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FÉVRIER-MARS 2013

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VALENTINS  
CHANTANTS  
SINGING  
VALENTINES

- ▶ SPOTLIGHT:  
DEAD MAN WALKING
- ▶ FRANÇOIS GIRARD:  
PARSIFAL
- ▶ WALTER BOUDREAU
- ▶ LES PRIX OPUS
- ▶ JAZZ : LE CAS STRAVINSKI

ÉTIENNE DUPUIS

*The philosopher*  
*Le philosophe*

ALLYSON McHARDY ▶



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PHOTO Bo Huang

## ALLYSON McHARDY

*Fast-rising Canadian  
mezzo-soprano on  
Dead Man Walking  
and Sister Helen*

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# ALLYSON McHARDY

on *Dead Man Walking* and *Sister Helen*

by JOSEPH SO

**I**n the competitive world of opera, a singer must have a beautiful voice, exemplary musicianship, a striking stage persona, and the ability to take on any project and make it memorable. Canadian mezzo Allyson McHardy has all these qualities and more. From Handel to Honegger, she brings a gleaming voice and communicative power that have made her a standout among the new generation of singers. She's now adding an important role to her growing operatic repertoire, that of Sister Helen Prejean in Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, arguably the most successful operatic creation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**LSM** Have you sung a lot of contemporary music?

My first forays were at the beginning of my career. At the Banff Centre, there was John Metcalf's *Kafka's Chimp*, and I did *Sirens* and *Mad for All Reasons* with Queen of Puddings, mostly contemporary music theatre with smaller orchestras.

**LSM** What are the challenges of singing contemporary repertoire?

You know, the process is the same. You start with the story, the words. In terms of singing, the vocal extremes required (in contemporary music) aren't really so different. There are lots of vocal extremes in Rossini too, that last aria in *La cenerentola*... whew! I would say Sister Helen is more about emotional than vocal extremes; is it challenging vocally? Absolutely. The sheer length of it, and the tessitura is high. I am on stage the whole time.

**LSM** Let's talk a little about the creative process, and the character of Helen – how do you approach an extremely serious subject like *Dead Man Walking*?

I start with the libretto, the book, and the movie. The details are different in the book versus the opera. I understand the librettist Terence McNally gave Jake Heggie the libretto to "do what you want, cut what you like." It shows the writer's maturity, as the musical mind often differs from the literary mind. What works with spoken words doesn't always work in music. I go in with all this information from the research, learn the notes and work on memorization, figuring out how to sing effectively, understanding the journey of the character. I don't have the

answers yet. It may be a silly analogy, but it's like making tea. You get the tea, put it into a tea ball, boil the water, heat up the teapot, pour it in, let it work, and in a while you have a good cup of tea! I'm trying to stay open to what it's going to tell me.

**LSM** Given that *Dead Man Walking* is about faith, love and redemption, where do you draw your inspiration for this role?

I would say I am a faithful person. I was raised in a Presbyterian household, and as a child I had an incredibly positive experience with the church. Do I go to church? Don't tell the minister but I haven't been in awhile! Forgiveness is a big theme in this opera, and the forgiveness he's seeking is far beyond what I hope would ever be required of me. When Sister Rose asks Sister Helen, "Have you forgiven him?" her reply is, "Of course I have... how can you even ask that?" before realizing that maybe she hasn't. She says to him at the end, "I'll be the face of Christ for you; I will be the one who loves you in that moment." She thinks that's her role, but maybe she hadn't realized that she had to forgive him for what he had done.

**LSM** Why do you think this opera has such contemporary resonance?

In her book, Prejean points out that you don't see rich people, and rarely do you see white people, on death row. It's about crime and punishment, and about poverty versus affluence. The scene with the mother and what she goes through – we don't see very much of that (reported) in the media; she loses her son too. We also see how the families of the murdered children suffer. Helen didn't set out to help this man through his journey on death row, she sort of stumbled into it. The parents say to her, "You never came to comfort us, to counsel us," so all she can say in that scene is, "I'm sorry...how could I possibly know what you're going through?" When the audiences leave, they're going to be thinking the many things that news reports don't provide: the suffering of the parents, the suffering of Joe's mom, Helen's struggling to help this man. Helen is still alive and talking about these issues.

**LSM** With this opera, you're following in the footsteps of two great mezzos, Susan Graham and Joyce DiDonato. What made you decide to take this on? How do you find the music?

I'm excited about the challenge of learning and singing this. The music? There's so much blues in this thing – there are moments of Copland and Bernstein. It's very American, yet I hear moments of *Dialogues of the Carmelites*...I don't know why it is!

**LSM** Would you say Jake Heggie writes well for the voice?

Yes, definitely. You know, I enjoy a jagged musical line! I think it's fun, very dramatic. His stuff is very Bernstein. There's a funny scene when they both sing Elvis Presley snippets. To me, *Dead Man Walking* is a very genuine, very honest work. I don't feel I'm being manipulated in my response as a musician.

**LSM** You've sung many great mezzo roles already in your still young career – Rosina, Angelina, Carmen, Dalila. Do you have any "dream roles"?

I would *love* to sing Octavian! And Sesto – I did Annio at the Paris Opera, but I'd much rather sing Sesto. I was seven month pregnant when I sang Dalila.... I was good too. Bring it on, I'm dying to do it again (laughs)! LSM



In *Dead Man Walking* and *Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher*, OSM, May 21, 23, 28, 30.  
> [www.allysonmchardy.com](http://www.allysonmchardy.com)



PHOTO Fort Worth Opera

# Spotlight on **Dead Man Walking**

by **JOSEPH SO**

**S**ince its premiere at the San Francisco Opera on October 7, 2000, Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* has become arguably the most successful of all 21<sup>st</sup> century operas. It opened to a packed house and the work received almost uniform praise by audiences and critics. There have been many revivals in the U.S and worldwide in its twelve-year history. Just in the past year and a half, DMW was staged in Dresden, St. Louis, Tulsa, and now in Montreal and Eugene, Oregon. Perhaps more than any other contemporary opera, *Dead Man Walking* brings into sharp relief that this art form is much more than just entertainment. Opera at its best serves as a form of social commentary, to inform, illuminate, and bring into focus contemporary issues that concern us all. Perhaps it could even play a role in social and political change. Based on Sister Helen Prejean's book of the same name, DMW tells the story of her experiences with Joseph De Rocher, a man convicted of rape and murder, who is on death row. In his final days, De Rocher reaches out to Sister Helen for spiritual advice, and she tries to persuade him to confess and seek redemption.

DMW has come to represent a powerful statement against the death penalty. Sister Helen was inspired to write the book from her experience in the early 1980's corresponding with two prison inmates on death row. After their execution, Prejean became a strong advocate for the abolition of capital punishment. She also founded Survive, an organization that offers counselling to the families of victims of violence. Her book was subsequently made into a highly praised Hollywood movie starring Susan Sarandon and Sean Penn, as well as this opera. DMW confronts us, makes us probe the dark recesses of our psyche; its

contemporary resonance has never been greater, given the rise of gun violence in America today and the killing of many innocent people in the process. In an interview on PBS Frontline, Sister Helen talks in depth about the essence of her work and her belief:

[www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/angel/interviews/hprejean.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/angel/interviews/hprejean.html)

DMW is the first opera for both composer Jake Heggie and playwright Terence McNally. As the librettist, McNally masterfully reduces Prejean's book to the essentials for storytelling while remaining true to its emotional core. The text is in very accessible American English, and Heggie's musical idiom is powerful, accessible, and has a strong sense of immediacy, with elements of jazz and rock incorporated into the score. It is to their great credit that an opera with heavy themes the likes of rape, murder, and capital punishment can actually fill an opera house with cheering audiences. The real-life Sister Helen has a great sense of humour, and the opera reflects that. There are also some two dozen solo roles in the opera, and each character is finely etched.

Montreal Opera's production comes from Fort Worth Opera and it stars an all-Canadian cast, led by mezzo-soprano Allyson McHardy in the pivotal role of Sister Helen Prejean. This character is on stage during practically the whole opera, and her music is vocally challenging. Baritone Etienne Dupuis has the physicality and voice to do justice to the role of Joseph De Rocher. Mezzo Kimberly Barber, who sang Sister Prejean in the Canadian premiere at Calgary Opera, takes on the role of the mother, originally created by Barber's good friend and colleague, mezzo Frederica von Stade.

LSM

## DISCOGRAPHY

For a contemporary opera, DMW has the distinction of having not one, but two commercial recordings, both taped from live performances – the 2000 premiere from San Francisco Opera starring mezzo Susan Graham on the Erato label, and the 2011 production from Houston Grand Opera on Virgin Classics, with an equally wonderful Sister Prejean in mezzo Joyce DiDonato. The conductor for both recordings is Patrick Summers. Canadian soprano Measha Brueggergosman brings her inimitable artistry to the role of Sister Rose in the Houston production. Also significant is American mezzo Frederica von Stade, who created the role of De Rocher's mother in the SFO premiere. She is a long-time champion of Jake Heggie, who has composed several works for her. One can only speculate that if the opera were to have happened ten or twenty years earlier, von Stade might well have sung Sister Helen. However excellent these two audio recordings are, it is fair to say that given the nature of the story and the almost unbearable dramatic tension inherent in the work, one really misses the visual element. Hopefully a DVD will materialize in the future.



PHOTO Fort Worth Opera

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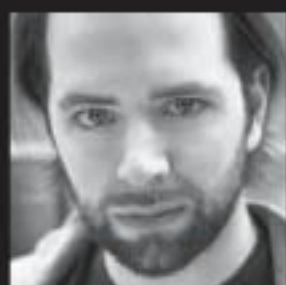
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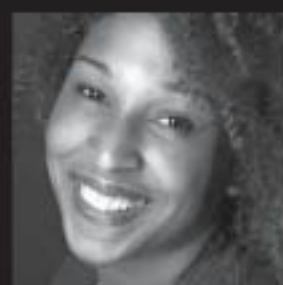
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