exchange with **Jimmy López**



Photo: Andrew Cloffi

Jimmy López

wrote so many beautiful songs and choral works that I consider him equally talented in both instrumental and vocal music; again, when I listen to him, all I hear is fantastic music.

In other words, I am inspired by great music, whether for guitar, film, voice, or orchestra. In this sense, a vocal passage could be influenced by a work for marimba, and a piece for piano might be influenced by a work involving electronics. When we talk about a composer's initial inspiration, the actual physical vehicle (i.e. the instrument) doesn't matter because, before we write it down, music exists in an abstract place devoid of all material associations. Obviously, once we decide to write it down, we must choose the sound vehicle so that we can write idiomatically for it, but that is only one of the stages of the compositional process, and certainly not the first.

We can even go beyond this and say that a composer can be influenced by any artistic manifestation like film, painting, poetry, or sculpture. Even math, physics, and philosophy have sparked ideas in me! My sources of inspiration are so broad and diverse that I can confidently say that when writing an opera—or any other kind of musical piece for that matter—I pour all my accumulated knowledge and experience into the score, and not only that knowledge which is directly related to the work I'm writing.

MM: The hostage incident that inspired *Bel Canto* took place when you were 18. What do you remember about it? What impression did it leave on you as a young person, especially since a number of the guerrillas were teenagers themselves?

JL: I remember almost everything about it quite vividly. It was the center of attention for a long time, and it was in the headlines for weeks, both in the national and international news, so there was hardly a day without a new development or breaking story. At the time the crisis was unfolding, the general public didn't really know any specific details about the identity of the terrorists, except perhaps for the commanders who were leading the operation. The details emerged much later, and it took years to get a complete picture of what had really happened in there. What I felt, and what many other Peruvians felt at the time, was a sense of dismay. We thought that terrorism had been defeated in the early nineties, and here we were, in the middle of an international crisis, getting exactly the sort of publicity that we didn't want. After the liberation, however, both terrorist organizations were irretrievably weakened, and with the exception of a few isolated incidents, Peru has enjoyed a relative period of peace and economic prosperity ever since.

An Exchange with **Jimmy López**

MM: You've said that being Peruvian and having witnessed these things, you felt a responsibility to make elements of the story more explicit and bring some aspects of the real-life events into the opera. What did you want to convey about the events?

JL: There are many parallels between *Bel Canto* the novel and the historical events, but many of them are deliberately obscured. As a Peruvian, I decided that there was no reason why I shouldn't shed a little more light upon them. Ann Patchett's novel, for example, takes place in an unnamed South American country; Nilo's libretto places the action in Peru. The novel changes the name of the terrorist organization, whereas in the opera we use the real name: MRTA. Also, we took advantage of the fact that many of Ann Patchett's characters are based on real people, and although we have kept their fictional names, we have added a few historical details here and there. In the opera, for example, the leader of MRTA makes allusion to his wife being in prison, something that is never mentioned in the book. Also, we know that at some point the commanders had conflicting views about how to resolve the crisis, and we bring some of these disagreements to the foreground.

In general, though, we have been faithful to the book because introducing too many historical elements would have altered the story considerably, which is not what we were after. When it comes to the staging, however, our director, Kevin Newbury, has done a lot of research on the actual crisis, so you will see uniforms, flags, props, and costumes inspired by the real events.

MM: Is *Bel Canto* a political opera?

JL: Politics serve as a frame for the story; they are not the central aspect of the story. What we are focusing on is the human drama that developed between rebels and hostages during the 126 days that they remained in captivity. The emotional and psychological drama that unfolds during that time is what interests me the most, as well as the love stories that flourish under such unlikely circumstances.

MM: How do you deal with differences of opinion in the collaborative process? What is the impact of collaborating with other artists on your own creative process and product?

JL: As a composer of mostly chamber and orchestral music, I was not used

to getting a lot of feedback before presenting the finished product. Here, however, I had to show my progress every few months, and that proved to be challenging and enlightening at the same time. What you'll see on stage on opening night is a finished product. *Bel Canto* has already gone through plenty of revisions, rewrites, cuts, and extensions, all due to the close collaboration I've enjoyed with Nilo Cruz, Kevin Newbury, Sir Andrew Davis, Renée Fleming, and Danielle de Niese since 2012. We even had a workshop in 2014 where we tried four out of a total of six scenes in the opera.

It is always important to remain receptive to criticism and keep one's ears open to different thoughts and ideas, but at the same time the composer must remain true to his/her own musical and stylistic convictions, otherwise there's a risk of compromising the artistic integrity of the piece. For me it has been a luxury to receive feedback from such a notable group of collaborators, and I've learned a lot in the process.

JG: You've dedicated *Bel Canto* to Renée Fleming. Explain her involvement and what it's been like working with her.

JL: *Bel Canto* is Renée's brainchild; without her, none of us would be here talking about it. It was her idea to bring Ann Patchett's novel to the stage, and she, along with Anthony Freud, has been the driving force behind this project. She was actively involved in the creation of the libretto, exchanging innumerable calls and emails with Nilo Cruz and myself. Ever since the announcement back in February of 2012, Renée has taken part in our periodic work meetings with Nilo, Kevin Newbury, Sir Andrew Davis, and Danielle de Niese. Her feedback has covered a wide range of topics, from vocal writing and text setting to dramatic pacing and formal structuring. It has been a luxury to benefit from her extensive experience as a performing artist and her vast knowledge of the operatic medium. She has even gone beyond the artistic, actively spreading the word about *Bel Canto* among arts organizations and opera audiences.



Photo: Decca—Andrew Eccles
Renée Fleming, Lyric's creative consultant, curated the commission of *Bel Canto*.

An Exchange with **Jimmy López**

JG: Modern audiences never know quite what to expect musically from a new opera. Over the last century or so, new operas have really run the gamut—from very traditionally structured, tuneful works to pieces that truly challenge the genre both musically and dramatically. Where would you say *Bel Canto* fits on that spectrum? What can you say about the music in *Bel Canto* that might give our audience a sense of what it's like?

JL: Anyone and everyone is welcome to see *Bel Canto*, including first-time opera goers. It is engaging, fast-paced, constantly moving forward, and it even includes two big action numbers. The story is contemporary and relevant; we have lots of arias, ensemble numbers, big choral passages, great singers, and gorgeous projections. I am the kind of listener who gets easily bored, so I've made every effort to keep the audience at the edge of their seats, and I must say that Kevin Newbury's staging is truly captivating.

The musical language I've used in *Bel Canto* covers the whole spectrum between firmly tonal and avant-garde; it all depends on where we are in the story. For the most part I have used tonal centers, and that is a tendency in my general style, but I don't always use functional tonality. In other words, I may use the building blocks of tonality such as triads and seventh chords, but I release them from the meaning associated with them within the tonal system. When I do use functional tonality, I then proceed to undermine it by modulating constantly, which results in continuously shifting melodies. At other times (in the initial explosion and final liberation, for example) I sever all connections with tonality and enter a more coloristic world, whose harmonies are nevertheless strictly regulated by an intervallic system of fixed tones that I have devised for most of my works since 2010.

There are moments when I introduce instruments that are alien to the standard symphony orchestra, such as the *pututo* (a conch shell), bird whistles, a waterphone, a *cuíca*, and even a whistling tube; but all of this is done briefly, subtly, and always in the service of the story.

The main characters are not directly associated to motifs or musical themes, but with what I call "musical auras." For example, Joachim Messner's vocal writing is always melismatic and many of his appearances are colored with metal percussion instruments such as glockenspiel, vibraphone, and

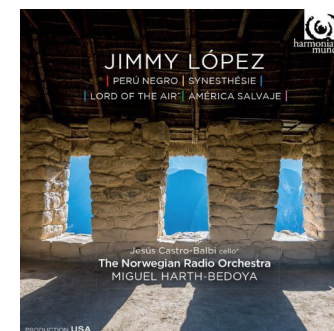
triangle. Roxane's arias are always grand and make generous use of brass instruments. General Alfredo's utterings are usually martial and rhythmic in character. In other words, one can discern the presence of a certain character through the musical atmosphere that surrounds him or her.

This is not to say that there aren't any recurring musical themes or motifs. In fact there are plenty, and when they come back, they bring with them all their emotional baggage, making for a deeper, more profound connection between different scenes of the opera.

JG: Have you written other vocal works that are similar stylistically to what you've written in *Bel Canto*? Is there music of yours out there people can buy or access that's representative of the opera, or is *Bel Canto* a departure?

JL: For the curious listener I would recommend my most recent album with the Norwegian Radio Orchestra and conductor Miguel Harth-Bedoya under the Harmonia Mundi label. It contains four orchestral works of mine that span six years of my creative output. You can also visit my website www.jimmylopez.com and my YouTube channel, which contains several other works of mine.

My output consists mainly of orchestral and instrumental chamber works, so *Bel Canto* is without doubt my largest and most ambitious vocal work to date. I think the seal of my musical language is apparent throughout the opera, but it won't be clearly apparent to someone who has only listened to one or two of my works. A three-hour-long show must be as varied and eclectic as possible to sustain the audience's interest, so I'm sure that even someone who is familiar with my music will be in for some surprises.



The latest CD of music by Jimmy López (summer, 2015) is all orchestral works.

How to Fall in Love with Opera

By Ann Patchett

***Bel Canto* was the most frustrating book I've ever written.** All of my novels have to do in some way with the passage of time—how it slows down, how it speeds up. In *Bel Canto* I was trying to write about the suspension of time. A thick fog settles in. Gen gives his watch away. No one really remembers how long they've been in the vice-president's house. But time and action are what move the reader (and the writer) forward through the story. Suspend time and things get stuck. I would finish a scene and then have no idea which way to turn next. I knew that something was happening in the kitchen, in the bedroom upstairs, in the china closet, outside, but all of those things were happening simultaneously. Months would pass without me even looking at the book. Finally I would pick a direction, write the next scene, and then get stuck all over again. This went on for years.

My husband told me if I was having such a hard time with the novel that it probably meant I should move on to something else. I had an idea for a wonderful new book that was all about real time. The whole thing would take place in 24 hours and be loaded with action. But years before, when I was writing my first novel, *The Patron Saint of Liars*, I made a promise to myself that I wouldn't go on to the next novel until I finished the one I was writing. (I had wanted to quit *Patron Saint*, too.) It was an excellent promise and so I've stuck with it ever since.

Bel Canto was less about opera for me and more about how people without a common language can communicate—first through a very clever translator, then through the power of art, and finally through love. *Bel Canto* is all about the shortcomings of language. Because so many people in the book couldn't easily speak to one another, I also had to figure out how to write in a completely omniscient voice so that the reader would have access to what everyone was thinking. Learning to move the point of view from person to person turned out to be the greatest trick of all.

I briefly considered calling the novel "How to Fall in Love with Opera" but my editor told me it would always be mis-shelved in the "How To" sections of bookstores. So I called it *Bel Canto* because that was the file name on my computer document. It's funny how well some accidents work out.

I then went on to write *Run*, my novel set in real time. It was such a relief!



The Troubled History behind *Bel Canto*

Although both the novel and the opera are works of fiction, composer Jimmy López, a native of Peru, felt it was important for the opera to allude to some of the actual events that inspired *Bel Canto*.

On December 17, 1996, the home of Japanese ambassador Morihisha Aoki in Lima, Peru, overflowed with illustrious guests—government ministers, Supreme Court justices, and Peruvian president Alberto Fujimori's mother, sister, and brother. They were assembled to celebrate the 63rd birthday of Emperor Akihito. In the midst of the festivities, fourteen masked members of Marxist rebel group MRTA blasted a hole in the garden wall and took everyone present hostage. "This is the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement," a voice announced. "Obey and nothing will happen to you."

Ambassador Aoki pleaded with the guerrillas to free his guests. "I, alone," he said, "am important enough for you to bargain with." But although the rebels would release many hostages in the weeks to come, for 72 people it was the start of an ordeal that would last four months. The rebels demanded, among other things, the release of several hundred of their MRTA comrades from prison, including rebel leader Néstor Cerpa's wife. Cerpa said they would start killing captives if President Fujimori did not appear for face-to-face talks. But when their deadline came and went, Cerpa backed down. "We're not killers," he told one of the hostages.

Fujimori did assemble a negotiation team, which included the Peruvian archbishop and Red Cross, as well as the Canadian ambassador, Anthony Vincent, who had briefly been a hostage himself. Nevertheless, the government repeatedly rejected the militants' demand to release imprisoned MRTA members and secretly laid plans to storm the residence.

As portrayed in *Bel Canto*, most of the rebels occupying the residence were young and unseasoned—many only in their teens. As the weeks dragged on, one of the hostages remembers seeing one of the teenage soldiers crying. When he asked her what was wrong, she said she was homesick. Other hostages requested a guitar for some of the rebels who wanted to learn how to play; it was brought in by the Red Cross. Later, a Peruvian newspaper would report that a microphone placed inside the instrument

had helped government officials monitor the rebels' activities inside the mansion. Former hostage Rodolfo Munante Sanguinetti, Peru's minister of agriculture, said that while in captivity he'd spoken often to the rebels about government projects he'd worked to accomplish in the country's impoverished farming regions. At one point he observed that one of the rebels liked to draw. Munante offered advice to the teen on his artwork. Also, as in the opera, the rebels did play soccer in the house and were doing so when the raid began.

On April 22, 1997, four months into the siege, military commandos raided the residence. In the event of a government attack, the rebels had orders to kill their captives immediately. Munante remembers lying on the floor, plaster raining down from explosives detonated by the military and the young man he'd helped with his drawing aiming his gun at him. "He was going to shoot me," said Munante. "But he didn't." The rebel lowered his gun and left the room. He and the rest of the MRTA rebels were killed. One of the hostages and two commandos also lost their lives.

Photographs of the president walking among the headless bodies of the rebels were broadcast on television. Following the mission, Fujimori's popularity ratings doubled to nearly 70 percent. But rumors began to circulate that surrendered MRTA members had been summarily executed. According to a Defense Intelligence Agency report, Fujimori had ordered the commandos to "take no MRTA alive." Twelve years later, in 2009, Fujimori was convicted of murder, aggravated kidnapping, and battery, as well as crimes against humanity for human rights violations committed during his time in office.



MRTA guerrillas in the Japanese Embassy, Lima, Peru, 1996.

The Art of Translation: **Language in *Bel Canto***

Ann Patchett has said that learning about opera, as she did while writing *Bel Canto*, was like learning a second language. Both novel and opera concern themselves with language and what is lost—and perhaps gained—in translation.

In fact, creating the opera was itself an exercise in translation. It was important to López and Cruz that each character sing in his or her own language. Audiences will hear English, Spanish, Japanese, Russian, French, German, Quechua, Latin, and Italian. The bilingual Cruz wrote in the appropriate languages for the English- and Spanish-speaking characters, and a team of translators converted the rest of the libretto into the other languages sung in the opera. López says he also relied on translators “whenever [I] didn’t understand the structure or thought process, the latter being especially true for Quechua, which comes along with a different perception of the world.”

Working with multiple languages provided logistical challenges. López cites a duet between Roxane and Hosokawa for which Cruz had written short, haiku-like lines:

ROXANE
Outside, the flight of a bird.

HOSOKAWA
Outside, a boy shouts...

ROXANE
...a woman runs...

HOSAKAWA
...a butterfly dies unseen...

López comments, “There’s a certain musical cadence to this exchange that begs for a kind of contrapuntal question-answer treatment.” Once Hosokawa’s words were translated into Japanese, however, the symmetry was broken.

ROXANE
Outside, the flight of a bird.

HOSOKAWA
Sotono sekai de-wa, otokonoko ga sawaideiru.

ROXANE
...a woman runs...

HOSAKAWA
Chyou ga, hitoshirezu, shindeyuku.

López struggled to find a solution, finally determining that Hosokawa should “sing each word as if reciting it, bringing a drone-like quality to it (especially because he doubles the bass line every second measure) while Roxane simply floats above him in an ever-ascending melodic line.”

There are many translators and acts of translating in *Bel Canto*. Hosokawa’s personal translator Gen becomes essential as the hostages and rebels try to navigate the Babel in which they find themselves. Of course, translation is always inexact and the number of languages Gen knows is finite. Carmen confronts him with his inability to understand her and the other young soldiers, so different is their life experience, the languages they speak:

We have uniforms, not bodies.
We have names you wouldn’t know how to translate...

Carmen and the other young rebels are the disenfranchised of their society—they are not seen, not heard, not understood. She asks Gen if he can teach her words she doesn’t know. Facility in Spanish, in which Gen is fluent, may help her get by in mainstream society, but on a deeper level, Carmen wants to be someone who is regarded with respect, who is listened to as Gen is.

The Red Cross emissary Messner becomes a translator of sorts when he acts as the go-between for the rebels and the Peruvian government.

The Art of Translation: Language in *Bel Canto*

Ultimately, though, he is unable to bridge the gap between the two. As General Alfredo says:

**They have no tongues.
We have no ears.**

As a result, despite Messner's best efforts, communication breaks down and tragedy ensues.

Roxane becomes a translator as well. Music is a language that speaks to each of the hostages and rebels, regardless of their native tongue. As Carmen puts it, when Roxane sings, she gives them all "a moment without fear." General Alfredo recognizes this power and initially yells at Roxane to stop singing when he sees how transfixed his soldiers become:

**You are like a weapon.
If I don't warn them,
they'll fall under your spell.**

He tells Roxane he and she will never find common ground:

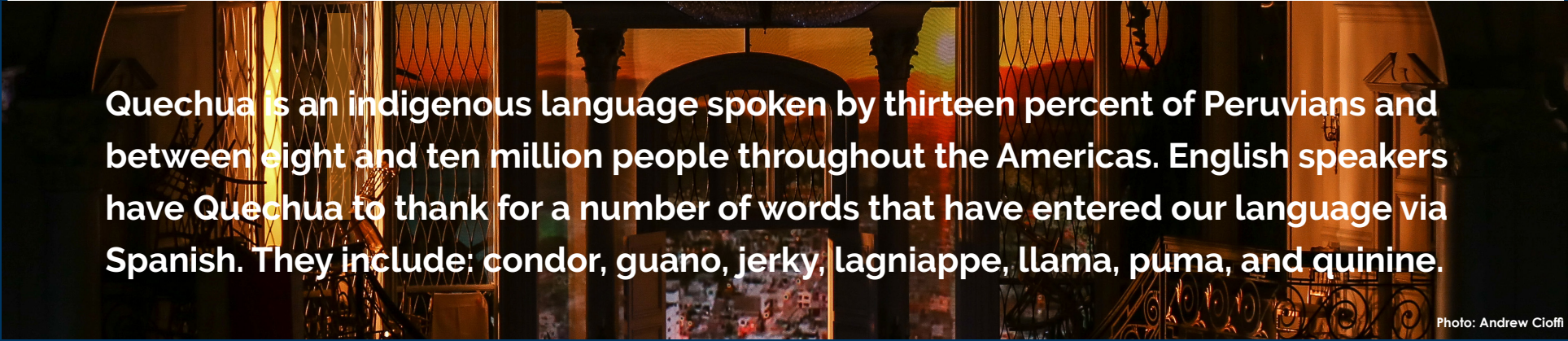
**I am unable to hear you.
And you're unable to see me.
For me reality is a rifle.
For you it is an opera.**

As time passes, however, the general softens, even allowing his young soldier César to take voice lessons with Roxane.

In the second-to-last scene, two couples sing two duets. Gen and Carmen sing in Spanish, though it is a first language for neither of them—when they speak to themselves Gen uses Japanese, Carmen Quechua. Hosokawa and Roxane both sing in English, though it's not a language Hosokawa understands. Having learned a new language of physical intimacy, the couples understand one another in a way they did not before. Desire is a language unto itself. Carmen enjoins Gen:

**Let yourself be a word
and let me be the mouth
that pronounces it.**

Language is more than words; it impacts our understanding of the world. Translation must become an act of knowing. In this story of captivity in which many of the characters do not speak one another's language, audiences may find themselves considering how language affects their own perception of the world and reflecting on the languages they speak.



Quechua is an indigenous language spoken by thirteen percent of Peruvians and between eight and ten million people throughout the Americas. English speakers have Quechua to thank for a number of words that have entered our language via Spanish. They include: condor, guano, jerky, lagniappe, llama, puma, and quinine.

Photo: Andrew Cioffi

La Voz de los Arboles (The Voice of the Trees): **Bel Canto and the Natural World**

All the action in *Bel Canto* takes place in a relatively confined space. "The piece could be very easily claustrophobic," explains filmmaker and projections designer Greg Emetaz, "because it all takes place in the same room." The production team addressed this issue with projections that Emetaz says "provide a kind of release from that claustrophobia." The projections—of clouds, butterflies, the city, the jungle, the cosmos—"take us outside, take us to magical places, and to some extent show the passage of time."

The projections bring the natural world into the mansion. Nature is vividly present, as well, in the language Nilo Cruz gives the characters to sing. General Alfredo, in describing the social revolution he seeks, sings:

**I don't want anyone
to deny me the wind,
the earth, the right to exist.**

César, the prodigy Roxane takes under her wing, learned how to sing from the trees:

**It was the jungle...
The great voice
of the trees
that taught me
to sing.**

As she reflects on her identity, Carmen compares the mysteries of herself to those in nature:

**In my body there are rivers
and volcanoes unknown to me.
Undiscovered stars and gardens
navigate through my blood.**

It's not just the soldiers who draw upon images of nature. So, too, do Hosokawa and Roxane. As she waits for him on the night of their tryst, Roxane sings:

**This night has traveled like a bird
and landed by your feet
so you may walk on it.**

The characters may be from different worlds, but their shared kinship with nature highlights a common humanity.

These images of the natural world bring to the opera a quality of magical realism, a literary genre which incorporates fantastical elements into a realistic narrative. According to Naomi Lindstrom, a professor at The University of Texas, magical realism "fuses lyrical and, at times, fantastic writing with an examination of the character of human existence and an implicit criticism of society, particularly the elite." In his own take on the term, Cruz has described his writing as "realism that is magical." Though no magical events take place in *Bel Canto*, the opera depicts a world in which ordinary lives are being lived in extraordinary circumstances, a world in which arias are juxtaposed with guns. As butterflies flit across the walls of the mansion and the skin of its inhabitants, Roxane sings:

**Are we being made again?
Could it be that we're in another place?
Could this moment have no logic?**

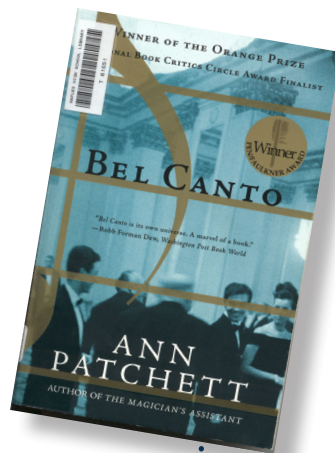
Cruz's poetic language evokes landscapes beyond the walls of the mansion and engenders a sense of surrealism that underscores the strange time-outside-of-time in which hostages and captors find themselves. Another element that contributes to this feeling of limbo is *la garúa*, the fog that descends eerily upon the mansion, disconcerting many of its temporary inhabitants. Father Arguedas says it is sacred; Fyodorov considers it a curse. Again, the world outside the characters becomes a metaphor for their interior terrain.

Bel Canto Timeline



December 17, 1996 – April 22, 1997:
The Japanese embassy hostage crisis,
Lima, Peru.

1996



May, 2001: Harper Perennial publishes
Bel Canto by Ann Patchett.

2001



December 9, 2010: Renée Fleming
is announced as Lyric's first-ever
creative consultant. Among Ms.
Fleming's projects is the curating of a
world-premiere opera to debut in the
2015/16 season.

Spring, 2010: Lyric begins moving
forward on Renée Fleming's idea to
commission an opera based on the
novel.

2010

Bel Canto Timeline



Photo: Dan Rest
Sir Andrew Davis, Renée Fleming, Ann Patchett, Anthony Freud, Jimmy López, Nilo Cruz



Photo: Todd Rosenberg
Director Kevin Newbury

December 4, 2013: Lyric Opera of Chicago and Jimmy López receive the Prince Charitable Trust's Prince Prize for Commissioning New Original Work—a first for an opera commission.

November 15-16, 2013: Working sessions in Chicago—Mr. López, Mr. Newbury, Sir Andrew Davis.

September, 2013: Working sessions in New York City—Mr. López, Mr. Cruz, stage director Kevin Newbury.

Summer, 2013: Working sessions in England at Glyndebourne—Mr. López, Sir Andrew Davis.

April 4, 2013: First draft of the libretto for Act II completed.

January 13, 2013: First draft of the libretto for Act I completed.

February 28, 2012: Press announcement for Lyric's seventh full-length operatic world premiere—*Bel Canto*, by composer Jimmy López and librettist Nilo Cruz.

December, 2011: Ms. Fleming, Sir Andrew Davis, and Mr. Freud agree that Nilo Cruz is their top choice for librettist, and they introduce him to Mr. López.

Spring – Fall, 2011: Ms. Fleming does extensive research on more than 80 composers, then narrows the field to a short list from which she, Lyric music director Sir Andrew Davis, and Lyric general director Anthony Freud choose Jimmy López.

January, 2012: Danielle de Niese is cast in the leading role of Roxane Coss.



Photo: Decca—Chris Dunlop

2011

2012

2013

Bel Canto Timeline



Photo: Todd Rosenberg

Director Kevin Newbury during technical rehearsals.

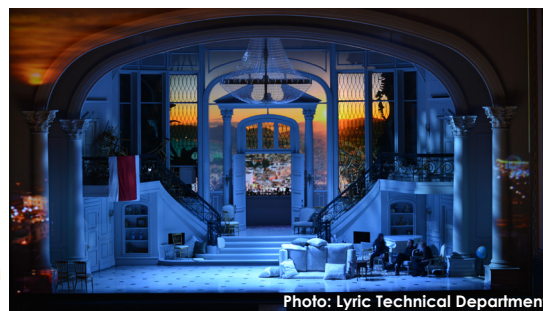


Photo: Lyric Technical Department

December 7 & 9, 2014: Working sessions in New York—Mr. López, Mr. Cruz, Sir Andrew Davis, Ms. Fleming, and Danielle de Niese.

December 1, 2014: Piano/vocal score completed.

October 16, 2014: Final libretto version completed.

September 8, 2014: Presentation of the final set and costume designs in Chicago.

July 7-11, 2014: Workshop week in Chicago, culminating with a run-through with piano accompaniment of the music of four of the six scenes by members of The Patrick G. and Shirley W. Ryan Opera Center.

April 18-20, 2014: Working sessions in Chicago.

2014

December 7, 2015: *Bel Canto* world premiere performance.

November 4, 2015: First orchestra rehearsal of the *Bel Canto* music.

October 26, 2015: Full cast rehearsals begin.

August 3, 2015: First chorus rehearsal of the *Bel Canto* music.

July 15-22, 2015: Technical rehearsals for *Bel Canto*, during which the set is assembled on Lyric's stage for the first time.

May 1, 2015: Full orchestral score completed.

February 9, 2015: Lyric announces its 2015/16 season, including casting of major *Bel Canto* roles.

February 2015: Ravenswood Studio, Inc. in Lincolnwood, Illinois, begins building the *Bel Canto* set.

2015

“He believed that life, true life, was something that was stored in music.”
—Ann Patchett, *Bel Canto*

After you've read *Bel Canto* (and experienced the opera), here are a handful of other literary works that feature music as a major theme or motif:

***The Bear Comes Home* by Rafi Zabor**

Winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction. The story of an alto saxophone-playing bear who happens to be an improvisational genius. According to Annie Proulx, “Rafi Zabor somehow makes the reader hear music.”

***High Fidelity* by Nick Hornby**

A thirty-something London record shop owner holds forth on the aesthetics of mix-tapes with his friends and confronts his fear of commitment when his longtime girlfriend leaves him.

***The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* by Oscar Hijuelos**

The first novel by a U.S.-born Latino author to win a Pulitzer. Cesar Castillo reminisces about his life as a Cuban musician in 1950s New York City, including his fifteen minutes of fame when he and his brother appeared on an episode of *I Love Lucy*.

***Music and Silence* by Rose Tremain**

British lutenist Peter Claire arrives in Copenhagen in 1629 to join the orchestra of King Christian IV. Love, court intrigue, and soaring music. Winner of Britain's prestigious Whitbread Award.

***The Song of the Lark* by Willa Cather**

Portrait of the artist as a young woman. Against the backdrop of the late 19th century American West, an ambitious and gifted young singer pursues her dreams.

A *Bel Canto* Reading List (Books the *Bel Canto* artists used along the way):

A Working Friendship: the Correspondence between Richard Strauss and Hugo Von Hofmannsthal

Renée Fleming sent this book to Jimmy López in the early stages of his collaboration with librettist Nilo Cruz. In López's words: “One has the impression that Hofmannsthal's delicate phrasing is always at the brink of breaking apart against Strauss's direct and blunt manner of expression. That they understood each other is already a miracle, but that they were able to create such a string of masterpieces is truly astounding. Perhaps these differences are what made their collaborations so richly varied. In any case, it does make for a great read and it fully reveals the inner workings along the process of creating an opera.”

***The Magic Mountain* by Thomas Mann**

A young man visits his cousin at a sanatorium in the Swiss Alps. When he is diagnosed with symptoms of tuberculosis, he extends his stay and becomes acquainted with the other patients. A meditation on time, illness, music, and much more. Patchett has said *Bel Canto* is really an homage to *The Magic Mountain*, a book she credits with inspiring her desire to become a writer when she read it at age fourteen.

***Opera 101* by Fred Plotkin**

Patchett's bible while working on *Bel Canto*: “It tells you how to listen and what to listen to. It takes you through everything you need to know step by step.”

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After a brief turn as a performance poet, **Maia Morgan** worked in theater as a playwright, actor, and monologist. Her essays have appeared in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Chattahoochee Review*, and *Hayden's Ferry Review*. Maia teaches writing and theater in schools, health care facilities, and jails in Chicago. She has designed and taught workshops for students, teachers, and teaching artists for Chicago Public Schools, Urban Gateways, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Lookingglass Theatre, Columbia College Chicago, and Lyric Opera of Chicago, among others. She recently completed a memoir, *The Saltwater Twin and Other Mythical Creatures*.

Jesse Gram is audience education manager for Lyric Unlimited.

Geary S. Albright is Lyric's executive assistant to the general director.