



INTERVIEW

# SPOTLIGHT ON: CHRISTOPHER ALLEN



Jenna Simeonov - Feb 5, 2016

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American conductor [Christopher Allen](#) is a rising figure in today's opera scene. He has assisted the likes of Robert Spano, Plácido Domingo, James Conlon, and

Donald Runnicles, and he made his conducting debut with the Cincinnati Symphony, for the world premiere of Ricky Ian Gordon's *Morning Star*. As the newly named John L. Magro Resident Conductor for Cincinnati Opera, he'll conduct their production of *Tosca* in July 2016.

Allen recently made his UK debut with [English National Opera](#)'s production of [The Barber of Seville](#), and in March, he conducts Donizetti's [L'elisir d'amore](#) at [Lyric Opera of Kansas City](#). We had the chance to ask him about his work, about communication skills, and the role opera plays in his time on the podium.

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## **How does the role of the conductor differ between opera and symphonic work?**

Not that long ago, the greatest symphonic conductors learned their craft in the opera house – Furtwängler, Toscanini, Klemperer, Walter, Szell, Reiner, Muti, Abbado. Each genre presents different challenges but the primary job of the conductor remains the same, which is to get the best performance out of the artist(s) in front of him/her. This is true whether you're conducting the opening clarinet solo of Tchaikovsky's 5th symphony or Lucia's Mad Scene. Opera has more moving parts, of course – principal singers, secondary singers, chorus, orchestra, offstage band, and often dancers as well – and the conductor is responsible for guiding each of these performers.

## **What kind of communication skills does a conductor need to work in opera?**

Communication IS the greatest skill a conductor can have in the opera house. In a typical day you are communicating not only with people on the artistic side – orchestra, principal singers, choreographers, lighting designers, directors – but also people on the business side of the company...the “suits”, if you will. A clear artistic vision is needed to start the process, and then one must always listen and

be open to investigating different ideas and points of view. I'm lucky to work with some of the most talented and wonderful people in the business. I find that if a situation is approached with mutual respect, willingness to listen, and a degree of malleability, the product will be greater because of it.

## **What does opera need more of? What does it need less of?**

Opera needs more exposure to a larger audience base. When speaking to younger professionals after their first experience in opera, I find they are all surprised how much they enjoyed the whole night. There are many companies out there that have made this a priority and have been very successful. Opera needs to become more relevant in our society, even though our society doesn't value the arts the way it should.

I've always liked the idea that while art may not change the world, it does affect and change people, who in turn have the power to change the world. As the culmination of all the great art forms, opera has enormous power to affect individuals and our society.

Opera needs fewer people writing that opera is dying! In fact, I believe more exciting new works are being commissioned and written now than in a long time. I recently conducted Ricky Ian Gordon's *\*Morning Star\** at Cincinnati Opera – that piece is a perfect example of exciting new works being created and how opera is still very relevant today.

## **Do you have any “bucket list” operas that you'd love to conduct? Why?**

I absolutely love Verdi! Every note was written with dramatic intent. I've been lucky to conduct quite a bit of Verdi already but really look forward to tackling

*Otello*, *Nabucco*, *Aida*, *Don Carlo*, and one of my favorites, *Falstaff*, which I've been lucky enough to assist on a few times. I look forward to conducting Puccini's *Tosca* this summer at Cincinnati Opera. *Tosca* is one of my favorite pieces in the repertoire and one of the reasons I fell in love with the genre.

Then we come to Wagner...enough said!