

Sound Expertise – Bonus Episode – The Impossibility of Opera with Matthew Aucoin

TRANSCRIPT by Andrew Dell'Antonio

SPEAKERS

- Matthew Aucoin
- Will Robin

Matthew Aucoin 00:00

Maybe it's a little bit underemphasized the way that a particular librettist can really radically change a composer's language. We think of composers sometimes in this platonic sense of their stylistic periods, but what are the forces that shape those things -- and if you look at even a composer like Verdi, he undergoes these seismic shifts based on whether he's working with someone that he can boss around and someone who is just going to deliver kind of conventional... I describe it as firewood that's just going to be kindling, set flame, or if he's dealing with someone super ambitious, like Arrigo Boito, who is going to stretch his limits.

00:56

[Theme music]

Will Robin 01:07

Welcome back to Sound Expertise. I'm your host will Robin. And this is a podcast where I talk to my fellow music scholars about their research, and why it matters. It's not typically a podcast where I talk to composers though, partly because that's what I do in my day job as a musicologist. A lot of my research involves interviewing living American composers, and sound expertise is usually a nice break from that. But I'm willing to make the occasional exception. And one such exception just came up recently, the opportunity to talk to the composer Matthew Aucoin, who just had a successful run of his opera, Euridice, at the Met. Oh, coin isn't just a composer though. He's a fascinating thinker about the history and culture of opera, and last month published an insightful book, The Impossible Art. We spoke in December about the book and how his own work fits into the history of opera as a "impossible" art form. This is, it should be clear, another bonus episode, season three is still pretty far off, unfortunately. But I hope you enjoy this great insightful conversation with Matthew Aucoin.

02:12

[Theme music]

Will Robin 02:24

So the framing you have for your book, which I really enjoyed reading, and I just finished a couple days ago, centers around this idea of opera as an impossible art form. Can you talk a little bit about why you see opera as being so "impossible" historically?

Matthew Aucoin 02:48

Yeah, I mean the term in a kind of loving or affectionate sense. I had the idea even before the pandemic, but of course, it took on new resonances when opera became literally impossible and illegal and unsanitary. I think that, at its most ambitious or utopian, opera reaches for this ideal synthesis of experience, really, of multiple art forms of the human senses. It reminds me of those wonderfully corny attempts in the early days of cinema to release perfumes into the air so that people would have this total sensory experience. And of course, audiences fled, gagging, when perfumes were released into the air. I sort of think opera attempts that by its basic nature, and I guess, I prefer to look at pieces, not on the metric of whether they succeed in doing that, because I don't think it's really achievable. But I sort of prefer to look at individual pieces through the ways that they touchingly fail or do something unexpected, based on the premise that they're reaching for this thing that never quite will be reached.

Will Robin 04:07

So there's this ideal and then there's the reality of the ... you do a really nice job of showing the day to day of opera creation, that composer librettist dynamic, especially. You know, it's funny, I was just... I've been... having put aside the book for a couple of days and thinking about -- Okay, do I think opera is an impossible art form, and the way I started to think about it was, in the United States, opera is definitely an impossible art form. But I don't know, in Italy in the 18th century, it seemed pretty possible, but it's a different way of looking at that metaphor. Compared to other art forms, how do you evaluate this impossibility?

Matthew Aucoin 04:50

I guess one way that I'd put it is, I do think every work of art or maybe every act of human communication is also a kind of failure, because -- a failure and a discovery at the same time, because I think if you're doing it right, you end up saying something different than what you set out to say, in a conversation, or a work of art. And that's true in sort of low overhead art forms, like poetry as well. But the thing that interests me about opera is that everything is kind of more egregious and obvious, and embarrassing because of the sheer scale of it and the number of moving parts, that I think ... when things don't quite come together, the seams are very obvious. And so I think it's a dynamic that is more universal, but I think it's most readily explicable in opera.

Will Robin 05:44

Yeah, just like this idea that you have both the coming together of all these art forms, and usually two out of 10 of them tend to work really well. And then the others are -- at service of the two or whatever.

Matthew Aucoin 05:58

Totally.

Will Robin 05:59

So maybe let's talk a little bit about the specifics of the book, in terms of how did you select the works that you wanted to focus on, the different both -- composers you obviously, and librettist you wanted to address but also the specific themes and works that resonated with this idea of impossibility?

Matthew Aucoin 06:18

Well, I think authors are often not supposed to call their books essay collections. I don't know, there's some aversion to that term in publishing, but really, I do think this is kind of a love letter to a bunch of individual pieces. It is an essay collection. And the guiding force is this idea of, okay, how are these pieces impossible? What do they set out to do? What do they actually do instead? But really what unifies them, it's just that they're the pieces that I've lived with the longest and had something to say about. I mean, there's a whole long section about Orpheus pieces, which, you know, I didn't do a deep dive into those pieces until after my opera Eurydice which I wrote with Sarah Ruhl was finished, because I didn't want to kind of clutter my mind. But I think that whole section is pretty important to the book, just because I think the story, the myth of Orpheus is like the seed of the rest of the art form. I think it does this kind of recursive, impossible thing of... it announces that it's going to sing music that conquers death. And of course, that's not going to happen. It also claims to be about the recovery of a loved one. And I think that's totally not what it's about. It's about kind of loss as an excuse for music making, which becomes the foundational act of the rest of the art form. So it felt important to spend some time with the different ways that that story has resonated throughout the ages.

Will Robin 07:57

Yeah, when you -- well, maybe let's back up to how the essays came into existence. So you are a composer and a conductor and like a bajillion other musical things. How did you get to the point where you thought, I would like to start writing about the operas that I'm playing, studying, starting to write myself that kind of thing.

Matthew Aucoin 08:21

I mean, I'm mostly a composer, I think. But I guess when you're an opera composer, you're always filtering things through language. And I had spent a lot of time with these pieces, kind of in my like, apprenticeship years. And I'd had ideas about the way that -- what made them tick. And a few years ago, a wonderful editor at the New York Review of Books, Michael Shea, reached out and said, Do you want to write about this music book, or that music book, and it kind of provided this wonderful side project, this kind of window into another... Really, it's another part of my mind that I hadn't exercised in close to a decade. And a bunch of the essays came into being through that relationship. And then when the pandemic hit, I thought, well, I've already got a few of these and I have nothing but time because I have no work for the next 18 months, so it kind of quickly cohered when the world shut down.

Will Robin 09:28

What does for any of -- let's take Rake's Progress, for example. What does the research process look like for you in terms of -- you knew the opera already, but you wanted to go deeper into it to figure out what you have to say about it.

Matthew Aucoin 09:45

I'm glad you brought up Rake's Progress because I think that's a piece where the facts have been hiding in plain sight, but at least I hadn't found the kind of synthesis of what happened what made this piece come into existence. In the case of that piece, I did a really deep dive into the extant documents between Stravinsky, Auden, and Coleman. Auden's literary executor, Edward Mendelssohn, has done just a beautiful job gathering those materials. And there's a little-known volume of Auden's dramatic works, the Rake libretto, the Paul Bunyan project with Britten, and many, many other things, his

translations of Magic Flute and stuff like that. And in this collection, there are dozens, if not hundreds of messages among the creators. And what was attractive to me about delving into that piece is because we're dealing with W H Auden, who's a super central figure, you know, very well known to people who read books, but maybe don't know this art form as well. It's incredibly clear the way that they worked. And I think Auden is just so lucid about -- you know, he's very pragmatic. It's like, he's a woodworker, or something; he's describing what will work and what won't in a way that I think pretty much anyone can understand. And also, I became fascinated by the way that I think he kind of encoded a lot of things about his romantic partnership with Chester Coleman, his co-author of the libretto, into the story, I mean, you know, the character of Baba the Turk is this kind of flagrantly gay, this kind of drag queen character. And I think they sort of hoped that Stravinsky wouldn't get, you know, the whole notion of a beard and you know, the bearded lady. It's just this parade of in jokes. And then -- so that process, followed by what Stravinsky does when he's handed the finished text, is just like my favorite illumination of how an opera is kind of cooked through. And the challenge I wanted to set myself was, can I make this interesting to a general readership? Can I present it in a way so that it feels kind of like a story? And hopefully it's interesting to musicians, but not just to musicians.

Will Robin 12:17

Yeah. I found it fascinating. That's an opera that I haven't -- I know the Stravinsky Rite of Spring very well, but I haven't spent much time with Rake's Progress besides just listening to it. It seems like the central thing that you are compelled by in these operas beyond the work is the composer-librettist dynamic. Is that a result of writing this book while also writing an opera with a librettist yourself? How did you conceptualize -- I'm reading about this relationship between Stravinsky and Auden, and I'm reading their back and forth. And I'm having my own backs and forths with a librettist, with Sarah?

Matthew Aucoin 13:03

Yeah, I think that's right. I hadn't quite thought of it that way. But for one thing, it's a heck of a lot easier to talk about those relationships because they're often kind of stormy. And also they deal with words, not just notes. But also, I think maybe it's a little bit underemphasized the way that a particular librettist can really radically change a composer's language. We think of composers sometimes in this platonic sense of their stylistic periods, but like, what are the forces that shape those things, and if you look at even a composer like Verdi, he undergoes these seismic shifts based on whether he's working with someone that he can boss around and someone who is just going to deliver a kind of conventional -- I describe it as firewood that's just going to be kind of kindling set flame, or if he's dealing with someone super ambitious, like, Arrigo Boito, who is going to stretch his limits.

Will Robin 14:09

Yeah. One thing that's striking to me too about the book... I don't keep up as well as I should with opera scholarship more broadly. The drift, I would say, in musicological work on opera in the last maybe 15 years has been to focus on setting aside a little bit the work as a score with words and music and focusing on how it's brought into performance, whether that's issues of staging technology, singing ... it was striking to me that actually though you're engaging with the impossibility of operas through the lens of this coalition of all these art forms, you tend to focus in on just a couple of them. I guess that's in part a virtue of you being a composer, too, I don't know, if you how you think about that.

Matthew Aucoin 15:04

I think part of it is just that I have very little visual imagination, I really have very little mechanical know how, I can't fix things around the house, I don't understand how sets get built. For example, doing this show in New York right now, I love to.., there's been a couple performances where I've stood backstage, rather than in the audience. And it's just so mysterious and wizardly to me, the way that the stage technicians and everyone are doing their work. So I think I would just have a heck of a lot less to say. When it comes to singing, though, and the way that the act of singing has changed. I do think I have more to say about that. I touch on it a little bit in the introduction, like the impact of the existence of amplification, and so forth. But I kind of think that's a project for another book.

Will Robin 15:57

Well, it strikes me too, that the Bel Canto period is not a central focus of the book, maybe in part because the role of the singer is so much more central to that than the composer I don't know. Are you a Rossini and Bellini fan? Or is that something that, you know ... it's interesting to me what ended up in there and what didn't end up in there in terms of like tackling opera.

Matthew Aucoin 16:19

Yeah, right. I mentioned that Wagner is not there, not because I don't love Wagner, but because he's been very well covered, especially in recent years. Yeah, bel canto is interesting for me, I did kind of apprentice at the Caramoor Festival when I was in college.

Will Robin 16:36

Oh, cool. I worked in their box office when I was...

Matthew Aucoin 16:39

did you really? What an idyllic spot. Did bel canto at Caramoor still exist?

Matthew Aucoin 16:45

So I worked as a coach there. And I actually have a lot of respect for that approach to the act of singing. I think that just this basic thing of, what is legato? How do you connect one note to the next? It sounds basic, but it's really hard to make it really seamless. So I love it as an approach to activating the human body. I'm less interested in those pieces. I mean, Rossini -- Rossini is hard for me. I never quite trust him. Bellini I trust a little bit more. But yeah, I think I just have less to say I mean, it's a good bowl of pasta, how much can you say about it? [both laugh]

Will Robin 16:45

Yeah.

Will Robin 17:39

I think the most interesting -- not necessarily the most interesting chapter of the book for me, I enjoyed them all in different ways. But the most interesting inclusion was Chaya Czernowin of in terms of like, even Adès I often see crop up in a lot of... let's talk about the history of opera, let's go from Monteverdi to Adès. Can you talk a little bit about what speaks to you about Czernowin's work and why you see it

as part of this larger continuity? Because I think a lot of people would just place it more in the new music world than in the opera world.

Matthew Aucoin 18:15

I'm glad you asked about that. I kind of just barely missed Chaya Czernowin as a teacher. I did my undergrad work at Harvard, and she was a professor there, I took a group class with her but didn't really get to know her. I included her and specifically her opera Heart Chamber because I think she really attempts something that I've always believed possible, but never really seen a composer do, which is to write a grand scale opera that is almost entirely inward, and almost entirely devoid of external event. I mean, there are plenty of operas, and certainly stagings that are quite abstract and that focus on inner experience, but normally, it takes the form of recognizable acts of violence, or ecstasy or whatever. And the thing that I find so extraordinary about Heart Chamber is, it's all the moments in a relationship, in the early stages of a relationship, when you feel flooded with these incredibly intense feelings that you usually don't have words for. And I think, in a way, Czernowin's goal in the piece was to make those moments feel as huge in an opera house as they feel in your head or in your body. And to do that in a moment is cool enough, but to do it for two hours, and to really trust that kind of experience is I think, totally thrilling. And also, if you know my music, it has very little to do with Chaya Czernowin's modes of notation and her concepts of sound. But I mean, for me, she's one of the few composers, where I find it such an overwhelming experience that it almost makes me want to go back to the drawing board and [unintelligible]. Should I just throw away the piano altogether and work with different sonic materials? I mean, yeah, that's rare.

Will Robin 20:30

It's striking that you mentioned the need to avoid Orpheus until you were done with your Orpheus opera, or at least the need to avoid revisiting them. Like which of these operas ended up bearing the most weight on Euridyce? And also which of those composer-librettist dynamics were in the back of your head when you were working with Sarah?

Matthew Aucoin 20:57

In a funny way, I think the process has the most to do with -- and I'm not comparing the pieces at all, but just the process has the most to do with what Debussy did with Pelléas, where he took a recently performed play and whittled it down to, I don't know, 60-70% of the original length. And I think in the same way that, you know, the Maeterlinck Pelléas does not change radically. It's basically just a shortened version of the play. That's mostly what the process for Euridyce was. And in a way, that's why I approached Sara in the first place and why I landed on the play was I felt it was pretty close to being a libretto already. There must be other examples, but it's not... it was not like a

Will Robin 21:47

I guess that's what Literatur-opera is, right? Like Salomé and Elektra too...

Matthew Aucoin 21:53

Totally, Salomé is another good example.

Will Robin 21:55

So maybe let's -- for those who haven't read the book listeners, and you should, walk me through your relationship with Orpheus opera, and how that led to your decision to kind of turn Orpheus into opera again, knowing that it had been done a few times before.

Matthew Aucoin 22:19

I kind of want to start near the end with this moment when I realized that Euridyce is not really an Orpheus and Eurydice play, actually. I didn't realize this until a couple of years in the composition. But I really think the shape of Sara's play is an entirely different story, that the myth is kind of contained within. It's really more of a father daughter story, and it's more ... almost a growing up story, if you can grow up when you're already dead. I mean, really, the drama begins when Eurydice loses her memory, and the central act where she's slowly recovering her sense of herself is, I think, really the heart of the drama. But I did at one point think it was an Orpheus and Eurydice piece. So it goes back to early in 2014, I think, when I wrote a piece called the Orphic Moment for my friends, Anthony Roth Constanzo, the countertenor, and Keir GoGwilt, the violinist. It felt sort of like a cantata sized piece, 16 or 17 minutes. And it was entirely an explosion of the few milliseconds before Orpheus turns around. It's this kind of slightly sadistic take on what's going through his mind at a subconscious level. And I think what's going through there is -- I have to turn around, because that's what will be most fruitful for music. And it was just one of those pieces that felt kind of like a personal landmark. It kind of set me on fire creatively. And I just felt -- there's more to do here and started toying.

Will Robin 24:14

What was your -- at that point -- engagement with all of the other Orpheus music stuff? Was that directly informing it at that point, or were you trying to come to terms with your own version of this?

Matthew Aucoin 24:30

We premiered it on a double bill with the Gluck which I conducted. So I knew the Gluck well enough to perform it. I'm not sure I knew the Birtwhistle Mask of Orpheus yet, which I think is an astonishing piece. But the more I lived with the idea of expanding that into a whole evening, the more the idea of it just being about male artistic narcissism began to kind of depress me. And then a couple of people suggested that I get in touch with Sarah and I just found her take was kind of a breath of fresh air, both her take on this story and more broadly, the way that she juxtaposes tragedy and comedy or the quotidian and the surreal. I think in recent American opera, there is a tendency towards the gloomy -- not necessarily the tragic, but just the sense that everything has to be so goddamn somber. And I've been guilty of it myself, my piece Crossing certainly lives in that kind of musky atmosphere. And I realized that I kind of wanted a way out, I wanted somebody who was going to push me to find musical modes for humor and surprise. So yeah, it's a long way of saying that that was the route towards Euridyce.

Will Robin 26:04

And revisiting the Orpheus mythology in opera, whether it's Monteverdi or Caccini, or Birtwhistle, after finishing the opera, how has that informed how you think of the opera now?

Matthew Aucoin 26:21

I think it really convinces me that it's not an Orpheus piece. I mean, my own piece. Especially in the last act after the kind of moment of the look, when there are like seven more giant dramatic events left. I certainly forget that we're in this story at all, by the time we get to the third act. But, you know, it's also reminded me how fertile this story is, I mean, Harrison Birtwistle, as I say in the book, has really spent something like 50 years obsessed with the story, to the extent that I think you could argue that it has kind of generated most of his music, even some of the instrumental music. And some may get bored with that. I don't. I think it's super fertile.

Will Robin 27:17

I guess you found your way out in a way of this feedback loop of Orpheus by not making it an Orpheus story?

Matthew Aucoin 27:25

Yeah, I certainly think I'm done for at least a few decades.

Will Robin 27:32

So tonight's the final night of the Met run, how impossible has this felt compared to the impossibility of opera writ large, that you tackle in the book?

Matthew Aucoin 27:45

It's been shockingly smooth. And I say that, having had a really difficult time with the premiere in LA, where everyone in the cast got very sick. And there were not understudies for most of the parts, and there was no one else on the planet who knew it. And it was just, it felt every day like it was just not going to happen. And that continued through the performances. I don't think we had a single performance in LA, without some singer saying I have laryngitis and so forth.

Will Robin 28:19

That seems like it has to be a part of an opera's history, there just has to be some colossal failure before that.

Matthew Aucoin 28:25

Yeah, it's part of the deal. It's in your contract in some way. But so far in New York, I mean, we've had a really committed team. And, knock on wood, we have one more show to get through tonight. No one's gotten sick. The audiences have been sizable, and not the audience that I know as the Met audience exclusively. And also, it's been a revelation for me to not perform, for once, to just sit back and... it's in very good hands with both Yannick Nézet-Séguin and Daniela Candillari, our assistant conductor who led one performance. So this is all probably -- it's boring to talk about things going well, but it's been really good!

Will Robin 29:18

Well, there's one more opportunity! (laughs)

Matthew Aucoin 29:20

I guess there is (laughs) I've probably jinxed it.

Will Robin 29:27

How do you tackle the sitting in the audience while your opera happens?

Matthew Aucoin 29:31

Well, you know, I ran into Nico Muhly at one of the performances and he was like -- I can't believe you're sitting in the hall. I never sat in the hall for any of the shows. And I kind of feel like I have to put myself through it. It feels like if I'm gonna learn things and react, I really should be there. I've had one good excuse. We have an offstage chorus that is amplified and what's extraordinary is they're actually four floors underground, they are very far away in the Met's orchestra room, which is in their personal underworld in the basement. And it's being piped in, but through a kind of amazing trick, it sounds like they're in the pit, it sounds like the sound is kind of emanating out of the pit. But it's very tricky in terms of balance. So for some of the shows, I've been sitting with Rob Gorton, the sound guy, and probably quite annoyingly, been hissing in his ear: Less! More! Because there are moments when you want the chorus to be totally overwhelming, and then there are moments when they have to get out of the way. So I've kind of comforted myself by feeling like I have a little job to do. It's easier, you know?

Will Robin 30:54

Coming out of the experience of both this opera at the Met, and publishing the book, what have you learned? And how is that informing what you're going to be doing going forward creatively?

Matthew Aucoin 31:08

It's a great question. I think I'm not the only composer to have had a kind of guilty sense that some aspects of the pandemic were good for one's work, I was very depressed about the state of the world. But I also... I'm an introvert at heart. And, there was some part of me that felt relief at not having the usual travel or social obligations, and I do just feel kind of a responsibility to recreate those conditions. Because I think there were things about the process of writing Euridice where this or that felt a bit cramped because of other obligations. And I don't want to create that for myself again, I'm thinking about really engaging with my teacher Jorie Graham's poems for a larger scale piece having to do with how the planet is changing. A much more abstract approach to the theater. And I think that's something I'm attracted to as well, it was nice to tell a good clear story for once, but I find myself wanting to go into weirder theatrical spaces, and to just leave lots of time to let that piece marinate. So that's my instinct after this very busy period. There are so many gig economy pressures that evaporated for a second during the pandemic. And I want to try to learn some lessons from that. I think if we can all pull one or two things from that very difficult experience, we might find a healthier way of moving forward as an industry.

Will Robin 33:10

I was really struck by how you grappled with -- I guess it was in the Euridice chapter about talking about reading Nico's essay about burnout and mental health and how that forced that realization in your own brain of both the individual experience of being a young hot composer, hot in a sense of ...

Matthew Aucoin 33:32

[laughs] Whatever sense, Will!

Will Robin 33:36

[laughs]. And also what that is as a structural piece of what's going on in the 2010s kind of gig economy too.

Matthew Aucoin 33:43

Yeah, what struck me and scared me a little bit in that amazing essay that Nico wrote is the awareness that it can creep into the music. How could it not? If there's this pressure to just produce, produce, produce, and you listen to music from other cultures, other times, and you hear the way that -- this sounds so Marxist, you know, conditions of production -- impact the nature of the music, and then the effect that has on a listener. So it really made me think in a different way about -- what do I want that to be and what do I want the effect on the listener to be. And Euridice is already one step in a direction that I like, but I think I can go a lot further.

Will Robin 34:37

In what sense?

Matthew Aucoin 34:40

Time, basically. Letting things marinate. That's it, basically.

Will Robin 34:49

It's been interesting to follow ... it's always interesting for me to follow a press phenomenon in what happens when there's a new opera at the Met. Often I don't get to see them. And unfortunately, I didn't get to see yours. But to follow it from afar and to just think about what you're saying versus what the Two Boys media frenzy was a decade ago, where Nico was giving all these interviews, which I think that essay was a response to in a way of -- I want to be like a baroque composer who can write a piece a week type thing. And that's not -- we don't live in the 17th century, and if you set those expectations for yourself, it can lead to these kinds of creative -- I don't want to say creative failure. It's more like you come up against a wall of some kind.

Matthew Aucoin 35:48

Yeah - you can't just hand the Met orchestra a lead sheet and say, this is it. But also, I think one other thing that's changed for the better is, in those seasons, close to a decade ago, it was like one new piece. And that was it. And so the spotlight and the pressure for it to be a Masterpiece, Goddamnit was so intense. And with Terence Blanchard's Fire Shut Up in my Bones opening the season and with Akhnaten, and Brett Dean's Hamlet later, it just feels in a nice way that there's maybe something for everybody and every piece does not have to be all things for all people. And that is super great. At the same time, I've been keenly aware that some of the smaller companies in the area, maybe have not come back. So that's -- I don't think that the Metropolitan Opera should be the only show in town. And it's kind of oddly felt Met-centric in New York this fall. So I really hope there's diversity of scale, as well as diversity within a season. But I think certainly the diversity within a season, in a lot of senses has gotten better, and it's made it less toxic for any given artist.

Matthew Aucoin 35:48

How does all of ... the book stuff, coming off Euridice with a new sense of what you want to be doing. How is that informing your own AMOC? Is that how you pronounce it -- amok, I guess?

Matthew Aucoin 37:04

Yeah, we say amuck, like "run amok"... Yeah,

Will Robin 37:21

Which is your ... or not *your* opera company, but this kind of collaborative thingy? I don't know. You could describe it.

Matthew Aucoin 37:29

Sure. Sure. I mean, AMOC is a collective. It's an artist collective, basically. AMOC stands for American modern opera company. But we are an opera company, mainly in the sense that we are artists from multiple disciplines that make work together. Yeah, I co-founded AMOC with the director Zack Winokur in 2017, out of this sense that various kinds of institutional structures, opera companies, but also ballet companies and orchestras, did not really provide the ideal model for the creation of new work, and collaboration among artists. We took this basic question of -- what stays consistent in a big opera company, and well, it's the building and the administration, who are the ones making most of the decisions, plus the orchestra and the chorus. What does not stay consistent? It's the solo artists, the directors, the conductors, the choreographers. And we just thought -- that's kind of backwards. The Duke Ellington band or the Pina Bausch dance company were only able to make the work that they did, because there was consistency among artists working together over a long period. And so really, what we wanted to do was to create that, in a pretty informal way to just sort of say, Okay, who are the colleagues that we know we want to work with forever? People like Julia Bullock or Davóne Tines or Keir GoGwilt, or the dancer Bobby Jean Smith, and can we just bring them together and create a space for them to meet each other and forge connections? And it's really worked. It's become a family in the sense of a very messy, complicated family dynamic. But also in the sense of, we really feel like we're in it for the long haul. And at the moment, our big project is we're collectively curating the Ojai festival for next June -- we collectively are the music director. And, yeah, I think this experience has made me feel even more -- the experience of this fall has made me feel even more committed to AMOC as an entity, because there's a real openness to whatever ideas people want to bring forward. There's never the sort of -- Will that sell enough seats? Will that work from a marketing perspective? It's much more ground level, what do the individual artists want to be doing? And yeah, we hope it'll be a model that people steal. Because it's a lot of fun.

Will Robin 40:20

Yeah. That's great. Well, thank you so much for speaking with me. And I hope tonight goes well.

Matthew Aucoin 40:27

Thank you, Will! I hope I haven't put a curse on us by saying we've gotten through all the shows okay so far, so stay tuned. [both laugh]

Will Robin 40:36

All right. Well, thank you so much. And yeah, people should buy your book.

Matthew Aucoin 40:41

Thank you very much. Take care.

40:48

[Theme music]

Will Robin 40:49

Many thanks to Matthew Aucoin for that fascinating conversation. His book, *The Impossible Art: Adventures in Opera*, is out now with FSG. Please visit our website, soundexpertise.org, to learn more about his writing and music. As always, check out the work of our great producer D. Edward Davis on SoundCloud at [warm silence](https://www.soundcloud.com/warm-silence). You can follow me on Twitter [@seatedovation](https://twitter.com/seatedovation), although I'm doing a lot more parenting than tweeting these days, and I'm very happy about that. And relatedly I can't tell you exactly when season three will get started. But I'm guessing it's not until the fall at the earliest. So check out our back catalogue and stay tuned.

41:27

[Theme music]