

CREATING A WARM ROOM

LOUISA MULLER IN CONVERSATION WITH REBECCA PALLER

An American opera director making a name for herself on multiple continents, Louisa Muller creates imaginative, truthful productions of a wide range of operas, from Handel's four-character *Amadigi di Gaula* to such large-scale epics as Corigliano's *The Ghosts of Versailles* and Ethel Smyth's *The Wreckers*.

She lives in Vienna with her husband, the conductor and pianist Eric Melear, who works at the Vienna Staatsoper, and their six-year-old daughter Maisie—though a move to London is imminent, as Melear has recently been appointed artistic director of the National Opera Studio.

We met in February in a quiet corner of the lobby of David Geffen Hall at Lincoln Center. She is low-key and level-headed—with a refreshing honesty ('I live in fear of arriving somewhere under-prepared') that is relatable—and comes from a musical family. 'My parents met in music school in Germany. My mother played the flute and my father was an oboist.'

Her hometown is Westerly, Rhode Island, near the state line of Connecticut—where her father worked at Zuckermann Harpsichords, a company that builds the keyboard instruments. 'Classical music was always around. My parents are huge opera-lovers—we listened on an old-fashioned record player—and they made it a priority to take me to concerts.'

She was smitten by theatre from a young age. 'I loved performing in shows as a child. There was a small regional theatre in Westerly—the Colonial Theatre. I played everything from Molly, the smallest orphan in *Annie*, to a baby mammoth in *The Skin of Our Teeth*.'

Her family moved to Salem, Oregon, where at 15 she directed the musical *The Best Kept Secret of World War II*. 'It was set in

Louisa Muller



Wisconsin and involved Nazi spies and teenage werewolves,' she recalls, laughing. 'My dad designed and built the sets.' At Lawrence University in Wisconsin, Muller, a soprano, studied music and theatre. 'I wanted to be a director, but I thought you had to do something else first because the only directors I had ever seen were older.' Fortunately she had an 'amazing' mentor—Tim Troy, a professor of theatre arts, who directed the university's plays and operas. 'He told me, "Directing is a job you can do at any age. Good directors are hard to find and they are important." He gave me a huge amount of confidence and taught me a lot of skills: how to approach a script or score, how to determine what story is there or what story you want to tell.'

Muller took time off from college for a directing internship at Seattle Opera, where she assisted on a production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* starring Harolyn Blackwell. 'It was the first professional opera house I ever worked with, and it was eye-opening and inspiring in every way. The rehearsal room in a professional house is unlike anything else: the number of people who are working and the division of labour, and the formalized way in which everything functions. I was totally blown away by it. We'd have these production meetings after the stage rehearsals, and everybody would talk about changes that needed to be made or how to do things technically. All of it was fascinating. I wanted to be in those rooms in whatever capacity I could get into them.'

After graduating from Lawrence, Muller continued her voice studies at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. 'I felt like I had been singing for so long that I had some responsibility to it.' But that responsibility to sing was trounced by her *need* to direct. 'I was the graduate assistant in the opera department at UNC. I directed whatever I could,



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including *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, *The Telephone* and scenes from *Figaro*. I stage-managed a *Così*. I took advantage of whatever opportunity came my way. Directing felt like a coat that fit me. The only way to get better at it is to be out there doing it. The act of directing and working with singers and the thinking on your feet—being able to respond to stimuli that are coming at you—that always felt natural to me.’

In 2005 she received her graduate degree and spread the net wide. ‘I sent my stage management résumé to every US opera company, cold.

Houston Grand Opera had not advertised their stage management internship, but I sent them a résumé anyway. Molly Dill, who is now the chief operating officer of Houston Grand Opera, was at that time in charge of hiring stage managers and assistant directors. I still remember our phone call. It was amazing. I said very clearly, “I don’t want to be a stage manager. I actually want to be a stage director. But this would be a great way for me to learn how the rehearsal room works. I want to be a stage management intern, and then an assistant director and then a director.” And Molly said, “OK”, and hired me!

‘My first season there was 2005-6. It was the best schooling I could have had. To be able to start my career in a top-level house like that was such a gift. The next season Molly hired me to be an assistant director, and that was how everything got started for me.’

The first production Muller worked on as a stage management intern was a revival of the Stein Winge production of *Boris Godunov* starring Samuel Ramey. ‘What I remember most was learning about traffic. There’s so much about a large chorus show that ends up being both about stage pictures and about actual movement. How do you move? The staging of a chorus has to be really technical. And then, within the framework of that, you give the chorus the freedom to create, to improvise, so that it feels lively and natural and real.’

Her second season at HGO, as an assistant director, included a trial by fire when the tenor in *Faust* was ill and ‘they flew in Gregory Kunde to play the role. I walked him to his entrance and said, “Give her the flowers and go right and do this.” Then we talked as we walked to the next place he had to go.’

A job as an assistant director at the Metropolitan Opera followed, in 2009, on Mary Zimmerman’s production of *La sonnambula* starring Natalie Dessay and Juan Diego Flórez. ‘There were three assistant directors on that show and the other ADs had been there for many years. The stage managers at the Met are not always in the rehearsal



Muller’s production of ‘Rinaldo’ for Pinchgut Opera in Sydney last year, with Alexandra Oomens as Almirena



Muller at Wolf Trap: (l.) 'The Rape of Lucretia' in 2016, with Brent Ryan, Will Liverman, Kerriann Otaño and J'Nai Bridges; (r.) 'Roméo et Juliette' in 2018, with Alexander McKissick and Madison Leonard

room because they're busy onstage—and the directing staff often take on things that would be done by the stage managers (then that division of labour changes when you get to the stage). I was writing down blocking and helping to rehearse covers and liaising between the house and the creative team.'

In 2010 she assisted the director Michael Grandage on his new production of *Madama Butterfly* at Houston: 'And over the years that *Butterfly* went to different houses, and I revived it in Brisbane, in Geneva, twice in Chicago and again in Houston.'

When Grandage went to the Met to direct a new production of *Don Giovanni* in 2011, he asked her to be his assistant; she directed the first two Met revivals of that production. Muller enjoyed staging revivals, 'keeping the director's original vision while helping the singers make their own choices'. In 2011 Anthony Roth Costanzo made his Met debut as Unulfo in one performance of *Rodelinda* and Muller was tasked with taking him through his paces. The countertenor recently recalled, 'I really didn't have much rehearsal, and Louisa was the one who helped me feel comfortable.' (The two became friends; she directed *Amadigi di Gaula* with Costanzo for Boston Baroque in 2022, and the first opera that Muller's daughter 'fell in love with' was *Akhnaten*, starring Costanzo.)

She has segued from assisting high-profile directors to becoming an in-demand director herself. Her 'first new production of any real scale' was *The Ghosts of Versailles* at Wolf Trap Opera in 2015, which she prepared with her husband (who conducted it) and which boasted a 73-person cast in Wolf Trap's small theatre, The Barns. 'We made a virtue of it being a sort of controlled chaos on the stage,' she says. The *Washington Post* wrote, 'It is a dazzling thing all around. Director Louisa Muller and designer Wilson Chin have crammed a miraculous amount onstage (and often spilling off it). Despite the shallow depth they have to work with, the ensemble scenes feel free and active.'

A video of her 2016 Wolf Trap production of *The Rape of Lucretia* so impressed Garsington Opera's artistic director Douglas Boyd that Muller was invited to direct a new production of *The Turn of the Screw* at Garsington in 2019. That production won a 2020 Royal Philharmonic Society Award and was named by the *Guardian* as one of the Top 10 classical events of the year—and Muller was a finalist for the 2020 International Opera Awards in the Best Newcomer category.

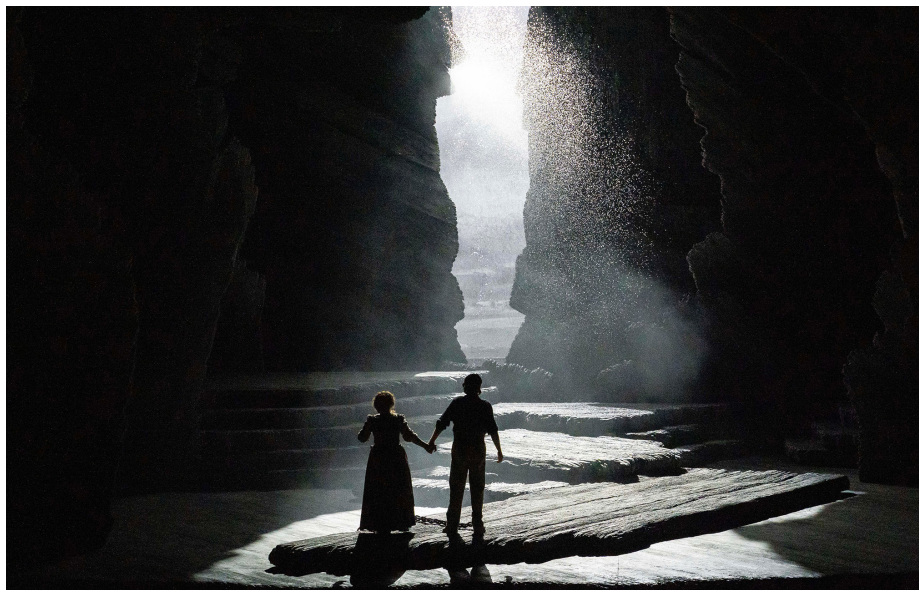
Her career came full circle last season, when she returned to Houston to direct a new production of *The Wreckers*. How did she approach a little-known 1906 opera about an impoverished seafaring community? ‘It’s incredibly freeing to tackle a rarity that doesn’t have the burden of a production history. *The Wreckers* was a pet project for Khori Dastoor when she was appointed general director of HGO in 2021. We had a little over a year for planning prior to the first rehearsal, then three and a half weeks in the rehearsal room and a couple of weeks of rehearsing onstage. I had a fabulous designer—Christopher Oram, who lives in Cornwall, where the opera is set—and a great collaboration with the conductor Patrick Summers [HGO’s artistic director].

‘When I work on a new production of any opera so much of it comes back to the score. A lot of what I do in the beginning is just listen, listen, listen. Then I figure out what’s the story there. What version of the story do we want to tell? What’s meaningful about it in this particular moment or for this particular audience? In rehearsal I care a lot about a collegial atmosphere. I call it a warm room—the space that we come into and where we ask the singers to take risks and to try things. It has to be a warm space.’

Muller will soon be returning to Garsington Opera, where she is directing a new production of Rameau’s *Platée* opening on May 29, with Samuel Boden in the title role and Paul Agnew, a notable *Platée* himself, conducting the English Concert. ‘I’ve fallen in love with the piece. There’s something so brilliant about it because you think you’re watching a comedy, and then at the end you realize it’s a tragedy and you’ve been complicit in this horrible prank.’ It’s being presented in the style of a television reality show. ‘Christopher Oram has designed a colourful, fun, clearly artificial world, and the choreographer Rebecca Howell and I are tackling the huge amount of dance music and deciding what all those dances mean.’

Award-winning production: Louisa Muller’s 2019 Garsington staging of ‘The Turn of the Screw’





Louisa Muller's production of 'The Wreckers' at Houston Grand Opera in 2022

Immediately after *Platée* opens Muller will fly to Santa Fe Opera for rehearsals for her mainstage debut there. *La traviata* opens the season on June 28 and is set in Paris in the late 1930s, on the eve of World War II. 'Paris was fertile ground for just about every writer, artist and thinker of that period. They all knew that war was coming, so there was this feeling of a last gasp, a desperate need for art and nightlife. It felt like a parallel to the personal story of Violetta.' Oram's designs, she says, are 'very beautiful, very evocative with a lot of reflective surfaces'.

Coming up in December is a new production of Pierangelo Valtinoni's *The Little Prince* for the Musiktheater an der Wien following a revival of *La traviata* at Dallas Opera. She's been engaged for a new production at the Met 'in a few years', but is not allowed to say more at this time. Also in the diary are returns to Santa Fe Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago and Garsington, and she'll make her debut with the Canadian Opera Company.

'The role of an opera director is on the one hand this incredibly heady thing: immersing myself in a score and discovering how it moves and resonates with me, dreaming up how best to tell the story in a way that feels true, endless rabbit holes of research and imagery, exhilarating conversations with my team and in the rehearsal room, and the joy of creating something together. And on the other hand it is deeply practical: making a million tiny decisions on how to translate my vision and ideas into something real and tangible that works. It's being able to hold both the big picture and the minutiae so that all those disparate elements and people come together to form a whole.'

Platée is at Garsington Opera from May 29 to June 30. www.garsingtonopera.org
La traviata is at Santa Fe Opera from June 28 to August 24. www.santafeopera.org