

esthetic possibilities. Only when viewers make a work their own does she consider it a success. One early installation, a permanent red and white vortex billowing over a traffic circle in Porto, Portugal, is

called—depending on whom you ask—the “Anemone”, the “Fishermen’s Monument”, or the “Patron Saint” of Porto. Echelman’s favorite photograph of the installation features men in dark business suits sprawling

on the grass underneath: pedestrians darted across three lanes of traffic just to lie under it and look up at the sky. “The work’s not alive in the white box of a gallery,” she says. “The public completes it.”



Matthew Aucoin

“Wrestling at Every Moment”

A young composer, finding his next notes

by SOPHIA NGUYEN

MATTHEW AUCOIN ’12 is unsparing toward his past work, especially the operas. Half-kidding, he claims, “I’d love to just burn all of it.” He has youthful assurance that he’ll write more and better pieces, but also more fuel for the flames than most people his age: he’s composed music since childhood, and his pieces have been performed in venues from Zurich to Salem, Massachusetts; he’s also conducted orchestras across America and in Europe.

Already he knows his creative rhythms: “I compose in the morning, and I go until I’m dry.” He tries to write every day, and always at the piano. “I find that if I’m engaging physically with this box, this hunk

of wood and metal, it pushes back at me. If I’m just sitting at my desk composing, I’m doing what I want rather than what the music wants,” Aucoin explains. “I don’t think I would be able to honestly discover a new space without engaging physically.”

Within a single conversation, he will alternate between describing music as something to “wrestle” with, and as something elusive, even delicate, vulnerable to injury through carelessness. Casually defying the old truism “Writing about music is like dancing about architecture,” he would reject its premise that the world of literature and the world of sound are essentially separate. At Harvard, Aucoin concentrated in English and wrote a cre-

ative thesis in poetry, while maintaining an active presence on the extracurricular music scene. Afterward, he matriculated in Juilliard’s composition program, but was by his own estimate “a derelict grad student.” Opportunities beckoned beyond the classroom—assistant conducting at the Metropolitan Opera and the Rome Opera, an apprenticeship with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra—and so, feeling confined by conservatory culture after four years of the liberal arts, he says, “I ran away screaming.” (He still managed to complete a graduate diploma.)

Composing opera allows him to pursue both language and sound, but he takes them one at a time. Aucoin always starts with the libretto: “I want to approach it as a stranger, who slowly becomes intimate with how the language works.” He hopes to upend a few commonly held beliefs—that English is a bad language for opera; that lyrics should act as “the subservient wife” to music—and cites the example of W.H. Auden and Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rake’s Progress*. In it, he says, “There are two rhythms, and two kinds of music, wrestling at every moment. A lesser composer might have said, ‘Give me something sweet, and flowing, and easy,’ and that’s what a lesser poet would have done. And a lesser composer would have done what the words want.”

Aucoin has been drawn to American poets as operatic subjects: in *Hart Crane*, the protagonist duets with his lover on the Brooklyn Bridge; in the one-act *From Sandoz*, James Merrill and his partner listen to a ghostly voice through a Ouija board. The American Repertory Theater will premiere *Crossing*, about Walt Whitman, at Boston’s Shubert Theatre in May. During a Harvard lecture and recital to introduce the work, Aucoin spoke of how, in his senior year, “I was very much in love with someone. Worried that my feelings would be unrequited, I came to see music as unrequitable love, and to see that it gains power by its very unrequitability.” His opera imagines Whitman in the midst of a midlife crisis, writing mostly journal entries or letters on

behalf of soldiers, as he serves as a nurse at a Union hospital. The lyrics borrow from his poetry only in snippets—a bit from “The Sleepers,” a verse from “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” at the show’s climax—and Aucoin’s restless melodic line makes the familiar words unfold anew. They don’t feel preordained, but like thoughts in open search of answers.

Aucoin counts himself lucky to have received a steady stream of commissions thus far. Classical-music institutions are known to be conservative, leaning on tried-and-true repertory rather than seeking out the work of living composers. “If you’re working in the classical tradition, it’s like you’re born rich,” he says. “Your great-great-great-great-grandparents came on the *Mayflower*. You’re that kid. You don’t need to work. If you’re an administrator born today, you can get fat off Tchaikovsky forever. So the question becomes, is that any way to live? Do you really feel 100 percent alive that way? Take a chance!” he urges, and points out that on Broadway—or, for that matter, at Venice’s Teatro La Fenice in the nineteenth century—a single season might produce many forgettable flops, but also *La Traviata*. “How do we expect people to make great work if the condition of every new work is that it must be great?” he asks. “Of course it’ll be bad sometimes. It’s supposed to be.”

Enough have taken a chance on him—

Boston’s Gramercy Trio, San Antonio’s SOLI Chamber Ensemble, the Metropolitan Opera’s New Works program, the composing residency at Dumbarton Oaks—that Aucoin feels able to take one himself. Introduced to conducting in college, he’d found it was “a total narcotic experience. I got into it so fast that it precipitated a quarter-life crisis”—he knew it was steadier, better-compensated work than composition. Though he says, “I’d go slightly crazy if I did only one or the other,” he can now accept fewer orchestra gigs, and allow himself unbroken time to sit at his piano and write.

That narrative of risk and discovery runs through his recent pieces. In *Crossing*, Whitman’s intimacy with a wounded Confederate soldier in disguise is electrified by the possibility, or threat, of romance. *Second Nature*, a one-act children’s opera premiering in Chicago this summer, also has heroes who dare to venture beyond what’s safe. (Asked if he changed his style for younger listeners, Aucoin remarks, “I think kids are more musically open than many opera audiences—they’re less likely to complain that I don’t sound like Puccini.”)

Set on a wrecked Earth where humans live in zoo-like protective enclosures, *Second Nature* tells a dystopian fairy tale in which two children meet a monkey who’s been growing a real, illegal fruit tree. Aucoin calls it a “reverse Garden of Eden”

HM Explore More

For more online-only articles on the arts and creativity, see:

A New Audience for “A Night of Storytelling”

The first Irish “talkie” comes to light at the Harvard Film Archive.

harvardmag.com/irish-15

“The Great War at 100”

Scholars examine the wounds left by “the war to end all wars.” harvardmag.com/war-15

A New Life for Heaney’s Home at Harvard

Adams House members, past and present, dedicate a suite to the Irish poet who lived among them. harvardmag.com/heaney-15



Visas and Visions

Kavita Shah makes music in many idioms.

by SAMANTHA MALDONADO

“GET STOPPED A LOT at borders,” says Kavita Shah ’07, laughing. “I think they think I’m smuggling drugs because they see my passport and they’re like, ‘You travel a lot. Why? Where do you go, and what do you do?’”

A jazz singer, composer, and arranger, Shah plays gigs around her hometown, New York City, and has performed throughout North America and Europe. She spent childhood summers in India, her parents’ native country; as a Latin American studies concentrator, she stud-

ied Incan architecture in Peru and worked in Brazilian favelas. Reflecting her varied experiences, her sound challenges the boundaries of geographic territories and musical genres.

She first experienced different musical structures and traditions as a member of the Young People’s Chorus of New York City, which performed folk songs, gospel, Western classical music, and children’s opera. Today, Shah sings in a number of languages, including English, Portuguese, Cape Verdean Creole, and *sargam* (Hin-

story: “Biting the apple is what saves you.” Fitting for a composer at the start of his career, these songs of innocence and experience relish the first taste of fresh fruit, and how it instills a restless urge to explore.



Kavita Shah

dustani solfège); the Indian tabla (a hand drum similar to the bongo) and West African *kora* (a type of lute) appear in the instrumentation of her debut album, *Visions*. On it, the suite “Rag Dosh” begins with a rhythm from the tabla and spoken vocals called *tabla bols*, used in Hindustani classical music to vocalize the different sounds of the instrument, then concludes with “Meltdown”: a bluesy, moody tune that deconstructs the traditional raga, or