

CARMEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH KEITH LOCKHART CONDUCTOR OF BLO'S *CARMEN*

Keith Lockhart currently serves as Conductor of the Boston Pops, Artistic Advisor and Principal Conductor of the Brevard Music Center summer institute and festival, and Music Director Emeritus of the Utah Symphony. Keith Lockhart has conducted the Symphony Orchestras of Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, Minnesota, Montreal, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Baltimore, Atlanta, St. Louis, Indianapolis, Singapore, Toronto and Vancouver as well as the Los Angeles and St. Paul Chamber Orchestras, and the National Arts Centre Orchestra (Canada) among others.

BLO: What do you enjoy most about *Carmen*?

Keith Lockhart: The great thing about *Carmen* is the sense of place and atmosphere; Bizet never actually visited Spain, but his music evokes a location so effectively that it feels more Spanish to most of us than real Spanish music does.

BLO: What do you feel is most challenging about this opera?

KL: Its familiarity – it is very difficult to look at a piece from a fresh perspective, when everyone has so many preconceived notions. I think what Nic (Muni, the director) has done is tremendous – getting right to the core of a dramatically cogent tale, while still retaining the elements the audience expects to hear and see.

BLO: Is there anything particularly unique about conducting *Carmen* versus other operas?

KL: Although I have performed many excerpts from *Carmen*, this is my first time conducting it as an opera. Every opera I've done with the BLO has been a first for me; it's exciting after twenty-five years in the symphonic business to take on new repertoire and musical challenges. It gives you a fresh perspective. I've had a good time working with Nic to create this new version, aiding in the many decisions that had to be made long before rehearsals start. Nic had a very definite sense of how he wanted to tell the story, and it was my job to make sense of it musically whenever transitions were awkward or challenging. Lots of red ink and Post-Its now adorn my score – I look forward to removing them once rehearsals start!

BLO: How does conducting operas differ from the work you do with the Boston Pops? (Other than length and the fact that you're working with singers and set changes, etc.) How do you prepare for one compared to the other?

KL: It's about the process of assembly and communication. The integration between staging and music, and the coordination of activities in the pit and action on stage is different from the symphony. Also, the time frame is different in the operatic world: when you guest-conduct a symphony, you show up five days before the concert, whereas I've been working on *Carmen* with Nic since this past spring.

BLO: What will be your personal stamp on such a well-known opera?

KL: It's very possible to do *Carmen* without thinking about it because you've heard it before. To look at it with fresh eyes – that's the entire responsibility, to approach the work as if you have never seen it before. Knowledge shouldn't blind you to new opportunities.

BLO: When did you first fall in love with opera?

KL: Symphonic and opera careers in this country often exist separately from one another, because it's so difficult in a successful symphonic career to carve out the five or six weeks necessary to rehearse and perform an opera. Over the last few years, I have deliberately made time because I enjoy the experience and new challenges presented. My love of opera is deeply rooted in the romantic opera repertoire of the late 19th century – from the first *La bohème* I saw as a fourteen-year old. I realized then how powerful music combined with dramatic action could be, and I've never ceased since to be amazed by the magic.

BLO: You recently wrapped up your tenure as Music Director for the Utah Symphony & Opera. Are you taking some time off or are you looking forward to collaborating with another company?

KL: I spent the last decade conducting 46 weeks out of the year. It is rewarding, but exhausting. I think it will be a while before I look for another fulltime position in addition to the one I currently occupy in Boston. This year I'll be guest-conducting more than I have for a while – I just finished my debut with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in Australia, then after *Carmen* I'm headed to the BBC Concert Orchestra in London in January and on to the NHK Symphony in Tokyo in March. I'm really happy to spend more time in Boston. I know most of BLO's musicians because we have worked together at the Pops and elsewhere, and it's always a joy to make music with them.

BLO: Do you have any pre-performance rituals?

KL: I'm pretty basic – I almost always require a nap before performances to be as on my game at 11 at night as business people are at 10a.m. for that big meeting. Other than that, I don't have any superstitious rituals, because I know I know I would be distracted if I happened to forget one!

BLO: How do you relax and unwind between performances?

KL: I like to get away with my family to our cabin on the coast of Maine, or take relaxing vacations in places that aren't filled with lots of people since I'm around so many people when I work. Space is very healing to me. I was just on the remote South Island of New Zealand with my wife prior to conducting in Melbourne, and that was amazing!

BLO: If you weren't a conductor, what do you imagine you'd be doing instead?

KL: I almost went to law school and became a lawyer, but then I married one instead! I have a fantasy which involves sitting in my cabin in Maine and penning the next Great American Novel. It might not be too late!

BLO: Art imitated life this past April when your wife Emiley Zalesky Lockhart gave a terrific performance as the prosecuting attorney in BLO's trial of Don Giovanni at a special event at the Moakley Courthouse. Do you think that instilled the acting bug in her? Might opera singing be next on her résumé?

KL: Emiley already had the acting bug – she has done a lot of amateur theatre and is actually quite a good singer! We sang to each other at our wedding reception. The courtroom is a stage in its own right, so she gets a lot of experience there too. Who knows what she'll do next?