

On the benefits of sharing your work



Composer and performer Kamala Sankaram discusses creating your own path, cataloguing your influences, how to know when a project's done, and why opera is more accessible than people think.

May 13, 2021 -

As told to Loré Yessuff, 2081 words.

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Opera is one of those artforms that the general public doesn't know much about. It's not really taught in a way that's accessible for a lot of people. How did you get into it?

There is this perception around opera that it's something inaccessible that you have to be educated in a certain way to understand it. And I think that the opera field hasn't really done itself any favors by not working harder to dispel that myth, although they are definitely doing that now.

I came into it as a singer. I came to New York to go to college. And I actually didn't really know about opera when I got here. My family doesn't listen to opera, my dad is from India. Opera is not something that we were engaged in. [In college], I was taking a lot of music classes and voice lessons. I also studied voice in high school, but in show choir. In California, show choir is this huge thing where everyone gets in spangly outfits and does choreography. It was basically like *Glee*, only I was in this really small town.

And then I got to New York and was taking classical voice lessons and had professors who were in the [Philip Glass Ensemble](#), so it was like this whole other world opened up. I thought I wanted to do Broadway, but I really only liked Sondheim and I realized, oh wait, that's actually more similar to what people are doing in contemporary opera.

So that's how it started. I studied composition as an undergrad, but when I got out of undergrad, my South Indian father did not want me to go to musical school so he offered to pay for grad school if I did something other than music. Which I did, but I continued to sing. I had this dual life where I was performing, mainly new music, and then doing a cognitive psychology degree at the same time.

What got me into writing opera was being a high soprano, and being someone who is a mixed race person and just not really seeing people like me in the opera world. So I wrote a piece for myself, that was the first thing, that was about biracial Indian American. And then it did really well, and other people started to ask me to write things, and that's how it started.

Opera came to you and then came back to you. Are you still involved in cognitive psychology in any way? Can you see the connections it has to your work now?

I don't do that formal research anymore, but what I was studying was the use of language in context. My dissertation was on reading on the internet and how commenting changes the way that you read. I think a lot about

semiotics anyway, and I think it really does have a huge influence on the way that I think about music for narrative pieces, because the music is also serving a semiotic and symbolic function. So yeah, actually I do see a direct link between the two.

Can you say more about that semiotic and symbolic function? How do you think about that in the context of creating a narrative for operas?

There is a long tradition of leitmotif in opera, the use of melodic themes or gestures to signify a particular character, but what I'm interested in, even beyond that, is how musical genre can be a signifier.

For example, a recent piece that I did takes place in the American south, and one of the characters has guitar music, and specifically the first time we see him he's got honky-tonk music. It gives us a window into what kind of a person he is. So that's something I find very interesting—our sense of musical style and genre, because we all have access to all music ever made, pretty much. We have these really built up repertoires of visual associations also because of film and television.

Who do you regard as some of your artistic ancestors? Music, theories, media. I'm interested in the influences that are in conversation with your work.

I've always been interested in sci-fi, and specifically how sci-fi can give us a sense of what the concerns of the now are. You don't find sci-fi being written about things that are not an issue. One of the things that I'm interested in my work is how we deal with contemporary issues and things that will be resonant for a modern audience.

Futurism and sci-fi are interesting ways to pull in the modern audience. I'm thinking of *WandaVision* right now because that was so popular. And why? Because it nodded to all of these TV tropes that we're familiar with. I think that's our meta narrative right now—looking at forms of earlier media and how we nod back to those things.

The work of Marshall McLuhan is really important. *The City We Became* by N. K. Jemisin.

Musically, I still think a lot about Mozart and Puccini, just in terms of structure and how to structure a libretto. Some of my favorite contemporary operas are, well it's not so contemporary anymore, but *Elektra* by Richard Strauss. It's basically a sung through drama. It doesn't really have these set arias the way that a lot of other operas do, but there are little motifs in the music that tell you things about what the characters are thinking. I look at film scores a lot, too. That's another contemporary form of music drama.

How do you catalog the things that are inspiring your work?

I look for interviews with the person who made the score, usually, just to see what they were thinking about and how they approached it. A recent one is, I really love what Michael Abels has been doing, he did the scores for *Get Out* and *Us*. He did the scores for both of those, and they're really clever. There are these hidden things like Swahili chanting in *Get Out*. I find that very inspiring just to see what he was thinking about.

What things do you rely on to go from an idea to a full production? What resources are important to you?

Collaboration. That's why we do opera or theater. It's a collaborative art form at its heart. You think that something is going to work a certain way, and then you get in the room with the people that are playing and singing and you find out if it works or not. Between all of you, you make something that's better than what you could have made by yourself.

How do you know when a project is complete? It can be so easy to obsess over perfecting an idea. How do you let go of that tendency?

Oh, it's really hard. But the benefit of having an audience is that you can gauge their reaction and their level

of understanding. It's important for you to set goalposts for yourself like, "It's really important to me that they understand this," or "It's okay if they don't get that part." And then you ideally get to do it in front of an audience enough that you find out if they're getting what you want them to get from the piece, and then that's it, you leave it alone. It's really tempting to keep picking at it, but you have to walk away at a certain point.

Are there any more contemporary opera artists or performers that you really enjoy and that you feel like people should be paying attention to right now?

Most people in America have never heard an opera, so there's 100 years of opera being made in America that's out there to discover. We tend to think of the old Italian and German pieces, but then America had what has been called a Golden Age of Opera, especially in the last 20 years or so. There's a lot of great work being done in New York, there's a festival called Prototype that has new pieces every year that are pushing the boundaries of what opera can be.

Some of the composers that have come out of Prototype are David T. Little, Missy Mazzoli, Ellen Reid. There's, of course, people who've been around forever, like Anthony Davis, who just won the Pulitzer last year for his opera *Central Park Five*.

He has an opera from the '80s called *Malcolm X* that's just amazing. It's going to get more productions now, but it's really great and there's a good recording of it out there, too. Right now, people are especially influenced by putting people on stage who haven't been there by representing social justice issues, borrowing from popular music, jazz. There's an opera that came out a few years ago called *We Shall Not Be Moved*, it's got a lot of hip hop in it and the choreography is by Bill T. Jones.

There are too many people to name everybody, but there's something for everybody out there.

The world is starting to change and open up again. We're not quite in the post-pandemic world, but it seems, hopefully, the stages right before it. There's some conversation right now about how to re-imagine and change things in the post-pandemic world, because obviously there's a lot of things that are not working. All that to say, I'm wondering what you are imagining for this post-pandemic world, what you want to see change in the opera world?

I have a lot of huge hopes, because the big problematic thing that happened when everything shut down is that opera, and theater in general works under a freelance 1099 gig contract. There's usually a clause in there where if a show gets canceled, you get paid nothing. So you have people who were working for months to prepare for a show and expecting to get paid, like people at the Met get paid, I don't know how much, but I'm guessing around 10 grand a performance at least. And then all of a sudden that's all gone and there's nothing that you could do. So you see the precarity of it, even for people who are stars on the surface, and it's just not sustainable. So what I don't want us to do is go back to everybody for themselves.

The most positive things that I saw were companies that insisted on paying their people anyway. That is not true of everybody. The smaller companies were the ones that tended to not do that, and I understand they might have less of a bottom line that they need to sell, but at the same time I would like to see all of us, ideally the theater arts community in general, come together in a way that we haven't because of the capitalist nature of the way that we deal with the arts in the United States.

That's my hope. I don't know how possible that is, but I really do think it means letting go of the precarity model of working. That's the same thing that we need to do if we're going to increase equity in general. It's this idea that there's only a spot for one person that makes us compete with each other in a way that will not lift anybody up in the end.

Kamala Sankaram recommends:

Favorite opera: *Elektra* by Richard Strauss (I love Christine Goerke in the title role—she's fierce)

Opera I'm excited to see: *Fire Shut Up in my Bones* by Terrence Blanchard. This opera is based on Charles Blow's memoir of the same name and is supposed to open the 21/22 season at the Metropolitan Opera. Will Liverman (who is singing the lead) is fantastic.

A theater show I'm still thinking about: *Dana H.* This was one of the last pieces of live theater I saw before the pandemic and it's just devastating.

An album that always makes me smile: Frances Bebey - *Psychedelic Sanza 1982-1984*. This is a compilation of Bebey's creative experiments mixing West African instruments (including the sanza and hindewhu) with funk-amazing!

Favorite tree: I was in Miami and stumbled across a *Kigelia Africana* (African sausage tree) in the middle of an outdoor mall. It was like finding an alien—it's the most magical tree (but don't eat the fruit, they're poisonous)!

Name

Kamala Sankaram

Vocation

Composer and performer

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Dario Acosta