



PRIMA DONNA/RUFUS WAINWRIGHT

INTERVIEW WITH RUFUS WAINWRIGHT

In 2009, you presented *Prima Donna*, the opera, a project that grew over time to become first a film, then a visual concert. How was this project born?

Rufus Wainwright: I've always loved the opera. It's a form that's part of my musical culture. When I was about thirteen, a so-called normal child who listened to pop music and had long been immersed in my parents' folk music, I had a sort of revelation while listening to Verdi's *Requiem* with Leontyne Price. I was enthralled. Since then, even though I've always known I wanted to be a pop singer, opera has been a sort of secret refuge that has even influenced my own music. I've often used its symbolism, its emotions, but also its orchestration in my own compositions, thanks in particular to string instruments. Writing *Prima Donna* was my way of giving back to opera all that opera gave me.

What was the starting point of the libretto?

I was about to start working on an opera loosely based on Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrien*. But I didn't feel ready to conquer the Roman Empire musically with the tools I had at my disposal! I wasn't quite ready to write the orchestration I imagined for that project. So I started looking for a subject that wouldn't have that kind of historical weight, that would be more personal. That's when I came across the series of interviews Maria Callas gave to Lord Harewood in 1968. At some point in the documentary, she says: "*This is what it means to be a Prima Donna.*" Immediately, the story came to me, very clearly: I would tell one episode in the life of a lyric singer. I was familiar with the subject. I knew I would be able to use my own experience as a performer.

Why did you write the libretto in French? How did you compose the score? It's obvious you'll be asked to explain the difference between writing a pop song and composing an aria...

Writing in French seemed self-evident. It's an intimate language, just like the subject I wanted to write about. I think it's *the* language of the opera, more so than English or German, which I know quite well since I composed the music for Bob Wilson's *Shakespeares Sonette*, performed by the actors of the Berliner Ensemble. As for the composition itself, I've often worked with symphonic orchestras for my pop albums, and so I had a very precise idea of how to compose for this type of ensemble. Contrary to what I usually do—when I first compose melodies on the piano before writing the rest of the piece—I used technological tools. I had all the orchestra's instruments at my disposal in a digital piano. I was able to write directly for those instruments without having to transpose a melody for the orchestra. It allowed me to really choose every note and to express those colours, those emotions I receive when I listen to an opera. In my longest and darkest songs, I'd say opera and pop share a certain mindset. Of course, there's a real difference with my rock'n'roll songs, with their faster rhythm. It's not easy to make opera singers swing! Each style has its own soul.

How would you describe the style of this opera?

It's Romantic. *Prima Donna* is a love letter to the great melodies of Romantic music that I love and that fit so well this story I'm telling, the story of a heroine who could be Maria Callas, Régine Crespin, or Jessye Norman—who, by the way, never sang works by Benjamin Britten or Stravinsky. Those singers who inspired me always preferred Berlioz or Verdi. I see great divas as great romantics, so I couldn't see myself writing in another style, whether more modern or classical. Other operas inspired me as well, like Richard Strauss's *Capriccio* or Verdi's *La Traviata*. Films, too, like Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard*, or Jean-Jacques Beineix' *Diva*, to whom I pay a sort of homage.

How long did it take you to compose this opera?

The opera was there, fully-formed, in my mind, in my imagination, but it took me almost three years to write it from beginning to end. I was working on other projects at the same time, like the one I did with Bob Wilson. This maturation period allowed me to better understand my characters before giving them life with the music. Sometimes, I even had the impression that it was the characters who wrote the music!

Who says characters says performance. How did you choose your singers?

It took some time as well, in particular because the world of opera doesn't work like the world of pop. Lyric performers are booked sometimes for the next three or four years! We auditioned and worked with amazing performers, like Janis Kelly, who recorded the opera *Prima Donna* published by Deutsche Grammophon. Or Lyne Fortin, the exceptional soprano from Québec, who'll play the cantatrice at the Festival d'Avignon.

Before turning into a visual concert, this opera became a film directed by Francesco Vezzoli with, in the title role, Cindy Sherman, a pioneer of postmodern photography known throughout the world for her series of self-portraits. How did you get the idea of transposing this opera for the cinema?

I didn't want the journey that was *Prima Donna* to end because of my engagements as a pop singer. I had the idea of giving it this shorter cinematic form, which was new in the world of opera. It also allowed me to broadcast it on another scale, which is very hard to do in the world of classical music. In the end, the film is a combination of my experiences both in pop and in symphonic music. This project attracted my friend Francesco Vezzoli, for whom the pleasure of the audience is very important, though he is also very demanding. He never compromises when it comes to the quality of the costumes, of the light, of the colours. He managed to translate the emotions of the score into images perfectly, in particular in a surprising and heartbreaking scene in which we watch an incredible Cindy Sherman remove her makeup.

This visual concert has gone through various forms since its first performance in 2009. How did you imagine it for the Festival d'Avignon?



Since its creation, the show has been in constant evolution. We presented it in Athens, Buenos Aires, and Hong Kong, and every time, some details were changed. In Athens, for instance, Francesco Vezzoli's film was longer. We cut it again to get a better balance between the different parts of this unique opera. It made the whole show's pacing better; it includes a screening of the film and excerpts from the opera *Prima Donna* I wrote in 2009, followed by me singing and playing the piano, alone at first, then with a symphonic orchestra. But the definitive version of this visual concert will be the one we'll perform in the Cour d'honneur of the Palais des papes. It's all the more important because it will be the first time that this opera, written in French, will be performed in France.

Did this move from pop music to opera changed the way you perceive or conceive your own pop music today?

A lot! Moving from pop to opera and back reawakened my passions. Ever since this adventure, I've written many new pop and rock'n'roll songs. They were influenced by the discussions born of this project. I can't wait to record them!

Interview conducted by Francis Cossu

Translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach

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