



# Maestro *Modern.*

Conductor **Christopher Allen's** schedule this season includes operas by Donizetti, Verdi and Jennifer Higdon

▶ **AT THIRTY-ONE,** conductor Christopher Allen is one of the fastest-rising podium stars in North America. The Rockaway, Queens native was named resident conductor at Cincinnati Opera in 2015 and earlier this year received the prestigious Sir Georg Solti Conducting Award; recent seasons have brought debuts at English National Opera, Florida Grand Opera, Washington National Opera, Atlanta Symphony, Lyric Opera of Kansas City and LA Opera, where he served five years on the music staff. This season Allen leads Jennifer Higdon's *Cold Mountain* at North Carolina Opera and *La Fille du Régiment* at Atlanta Opera; spring 2018 brings a new production of *La Traviata*, directed by Patricia Racette, at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, where Allen made his debut conducting his friend Ricky Ian Gordon's *Grapes of Wrath* in May. Allen's leadership of Gordon's broad-ranging score was a model of clarity, vigor and intelligence, keenly detailed and richly colored; his work with soloists, chorus and orchestra was first-class.

During a late afternoon lunch in St. Louis's plush Tenderloin Room last June, Allen answered questions carefully and succinctly; his voice is soft, but his passion for opera is loud and clear. "The stories of our time need to be told. And the medium where I can help that is opera. That's what we do—tell stories. Look at Ricky's *Grapes of Wrath*, which we are doing now. Steinbeck's novel was written in the '30s, but there are so many things in it that are relevant today. How scary is that?"

“Did you see *Fellow Travelers* at Cincinnati Opera? Greg Spears is a brilliant composer, and that piece is a perfect example of a story that is relevant to our time and needed to be told. I sat there and thought, ‘Wow, this is absolutely entertaining—people need to see this.’ And the reaction of that audience was astonishing. Opera is not dead. I’m just going to keep saying that. I suppose

I would rather focus on what we can do to bring a different audience to the opera—how to make it more cost-effective, how to tell contemporary stories. It’s our mission, *my* mission, to help galvanize the younger audience.”

Allen has acquired a reputation as a singer’s conductor—one reason why Racette requested him to lead her OTSL *Traviata* next spring. “I have so much respect

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‘Opera is dead’ is a good media headline, but I don’t know how true it is.

“When I conducted [*Barber of Seville*] at English National Opera—and like every performing-arts institution, they’ve had their share of problems recently—the audience was ecstatic. They had such a desire to be there—and it was a young crowd! I can’t go through those experiences and believe that opera is dying or opera is dead.

for singers—they’re expected to do so much. We want them sing beautifully, to be musicians, to know style, to know language, to act. They are like Olympic athletes of our business.

“When singers go to school, they work on technique, they work on languages—coaches are telling them what to do, teachers are telling them what to do, conductors are telling them what to do. But as they get further along in the process, they need

to free themselves and to focus on making music. Structure matters a lot. As conductors, we analyze phrases rather than notes. That kind of analysis is something that a lot of singers don’t cover in their studies. So my first question to myself is, ‘What can I do, or what can I say, to help this singer make music? Where is this phrase going? What is the word in this phrase that is important?’ If I can say something that helps a singer own that music—explore it in a deep, personal way—it is incredibly satisfying.”

From top: in rehearsal for *La Traviata* at Intermountain Opera Bozeman, 2013; leading a rehearsal for Ricky Ian Gordon’s *Morning Star* at Cincinnati Opera, 2015



Allen defines conducting as “physicalizing sound” and is scrupulous about keeping in shape: he runs frequently, belongs to a boxing gym in Los Angeles and does daily yoga exercises and stretching. “As they get older, a lot of conductors have back and shoulder issues—it’s very taxing work. If you don’t reset your body every day, it causes problems. I can tell you, if I feel tension in my body when I am conducting, I can *hear* it in the music we are making. And that’s not what anyone wants to hear!”

Asked if he has a wish list for future repertoire, Allen pauses and looks slightly abashed. “To be quite honest, I haven’t thought about that so much. I’m so obsessed with whatever I’m doing in the moment, you know?” ■

