

**“IT IS EMOTION AND STRENGTH THAT WE ARE CONVEYING
THROUGH MUSIC”
- Interview with maestra Keri-Lynn Wilson -**

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Photo: Darja Stravs Tisu

SUMMARY. Conductor Keri-Lynn Wilson began her musical studies at a very young age. While other children were still learning how to talk, she first started her piano lessons at the age of three, completing her passion for music by gradually adding two other instruments: the violin and the flute. The first major success of the young flautist was her Carnegie Hall debut at the age of 21. Soon a new passion arose: conducting, under the guidance of Otto-Werner Mueller at The Juilliard School of Music in New York. As a student also had the opportunity of being the assistant of Claudio Abbado at the Salzburg Festival. Since then, Keri-Lynn Wilson has worked with famous symphony orchestras and opera houses all over the world, such as: Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Toronto Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gewandhaus Orchestra, Simón Bolívar Symphony Orchestra, Vienna Staatsoper, Bolshoi Theatre, Arena di Verona, Israeli Opera. Returning to Cluj to once again conduct the great operatic masterpiece *Tannhäuser*, the

maestra agreed to sit down for an interview focusing on about a conductor's life and work in the XXI century, her unique musical thinking, current and future projects and on the experience of conducting in Romania.

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A. F. - *Have you ever considered the fact that after having a Carnegie Hall debut as a young flautist, a sudden shift to conducting would pose a great career risk?*

K.-L. W. - After hitting the climax of your upbringing and getting to Carnegie Hall making your debut one could say that, but I was never thinking in those terms. It was very much an extension of everything that I had grown up doing by playing the piano, playing the violin, playing the flute. It was a very natural thing for me. Yes, there is much more pressure for a conductor, but ultimately I am very happy with this choice.

A. F. - *When you first started this journey, did you have a plan in mind to become a successful, world famous conductor?*

K.-L. W. - There is no plan for any conductor and his career. It is very much like a maze, like a labyrinth: steps, and bumps, and hills, and rivers... It involves traveling constantly, seeing many different orchestras, and finally having an orchestra of your own, while also balancing symphonic and opera and guest conducting. Therefore, there is no formula other than working all the time. This being the best part you can grow as a conductor.

A. F. - *What was the best advice anyone ever gave you about conducting?*

K.-L. W. - My mentor, Otto Werner Mueller, with whom I studied at Juilliard, said: "Always be prepared". And it is so true. There is so much responsibility: if you do not know the score, the music, and you get in front of people, and you have any doubt about anything... «First of all you come off as not being professional, and not having integrity. There are many conductors who get up and wave their hands, a lot of "impostors". How can you expect to be the vehicle between the genius and great musicians if you yourself do not have that understanding? So, be prepared, and know the score» this is absolutely number one. It also gives you great confidence. In other words, there is a lot of pressure in this job to get in front of a group of amazing

musicians and have that responsibility of making great art out of a great piece of work. Every morning I wake up and go to work there are always butterflies in my stomach in front of greatness. In addition, there is something I always hear from orchestras: when things are special, it is because there is emotion. Things have to be electric in a performance. If the audience or the orchestra go home with a dull expression on their faces, then you have not done justice to the work. Be prepared and have passion, that is my advice!

A. F. - *How do you usually learn a new score?*

K.-L. W. - First comes the architecture of the piece, all the harmonies and melodies, the orchestration, how it all fits together. Then comes the history of the work, the background: when it was written, what was happening in the composers' life, what was going on historically. And then, finally comes the interpretation: you think it, you listen to it just to have an idea, but never to copy, just to confirm your own ideas. In opera, it is also important how the word fits together with the sound. *Gesamtkunstwerk*, like Wagner said. It goes back, of course, to Donizetti and *Lucia di Lammermoor*, with the underlying nuances of the orchestra going with *la parola*. That is why I feel the conductor has to speak the language of that certain opera, otherwise one cannot understand the nuances necessary for words like *l'amore* or *hässlich*...

A. F. - *What is your opinion about the question of the gender when it comes to conducting?*

K.-L. W. - The language of conducting comes from one's internal self and knowledge and heart, in my opinion. Therefore, there is no advantage or disadvantage one can say for anybody, because of the fact that it is not our sex or our color; it is emotion and strength that we are conveying through music.

A. F. - *You do travel a lot: how can a traveling conductor achieve the level of quality he or she seeks in today's hectic world, where rehearsal time is (so) limited?*

K.-L. W. - It is all about experience. You must work with many orchestras, because a lot is different: ways of playing, sounds of playing, which come with individual orchestras. No one orchestra is the same, and there are sometimes great differences between orchestras. Therefore, if you have that kind of experience, you can go over from Romania to Switzerland and

have a sense of what is different and what it is the orchestra needs; basically it is about the chemistry you have to create. Experience comes with working with different orchestras, doing as much repertoire building as possible. I think that is the goal of most conductors is to have a broad repertoire, and for me, personally, it is both opera and symphonic, the more European way of conducting. Yes, conducting is all about experience and it is all about maturity. You are still a young conductor in your 40s, and fortunately, that is one of the rare professions in the world where you get better with age.

A. F. - *Do you see cultural differences and/or globalization as having a major impact on how music is made in the 21st century?*

K.-L. W. - It has a major impact, with recordings: you can edit and slice to perfection a recording, and because of that, we somehow lost the individual sounds of orchestras. Nevertheless, in the actual concert hall, orchestras are still very different, because we have different schools of playing and teaching. I mean, you have the Suzuki method in Japan: excellent technique, but you cannot teach expression that has to be felt from within through a technique. That applies everywhere: you have many technically able orchestras, but if they do not have a conductor who is making great emotion and music, then it tends to sound the same.

A. F. - *I am curious: could you give me three different examples of “orchestral sounds” from different parts of the world?*

K.-L. W. - Let us take the New York Philharmonic, and then the Vienna Philharmonic and the Tokyo Symphony. These are all fantastic orchestras, but again, the historic background of the orchestra and how they built their ensemble are different – for example, the string line of Vienna is like a family: sons and daughters growing up having the extension of the family playing instruments. That happens a lot in other countries as well, but it is more the system of playing in Vienna □ the sonority, the fact that they blend so well. Whereas in America, and with the New York Philharmonic it is really great professionals who come together, and then, it takes many years of experience to develop the sound of the orchestra, to mold a certain way of playing. I can say that you have a huge difference between the sound of the New York Philharmonic and the Vienna Philharmonic. The precision is different; the color of the string sound is different: you have more brilliance in New York and more depth and warmth in Vienna. Tokyo Symphony comes, again, from the Suzuki system, so they do not necessarily have that training other orchestras, which have lived with

Wagner all their lives, that is much more remote from their cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, they are great fanatics of classical music, one of the last countries where you feel that people are indeed fanatics of classical music.

A. F. - *What can you tell us about your first conducting experience in Romania at the Enescu Festival in 2009?*

K.-L. W. - Well you know, even at Juilliard School in New York, most of my best friends were Romanian, so the culture of Romanians was not foreign at all to me. When I first came here to conduct in Bucharest, I did not know what to expect. Nevertheless, I was not surprised, because in Eastern Europe you generally tend to have certain strengths and certain weaknesses. You just need to know what to work with and what can easily be achieved and what is more challenging, and I was somewhat prepared for that, having already worked in Eastern Europe. I was truly happy with the fact that there are such warm people here, and when they make music, they put their hearts into it. That is very important. I have already been in Bucharest, Timișoara, a couple of times in Cluj and it was wonderful – next week I will be going to Iași. Also, Ioan Holender, who is one of my mentors, has been very enthusiastic about me working here.

A. F. - *You once said in an interview taken in 2012 that conducting La Traviata always gives you shivers down your spine. What is your reaction to the music of Tannhäuser, the last great success conducted under your baton here at the Romanian Opera of Cluj-Napoca?*

K.-L. W. - Well, put it this way: I had just conducted the general rehearsal with *Tannhäuser*, after having rehearsed the pre-general the night before without any sleep. I am not one to complain, but it is difficult for conductors: we get on the plane, we arrive, we have to work and concentrate. I came from New York, so I have no voice right now; I did not sleep last night, and I woke up at three in the morning, and not to mention the jet lag. I felt exhausted: just talking to anyone required too much energy. Nevertheless, the minute the music started, I had all the energy in the world. And I think most musicians feel this, it is pure adrenaline what you get. It is the language that makes me feel alive. I just conducted Wagner, so I have this indescribable feeling. If it is music I love, I get shivers even just thinking about it. It has come to me later in my career to do Wagner, but it has become one of my obsessions. Therefore, I am very grateful to have this wonderful experience, because we did this new production back in December, with lots of time for rehearsals, and now to jump in with just two

rehearsals makes this time feel like an extension and a continuation of the premiere. Besides, it is even better: the company has grown and it is much more comfortable for everybody.

A. F. - *Do you have any further plans to conduct in Cluj? What are the most exciting projects you will be a part of in the following months?*

K.-L. W. - We were talking with manager Marius Budoiu about potentially another Wagner opera, and I hope it will come to fruition late next season. An important debut is coming at the English National Opera in London; I have never worked in London, so that is a very good thing. Also, from next year I am officially the new music director with the Slovenian Philharmonic: an Eastern European orchestra, which is like a little jewel. This is a big honor for me, and in this way, I can also do much more symphonic repertoire. Most of my work is in Europe, and I am happy that way, since I feel very much at home in Europe.

A. F. - *Speaking of Eastern Europe and its musicians, what are your thoughts about the great Romanian conductor Sergiu Celibidache?*

K.-L. W. - Oh, he was an eccentric, but he was a great figure in the history of music. He did amazing things, with which I do not always agree with, but musically amazing things, like in terms of searching for the line of the music. His tempos were very slow – like in his Bruckner –, but when it worked, it was incredible, because it just had that certain intensity. Sometimes you can take a tempo slow, and the phrase collapses, so there is danger in going too slow, but sometimes it works out.

A. F. - *With my two final questions, I would love to hear your opinion about the past and future of classical music. If you could meet one great conductor, one great composer and one great opera singer from the past, who would they be?*

K.-L. W. - Composers? Shostakovich and Mahler are the two I would really love to meet. I love their music, there is so much depth in them. I know that Shostakovich was an incredibly internalized, struggling man, with so much to say and it would be fascinating if I could sit down with him and just have coffee – he really did not like being questioned. Mahler was a very complex human being, a great thinker with so much emotion as well. Conductors from the past? I think Wilhelm Furtwängler, or Arturo Toscanini. And a great singer, well, Callas of course. She was such an enigma. And what a musician! Forget the voice, forget that she had the greatest voice of the last

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century: the way she used it, you cannot teach that; she did everything from *bel canto* to more dramatic roles.

A. F. - *Lastly, what do you think will happen to classical music in a 100 years time, will it even exist?*

K.-L. W. - I think as long as mankind is on this planet, there will be music. Because we need it, it is our escape, it might be work for some, but without music we would be dead, there would be no life. Sound... All the kids with their walkmans on the streets, with their headphones, listening to music... They do not have that culture of classical music, which we are losing a little, but I know that we are not going to lose classical music, like we are not going to lose Shakespeare either.
