



How Jordan de Souza went from suburban Toronto to the Komische Oper Berlin

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Jordan de Souza is the Kapellmeister (leader of orchestra) for the Komische Oper Berlin.

BRENT CALIS

“It’s just one more flight!”

Jordan de Souza bounces up a steep set of stairs to his office at the Komische Oper Berlin, which overlooks the thoroughfare of Behrenstrasse, not far from the





De Souza, who turns 30 this year, is a ball of manic energy; he walks quickly and speaks with an unbridled enthusiasm for work and life, both of which have integrated in a way many classical artists can only dream of. He and his wife, soprano Jana Miller, moved to Berlin in 2016, where he is Kapellmeister (leader of orchestra) for the Komische Oper (Comic Opera). His daughter was born in Berlin in early 2017. His German is self-taught – absorbed, he says, mainly from reading. He cycles through the immense Tiergarten (a park running through central Berlin) from his home in Charlottenburg to work almost daily. “I was lucky to feel like I belonged here really quickly,” he says, settling into an immense office chair, “and it has a lot to do with this company.”

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Located in the former East Berlin, the Komische Oper Berlin recently marked its 70th birthday. Under the leadership of Australian director Barrie Kosky since 2012, it is a powerful force in the classical music world, presenting a mix of opera and operetta with frequently bold, unusual productions. The hierarchy within the Berlin opera scene is, as de Souza puts it, “clear – we’re the little brother in town” (the other two companies being Deutsche Oper and Staatsoper Berlin), but the company boasts a roster of stellar music figures from its past staff, including Kirill Petrenko, now music director of the Bavarian State Opera in Munich, and Vladimir Jurowski, now chief conductor and artistic director of the Radio Symphony Orchestra Berlin and principal conductor of the London Philharmonic. The incoming general music director for Komische Oper is 39-year-old Ainars Rubikis, winner of the Third International Gustav Mahler conducting competition in 2010, and former musical director of the Novosibirsk State Opera House. “There’s a life to what we’re doing,” de Souza says of the organization. “It’s palpable, you can feel it not only in audience, but people working in the house. We’re trying to create something fresh. I feel really at home here.”

That sense of home was reinforced last winter, when de Souza was asked to fill in for conductor Henrik Nanasi on the Komische Oper’s *Eugene Onegin* at the last minute. Despite not knowing Russian, and only days into becoming a father, de Souza learned all 484 pages of the score – in a little over a week.





Oper on March 29, with de Souza on the podium, and runs through mid-May.

The fact de Souza, who has conducted at the Canadian Opera Company, l'Opéra de Montréal and Houston Grand Opera among others, now holds the title of Kapellmeister is fitting, considering the term originally applied to someone in charge of chapel music; he (along with his six brothers) attended St. Michael's Choir School, a semi-private institution in Toronto with a core curriculum balanced between academia and music studies. It boasts a number of internationally celebrated classical alumni including tenor Michael Schade and conductor Janko Kastelic. A teacher introduced de Souza to opera, but his passion for the art form truly took flight when he was given the score to Mozart's *Così fan tutte* by a professor at McGill, where he studied organ. "My passion was church music," the prize-winning organist admits. "I loved taking hymns and finding new harmonies, and fresh ways of looking at them."



I don't work on music; music works on me.

— Jordan de Souza

The job of Kapellmeister has evolved to encompass a range of activities and responsibilities which can vary wildly from house to house. In more traditional German opera companies, a Kapellmeister might be very much an assistant's position, but not so at the Komische. "I get to [conduct] 40 to 50 nights a year, I rehearse, I have assistants on every show. I have the chance to develop my vision as a conductor."

"I'm an instinctive person so I knew he would be good," Kosky of de Souza says, "otherwise we wouldn't have given him the position of Kapellmeister. When you're starting off as a young conductor you should have a go of everything, and also you can then use it, in lots of ways, later in your career, and Jordan thank goodness is clever enough to realize that."

Kosky happily refers to de Souza's "excited puppy energy" and it was this quality that proved important during preparations for *Pelléas et Mélisande*, presented last October. The sole opera by French composer Claude Debussy is a seminal work within the opera repertory, and one of the most musically challenging. German baritone Dominik Köninger, who made his role debut in the title role, says the conductor arrived for rehearsals "superprepared. He already had built up his whole idea of every word ... every note! It was scary a little bit ... but he still he gave us room. It was a very special atmosphere."





The production marked a trio of premieres – for company, director and conductor. While Kosky praises de Souza for his willingness to experiment, the conductor, who admits he is “intensely self-critical,” was experiencing pangs of self-doubt over tackling Debussy’s dense score, feeling his youth was an impediment to the intense thoughtfulness the work demands. He discussed his concerns with Jurowski, who asked him his age. “I said, 28. He said, ‘I was given my first *Pelléas* when I was 28 too.’ To master the elements of that score can take a lifetime. It’s not something you learn in two or three months.”

What little amount of time de Souza has off is spent with his baby daughter, singing lullabies and pouring over future planned works. “Bea sits with me while I’m studying scores,” he says, a proud smile creeping across his face, “she takes her little fake pen, has her finger where I ask her to leave it, waves her hands when the music starts ... every time I hold that little girl in my arms, that’s my release.”

Despite not listening to music in his spare time (“There’s not one piece of music on my phone”), it’s never far away from de Souza’s thoughts or pursuits, something Koninger, who’s a neighbour, has noticed. “I was like, ‘Do you want to go to the gym someday or have a run or play squash?’ And he was like, ‘I’d love to but ...’ – he was just focused on his work. It’s so funny, I see that and ask myself, ‘Maybe I should be more like this?!’”

“I don’t work on music; music works on me,” de Souza says, as announcements echo across the Komische Oper speakers. “It’s a mystical kind of engagement but ... when you sit there with this thing you are not the same person having interacted with it. That’s the joy of being in music.”

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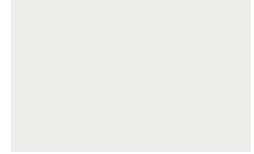
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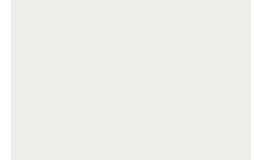
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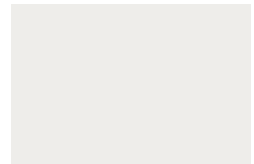
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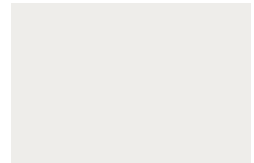


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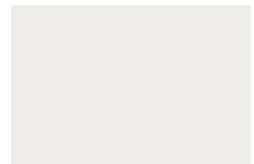
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