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An American in China

Conductor Kazem Abdullah has built his career on introducing American works to international audiences. **Tom Stewart** meets him in Beijing

Just two decades after the premiere of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, the Soviet Union paid a New York opera company to stage performances there. The year was 1956 and the Cold War was well underway. Truman Capote, who joined the performers on their journey to Leningrad, heard one person leaving the theatre singing the line, 'There's a boat that's leavin' soon for New York, come with me, that's where we belong, sister'. Soviet critics, on the other hand, enjoyed the show but found their worst fears about capitalism and the West confirmed by Gershwin's tale of poverty and oppression. But the opera soon became a staple of Soviet repertoire, with singers brought in from the US and Europe to meet Gershwin's stipulation that its performers must be black.

Last autumn, almost 70 years later, *Porgy and Bess* was performed in China for the first time. American conductor Kazem Abdullah, 46, was at the podium, first in Shanghai and then in Beijing, where the opera was the crowning glory of last year's Beijing Music Festival. Although threats of trade tariffs were still months away, relations between the US and China were already soured. While the festival featured a number of American performers, it was notable but not surprising that, unlike the Soviets, they had not chosen an American opera company for these historic performances. Instead, it fell to the singers of Cape Town Opera, alongside the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra, to introduce Chinese audiences to the inhabitants of Catfish Row, Gershwin's imagined South Carolina slum.

'It feels crazy, it's so exciting,' says Abdullah, speaking the day before the Beijing premiere.

'I feel like a pioneer, if that isn't too corny.' For a conductor who has built his career championing American opera on international stages, these performances of Gershwin's opera represented both personal achievement and cultural diplomacy in action. 'It isn't just *Porgy and Bess*; so many pieces we're very familiar with are still new here. There's still so much for people from the US and China to learn about each other's music and culture.' The semi-staged production

'There's so much for the US and China to learn about each other's music and culture'

had an all-South African cast of singers featuring Otto Maida as Porgy and Nonhlanhla Yende as Bess and was directed by Noa Naamat.

Abdullah's journey to conducting one of opera's most politically charged works in one of the world's most complex geopolitical relationships began in the American Midwest. Born in Indianapolis and raised in Dayton, Ohio by parents from Sierra Leone, he trained as a clarinetist at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music and with the New World Symphony before studying conducting at the Peabody Conservatory. He has been principal conductor of a number of German orchestras and in 2023 conducted *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X* by Anthony Davis in a critically acclaimed production at New York's Metropolitan Opera.

Cultural exchange:
(main and below)
Abdullah conducts *Porgy and Bess* at The Beijing Music Festival, 2024;
(right) Cape Town Opera is awarded BMF 2024 Artist of the Year





The pivotal moment in Abdullah's transition to conducting came when maestro Michael Tilson Thomas warned him that waiting wouldn't make it any easier. 'He had seen me conduct and thought I was good, so asked why I wasn't pursuing it properly. I was in my early twenties and still trying to make my way as a clarinetist. He said it would get harder to make the move as I got older.' That was the final push Abdullah needed. 'Every conductor has his or her own path, but the transition is never seamless. So, I left the New World Symphony for Peabody, from which I got a position working in the Young Artist Program at LA Opera.'

Abdullah has since established himself as a champion of distinctly American operatic works. In 2013, during his time at the Sinfonieorchester Aachen, he conducted the first performance in Germany of Charles Wuorinen's *Brokeback Mountain*, based on Annie Proulx's story of two cowboys who fall in love in 1960s Wyoming. Ten years later, Abdullah's appearance at the Metropolitan Opera marked only the second time an opera by a black composer had been performed on its main stage. In its review, the *New York Times* called *X* a new 'American classic'. 'You might say the same about something like John Adams's *Nixon in China*,' Abdullah says. 'These works – like *Porgy* – turn American stories into operas using music that comes straight out of American traditions.' Where Gershwin uses spirituals and New Orleans jazz, *X* brings the references into the second half of the 20th century with passages of improvisation and performance directions that include 'Bitches Brew Miles!', in reference to the 1970 album by Miles Davis. Both examples, Abdullah explains, make opera relevant to contemporary American audiences while telling stories that transcend cultural boundaries.

'In the same way an audience in New York or London can have its eyes opened by opera to stories about different kinds of people, a





Bold talent: composer Huang Ruo

Beijing Music Festival Highlights from 2025

Founded in 1998 by Chinese conductor Long Yu, the Beijing Music Festival has become the most prestigious classical music festival in the region. Following last year's Gershwin premiere, the festival returns from 10-24 October with the first performances in China of Berg's *Wozzeck* – Charles Dutoit will conduct the Shanghai Symphony and Opera Ballet Vlaanderen in a production that celebrates the opera's 100th anniversary. The English Concert will also perform Handel's *Rinaldo* with a British cast and Chinese countertenor Liu Shen at the Forbidden City Concert Hall.

This season also includes world premieres by three Chinese composers: Huang Ruo, Elliot Leung and Pulitzer Prize winner Du Yun, whose work features ethnic Jino musicians. Huang's piece is performed by the BBC Philharmonic with conductor John Storgårds, alongside Shostakovich's Ninth Symphony. The China Philharmonic, with conductor Yang Yang, violinist Gil Shaham and mezzo Ildikó Komlósi, will play Brahms, alongside Leung's work.

Other highlights include Russian pianist Mikhail Pletnev, and the Chinese Philharmonic in Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky with Long Yu and Chinese pianist Haochen Zhang.

Full info: bmf.org.cn/en



Changing minds and hearts:
Will Liverman in *X: The Life
and Times of Malcolm X* at
the New York Met, 2023;
(left) Abdullah conducts

Chinese audience can discover a whole different world through *Porgy and Bess*,' Abdullah argues. The Shanghai premiere, which took place in a hall with a 360-degree stage, proved his theory in practice, he explains. 'The fact I could actually see the audience's faces light up meant I could watch how engaged they were. People were intently following the subtitles and making sense of it all. But there are certain numbers, the ones that are most like folk songs, that anyone can relate to whatever background they come from.'

'As I conducted, I could see the audience's faces light up and watch how engaged they were'

For audiences in the US, Abdullah argues that being able to watch operas performed in English is key to ensuring the art form remains relevant and accessible to new audiences. 'It's a very important way in for many people because the language can be such a barrier,' he says, pointing to LA and Chicago Lyric Opera, as well as London's English National Opera, as examples of companies that have staged English-language versions of operas originally written in other languages. 'That said, when I conducted a production of Janáček's *Jenůfa* in Chicago, I met a few people who were new to opera. I wouldn't have expected them to get along with an opera in Czech but people just love the voices. I think the same is true for Chinese audiences watching *Porgy and Bess*.

'It's the job of the conductor to bring your understanding of music history and theory to the orchestra in a way that doesn't seem

obviously didactic,' Abdullah says. 'If you say the right thing at the right time, it can unlock totally new ideas for the players. The opposite is also true, however. Say the wrong thing at the wrong moment and it can make things a whole lot worse.' In a relationship that relies so heavily on subtleties of meaning, how does he approach working with musicians, like those of the Shanghai orchestra, whose English is limited? 'It's about body language, baton technique and thinking very carefully about what to say,' he explains. 'In this case the orchestra had to learn a whole opera in less than a week. You have to be very precise and controlled.'

Porgy and Bess is Abdullah's third collaboration with Cape Town Opera, following performances with them of Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* and Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*. 'There are so many magnificent voices in that country,' Abdullah says. 'I always enjoy being there and working with such fantastic musicians.' Unlike the two previous examples, this production was semi-staged, with no sets for the singers, who faced in the opposite direction from the conductor. 'You have to be much more in tune with what everyone on stage is doing,' he explains. 'It requires a lot more flexibility because I have to rely completely on my ears and the nuances of what each singer is doing.'

As Abdullah prepared to bring *Porgy and Bess* to the Chinese capital at last, the broader implications became clear. In an era when cultural exchange faces increasing political headwinds, opera perhaps has a unique diplomatic language that speaks through emotion rather than ideology. The Chinese audience's rapt attention to this story of distinctly American struggle suggests art might transcend national boundaries in ways that political rhetoric cannot. ☺