



Deborah Borda, president and CEO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, asked Frank Gehry and Jean Nouvel to design opera sets for the Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Text Katya Tylevich
Portrait photo Alexei Tylevich

D E S I G N I N G
F O R
M O Z A R T

at the Frank Gehry-designed Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, a three-year programme kicked off this past May, pairing starchitects with hip couturiers to work on productions of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Così fan tutte* – known as the Da Ponte trilogy, for librettist Lorenzo Da Ponte.

In collaboration with LA fashion house Rodarte, Frank Gehry inaugurated the project with a black and white 'paper' set, in which an unorthodoxly placed orchestra floated behind Don Giovanni's characters to create an otherworldly atmosphere for an opera that questions the repercussions of certain earthly pleasures and actions. The production ran four shows between 18 and 26 May. Next up is Jean Nouvel, teamed with couturier Azzedine Alaïa for *Marriage of Figaro*, with four shows scheduled between 17 and 25 May 2013. Online rumours from far-reaching corners like *Dezeen* and *The Huffington Post* have Zaha Hadid doing *Così* in 2014, but nobody at LA Phil will confirm the allegations, and we'll have to wait until next February for an official announcement of the third design team.

Tickets for this year's four shows sold out instantly. Which begs the question, since when does modern architecture sell out seats to the opera? And who's buying these tickets, anyway? I sat down with Deborah Borda, president and CEO of the Los Angeles Philharmonic – who, incidentally, was instrumental in the realization of the Disney Concert Hall in 2003 – to discuss the concept of pairing modern architects with not-so-modern operas, the challenges of this unusual idea, and the effects it's had on LA Phil patrons, both regulars and newcomers.

What was the seed for this concept?
It began over a year ago, on a rainy Sunday morning at a Starbucks in Berlin. Gustavo

'FRANK REALLY LOVES DON GIOVANNI; HE MUST IDENTIFY WITH THE DON'

[Dudamel, music director of the LA Phil] was conducting the Berlin Philharmonic, and I was there with our director of artistic planning, Chad Smith, to meet between Gustavo's concerts to plan our upcoming seasons. None of us had had any breakfast yet. It was pouring outside, so we sat at Starbucks and talked and talked. Gustavo was the first to say that in order to develop the kind of nimbleness that makes an orchestra truly great, they needed to play opera. And to develop a purity and beauty of sound, they needed to play Mozart, specifically. Of course, Mozart's three greatest operas – the Da Ponte trilogy – are *Giovanni*, *Figaro* and *Così*. But rather than doing the operas just as concerts, why not do something special, like when we commissioned a Bill Viola video for Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and had it staged by director Peter Sellers? In short, we wanted to try something new, and we had to get Frank Gehry on the phone right away.

Do you have him on speed dial for moments like this?
Oh, we love bringing Frank into our artistic and musical discussions. He's had a tremendous influence on my thinking about music, architecture and the arts in general, and we're very close friends. But at that

particular moment, we realized we couldn't call him. It was still the middle of the night in LA. So while we're sitting there, waiting, Gustavo's wife, Eloïsa Maturén comes by, hears our idea and says, 'Why not add couturiers to really round out the idea?' So I suggest we let Frank pick the designer he wants to work with, and finally we can't wait any more and call him at 7 a.m. on a Sunday morning. Frank immediately agrees but says that we need to select the architects for the following two productions right away. We also agree to change the order of the productions for him. Typically, *Figaro* goes first, but Frank really loves *Don Giovanni*; he must identify with the Don. [Laughs.] And since we wanted him to be our first architect – it is his hall – we agreed to do things a little differently. It was Frank who chose Jean Nouvel and another Pritzker Prize-winning architect, whom I cannot reveal yet. He made the initial calls for us, and then we travelled to Paris to formally ask Jean Nouvel and to another foreign city to ask the other person. When they agreed, we asked them to select their own couturiers to work with.

Why did Gehry choose to work with Rodarte?
After much thought, he wanted somebody who wasn't so much of a household name. We also knew it was a good idea for the architect and designer to be based in the same city, which is why we let the architects make their own selections.

Is there something about each architect's particular style that corresponds to the theme of the opera with which they're paired?
Absolutely not. The themes of the operas are open to the fantasies of the architects, all three of whom have very different individual identifications. Jean just happened to like *Figaro*. ▶

Frank Gehry (right) at a dress rehearsal of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at Walt Disney Concert Hall. Photo Mathew Imaging



◀ Did you consider bringing lesser-known architects into the mix, the way you brought in lesser-known fashion designers? Well, these are by no means conservative architects, and the world of symphonic music can be very conservative. I think the boldness of our project includes bringing in architects who are at the height of their creative powers.

Did you face any challenges proposing this idea to, say, the board of directors or even the audience?

Oh, the audience was excited. It sold out immediately. And the board of directors

'AUDIENCES ARE MUCH MORE SOPHISTICATED TODAY. WE'RE LIVING IN THE DIGITAL AGE'

here is remarkably open to experiments. They also understand that part of success is being able to take risks and to fail. We don't want to fail too much, but we have to have the opportunity to fail. In general, though, the working and creative atmosphere in Los Angeles is completely different from that in the rest of the United States. No matter how wild your idea, you can convince someone here to let you try it. That wasn't the challenge. I think the challenge was that Disney Hall is not an opera house. So staging an opera in what was very much designed to be a symphony hall was difficult.

Did you have 'form versus function' conversations with Frank, like when he decided to place the orchestra behind the performers on stage?

We were very concerned about that, and we did an experiment to see if it could actually work. That was definitely a risk, and I have to say, if there was anything I felt was not entirely successful, it was that part, because so much had to happen by video monitor. I think you want a great musician like Gustavo right in the centre of everything. So we'll be adjusting for that in the next performances. But Frank was interested in inventing a new kind of space, and his

idea was forward-looking and ultimately it worked. Jean has come up with a very different idea, so what you'll see next year will be completely different.

Does it surprise you that modern architecture can sell out seats to an opera?

I think audiences are much more sophisticated today, in part because of the way they receive information in the digital age. I think they look for a sort of encompassing 'life' work within the arts. Another thing you probably noticed is a much younger audience than you would expect at an opera. We're breaking down

many barriers with programmes like this. And of course, barriers are literally broken down in Frank's hall – especially the barrier between performer and audience – so that a symphony or opera can become a very personal and visceral experience.

Does Gehry's rather cerebral design give a different meaning to *Don Giovanni*?

The design was, in some ways, extremely abstract. I think it was intended to raise the question of whether the landscape was actually all in the mind of Don Giovanni. Gehry's set allowed the audience to relate to the characters in a stripped-down emotional state, and I found that fascinating and very scary. In all, it was a very, very 21st-century production until that great moment at the end when Don Giovanni is dragged down to hell by Il Commendatore. [Director] Christopher Alden and Frank came up with the idea that just like in an ancient opera house – say, the Drottningholms Slottsteater in Sweden – the performers would simply twirl the Don off stage on a movable platform. I loved that brief return – in this high-tech, 21st-century moment – to the 18th century.

Why are you so invested in bringing together modern architecture and music?

My personal relationship with architecture was nil until I came to work here [in 2000]. The funny story is that my first profound reaction to architecture came when I was running the New York Philharmonic. I was on a project trying to convince Lincoln Center and the board to move forward with major renovations of Avery Fisher Hall, to make it a more successful hall. One Sunday morning I was sitting at my breakfast table in New York City. I opened up the arts and leisure section of *The New York Times* and saw a full-page rendering of a symphony hall that was supposed to be built in Los Angeles: Walt Disney Concert Hall, which I had never heard of before. My first reaction was that it was the single most beautiful building I had ever seen – it was like music. My second reaction was jealousy. Why can't we have that? As bizarre stories sometimes go, a year later I was asked to come and help get this project off the ground.

Interesting that you say Disney Hall was 'like music' to you.

Well, of course, there's Goethe's famous remark about 'frozen music', but I can't say that's my metaphor of choice. I remember standing in front of a massive Jackson Pollock once and being moved to tears. I think it was the motion of that work that moved me. This building has the same kind of motion, and so does music. It's the motion of going forward. ◀



LA Phil's production of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* at Walt Disney Concert Hall – led by Gustavo Dudamel in collaboration with Frank Gehry, Rodarte and Christopher Alden. Photo Autumn de Wilde