

JOBS 2.0: an in-depth guide by Stu Lewis

When some of Mark Campbell's friends heard that he was writing the libretto for *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, many of them asked him, "Why would you write an opera about Steve Jobs? He was the worst capitalist." Campbell had an easy answer: "Reach into your pocket," where many of them would come into contact with their iPhones. Steve Jobs may not be one of the great heroes of the past half-century, but there is no denying that he was one of the most influential in the way that we lead our lives today. At the conclusion of the opera, Jobs' widow imagines that if there could be a Steve Jobs 2.0, he would have told people to buy his phones "but don't spend your lives on them." But there never was a Steve Jobs 2.0, and a number of reviewers of this opera noted that before the curtain calls were over, several audience members had already pulled out their phones to check for messages.

Ever since composer John Adams and librettist Alice Goodman unveiled "Nixon in China" at Houston Grand Opera in 1987, there has been a trend in American opera toward depicting not only literary masterpieces but also the lives of contemporary Americans on the operatic stage. Though this trend has sometimes been sarcastically referred to as "CNN Opera," it has proved to be popular with today's opera audiences. Such operas do not merely re-state the headlines we all know but rather invite us to understand the inner lives (or perhaps the imagined inner lives) of the people who have been instrumental in shaping the world around us. Among contemporary Americans who have been portrayed on the operatic stage are atomic-bomb developer Robert Oppenheimer, Civil-Rights activist Malcom X, gay activist Harvey Milk, boxer Emile Griffith, and death-penalty opponent Sister Helen Prejean.

By its very nature, however, opera tends to give us characters who are "larger than life," and the fact that the people we see on the operatic stage bear the names of people we know from the news does not negate the fact that these characters are often mythologized versions of themselves. In many operas based on historical figures, there are scenes which never could have

happened in real life, and anyone who objects to such contrivances probably should not be attending operas in the first place. In fact, the composer and librettist of *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* have deliberately distanced us from the real world by presenting the story in non-linear fashion, as a series of several independent scenes intended to create not a continuous narrative but rather a mosaic of a man driven not only by personal ambition but by a desire to make order out of the chaos which surrounded him. If you want to learn about Steve Jobs, there are several books you can read. If you want to experience what it would be like to be Steve Jobs, then you should attend this opera.

CHARACTERS

Young Steve Jobs—silent

Steve Jobs—baritone

Steve Wozniak (aka “Woz”)—Steve’s associate, co-founder of Apple, who was the more technically adept of the two—tenor

Kōbun Chino Otogawa—Steve’s spiritual advisor—bass—In several scenes, he exists only in Steve’s imagination, since he died in 2002. Some critics have compared him to Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*, an advisor to the younger protagonist. Other such characters who come to mind are Alidoro in *La Cenerentola* and Sharpless in *Madame Butterfly*.

Chrisann Brennan—Steve’s early girlfriend, mother of his first child--soprano

Laurene Powell, later Laurene Powell Jobs—Steve’s wife--mezzo-soprano. The opera does not explore her own considerable accomplishments.

Paul Jobs—Steve’s father--baritone

Teacher—mezzo-soprano

Ensemble, taking on various roles

THE STORY

The action of the opera consists of several separate scenes, not necessarily chronological, with each scene morphing into the next, thanks to the wonders of modern stagecraft. The creators of the opera also make use of the Japanese convention of having characters who have exited a scene (or who have not yet entered) sit on a bench that is visible to the audience.

Rather than use Wagnerian-style leitmotifs—the practice of identifying characters by distinctive melodies—the composer has chosen to identify characters by unique instrumental combinations. Jobs’ music tends to be dissonant and filled with electronics, but is also characterized by the acoustic guitar, an instrument not often associated with opera. Laurene Jobs is associated with “oceanic” strings. Woz’s music is heavy on brass and loud woodwinds. Kōbun’s music is supplemented with Asian percussion instruments, such as gongs.

Prologue: The garage of the Jobs home, 1965.

Paul Jobs covers his son’s eyes as he leads him into the garage. He then removes his hands to reveal Steven’s gift for his tenth birthday, a workbench which Paul made himself. Paul expresses confidence in his son’s ability to put things together and take them apart. From this brief scene, we can glimpse the warm affection that Steven had for his parents. Though he was adopted at birth, Steve Jobs invariably objected to his parents being referred to as his “adoptive parents,” since they were the only parents he had ever known. As Steve sits at the workbench, the pulsating orchestral music grows louder, and the scene morphs into a San Francisco convention center in 2007, where Steve is presenting a product launch.

This garage has been designated as a historical landmark. Composer Mason Bates drew part of his inspiration from his visit to this site, which he referred to as “a place where technology and creativity interact.”

Scene 1: A convention center in San Francisco: 2007

The adult Steve Jobs is standing on the platform of the auditorium. He begins his speech by announcing that he now has the “one device” that everyone needs. At first, the people in the audience are shocked when he tells them that their cellphones are worthless, but as he goes on to list the things that the new multi-faceted phone can do (with images flashed on a screen to make the new device’s capabilities tangible), the ensemble joins in expressing their enthusiasm, as the increase in tempo expresses their excitement. (A few of the images—such as those of industrial waste and hacking—suggest the downside of such development, but on the whole the vision of what the new device can do is positive.) While the scene clearly refers to the iPhone, a conscious decision was made by the opera’s creative team not to refer to Apple or its products by name. One reason for this decision was that specific names might make the show seem dated in the future; there was also the issue that Apple could sue anyone using its corporate symbol or name.

Scene 2: Shortly afterwards—Corporate Headquarters in Cupertino

Steve is alone on stage. Laurene enters and tries to persuade him to take a rest, not only for his health, but because he is missing so many significant events in their children’s lives. In contrast with the music associated with Jobs himself, both the aria and the orchestral background have an air of tranquility, featuring soft strings and woodwinds. The calm continues, as Steve takes a meditative walk in the form of a “hinkin,” a Buddhist practice.

Scene 3: Later that afternoon—the hills around Cupertino

Steve sits down, and is surprised to see his spiritual mentor, Kōbun, who tells him “I am always around.” Their meeting is actually taking place in Steve’s imagination, as Kōbun had died five years earlier in an unsuccessful attempt to save his five-year-old daughter from drowning. Kōbun reminds Steve that he is dying and compares death to a sunset.

Scene 4: 1973—A calligraphy class, Reed College

Steve is engrossed in learning Japanese calligraphy and the spiritual meaning behind many of the symbols, including the circular-shaped “enso,” which stands for enlightenment, and the “kanso,” which connotes simplicity.

Scene 5: 1973—The garage

The two Steves—Jobs and Wozniak—have invented a device that will allow them to make long-distance calls without paying the required tolls (something for which some younger viewers might need an explanation). They see larger implications than mere financial savings. In their eyes, they are striking a blow against corporate America on behalf of all of those who have struggled on behalf of the common folk, including David’s killing of Goliath with a slingshot. Their excitement is echoed by the syncopated beat in the orchestra.

Scene 6: 1974—An apple orchard near Los Altos, CA

Steve and his girlfriend, Chrisann, are sitting together experimenting with psychedelic drugs, though Steve is not yet experiencing anything unusual. Chrisann tells him that she admires his boundless inventiveness. He tells her that he can hear the grass playing a piece by Bach, to which Chrisann replies that the drug must be taking effect. They begin to make love, despite a warning tap on Steve’s shoulder from the ever-present Kōbun (a warning that we will later learn Steve should have heeded).

Scene 7: 2007, the hills around Cupertino; 1975, the Los Altos Zen Center

A scene which is designated as taking place in two different centuries indicates the vagueness of the opera’s time line. Steve reminds Kōbun that at one time he wanted to be a Buddhist monk, but Kōbun relives the time that he advised Steve that he needed to get out into the world. The orchestral interlude following Kōbun’s aria is filled with Asian percussion instruments.

Scene 8: 1989—Lecture Hall, Stanford University

Steve is getting ready to give a lecture when he meets Laurene, who explains that she won a ticket to the lecture in a raffle. She jokes that the ticket also included dinner with the lecturer, and Steven decides to take her up on it if she agrees to a vegan restaurant.

Scene 9: 1976—the garage

Steve and Woz are celebrating the completion of their circuit board. Chrisann enters and informs Steve that she is pregnant. He angrily tells her to obtain an abortion, informing her that otherwise he will deny that he is the father. Chrisann quietly exits, and without missing a beat, Steve returns to his work on the computer. Suddenly, he has an epiphany, comparing the computer to a musical instrument, and in the most extensive aria in the entire opera, he rhapsodizes on the computer's potential.

Scene 10: 1989—Steve Jobs' home

Laurene visits Steve's home and is surprised at the lack of furniture. She asks him if he hears music when he makes things, but he admits that he no longer does. Suggestively, she asks if he at least has a bed in his home, but they simply kiss and part, as Steve goes back to work.

Scene 11: Corporate offices, Cupertino

Steve is talking with an engineer about the wonderful simplicity of his device when Chrisann enters. Steve rebuffs her. Woz asks Steve to provide some severance pay for a former worker who is down on his luck, but Steve angrily refuses. Woz and Chrisann join in a duet to tell Steve "You're losing it," and that he is no longer the man they respectively knew and loved.

Scene 12: 1981-1986—Corporate offices, Cupertino.

Interlude, the Rise and Fall of Steve Jobs

An extended, intense orchestral passage accompanies videos depicting Jobs' progress in the tech business. However, as we will see in the next scene, his manic behavior has begun to have a

negative effect on the corporation. Chrisann enters and tells Steve that she needs money for their child, but Steve continues to insist that he is not the father. Getting back to business, Steve again finds himself in conflict with his colleagues. Finally, Woz berates him, telling Steve that he has become a “Goliath...one of the people we hated, an egomaniacal, self-centered, self-serving, mega-corporate prick.” Following this tirade, Woz resigns from the company. Steve continues to berate the workers, until he is told that he is being moved to a different division of the company. The ensemble, representing the workers, becomes louder and more intense, as a loud, dissonant sound emerges from the orchestra. Announcing “I quit,” Steve collapses in rage.

Scene 13: 2007—The hills around Cupertino

Kōbun (in Steve’s imagination) reproaches Steve for his selfishness but reminds him that he was able to move on.

Scene 14: 2007—The hills around Cupertino

1989—A lecture hall at Stanford University

A brief flashback to Scene 8

Scene 15: 2007—The hills around Cupertino

1989—Steve Jobs’ home, Palo Alto

A brief flashback of Scene 10, with the addition of Kōbun’s comment that when Steve got out of line, Laurene was there to “kick your ass.”

Scene 16: 2007—later that night, Steve Jobs’ Home

Steve enters; Laurene has been waiting for him. She is angry that he is denying the cancer that is threatening his life. He finally decides to seek medical help. The two join voices on the word “try.”

Scene 17: 1991—the wedding—Yosemite National Park

A lyrical passage in the orchestra, concluding with the Japanese instruments, leads to the wedding. Kōbun recites some Buddhist liturgical phrases in Japanese. Steve steps out of the scene to bring

us up to date on his life—the children he and Laurene have had together and his acceptance of his out-of-wedlock daughter, Lisa.

Kōbun takes a seat on a bench, and Steve tells us how he died, as Kōbun comments, “We start at nothing, return to nothing/The circle ends as it began.”

Scene 18: 2011—The memorial service, Stanford Univ. Chapel

Laurene speaks of the twenty years she and Steve had together. Steve, accompanied by Kōbun, observes the service, and Kōbun has to remind him that he no longer can control anything. The ensemble thanks Steve for improving their lives through his inventions. Laurene tells Steve that while it took some time, he finally found a way to connect. Woz also praises Steve for finding a way to connect. Laurene tells the audience that if Steve could speak to them now he would tell them not to focus their lives on their phones.

Epilogue: The garage

The opera ends where it began with Paul giving Steve the work table. Laurene tells us “Be here now, and now is a fine place to start,” with Steve joining her on the final line.

MASON BATES

Mason Bates, the composer of *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs*, was born January 23, 1977 in Philadelphia, PA and grew up in Virginia. He showed an early interest in creative writing, both in music and poetry. He received his first commission for a musical composition when he was still in his teens, and he received a B.A. English from Columbia University and a Masters of Music in music composition from the Julliard School. Among his music teachers were John Corigliano, David Del Tredici. He subsequently earned a Ph.D. in music composition from the University of California at Berkeley.

Perhaps the most notable feature of his style is his tendency to combine electronic music with more conventional ensembles. He has not sought to replace conventional orchestration with electronics but rather to view electronics and non-musical sounds as extensions of the sound palates with which composers can work. Before *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* won the Emmy for best opera recording, his compositions were nominated for two other awards in the classical field. In 2018 a survey of American orchestras revealed that of all living composers, he was the second-most performed in the U.S., trailing only John Adams.

While he is primarily associated with instrumental music, Bates has written a number of pieces for voice. *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* is his first opera. He is currently working on a second opera, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, based on the prize-winning novel by Michael Chabon, with Gene Scheer—best known to Lyric audiences as the librettist of *Everest*—providing the libretto. He has also written the film score for “The Sea of Trees.”

Despite his innovative use of electronics, Bates sees his music as a continuation 19th-century symphonic traditions, enhanced by 21st-century sounds. While he has served as composer in residence for several orchestras, he has established a special connection with the San Francisco Symphony, and he currently lives in the Bay area.

MARK CAMPBELL

Librettist Mark Campbell is no stranger to Lyric Opera of Kansas City. Two of his operas have been produced here in recent years: *Silent Night* (Kevin Puts, composer), depicting the spontaneous Christmas truce during World War I, and *As One* (Laura Kaminsky, composer; Kimberly Reed, co-librettist), an intimate look at a male-to-female transgender protagonist, presented as part of the *Explorations* series. A third opera—*The Shining* (Paul Moravec, composer)—was scheduled to be performed recently, but the production was cancelled due to Covid. Hopefully, it will be rescheduled in the near future.

Mark Campbell was born March 18, 1953 in Washington D.C. His father was a lawyer, and his mother was a visual artist. Currently, he lives in the West Village (New York City) with his husband, Steve.

Initially, he tried to make his living as an actor, without much success. Based on his love of theater, especially the works of Stephen Sondheim, he tried his hand at lyric writing for musical theater. Though he was good enough to win the Kleban Foundation Award for lyric writing, he was not able to achieve the success he needed. In 2000, however, the composer John Musto asked him to collaborate on an opera for Wolftrap, and the success of this comic opera—"Volpone"—turned out to be the beginning of a great career, during which he has been recognized as one of the most important living librettists, if not the most important. To date, he has written the libretti for thirty-nine operas, seven musicals, six song cycles, and an oratorio. He also has several other projects in the works. Among the more famous composers he has collaborated with, in addition to Musto, are Ricky Ian Gordon and William Bolcom.

Among the awards he has received are two Richard Rodgers Awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Jonathan Larson Foundation Award, three Drama Desk nominations, a New York Foundation for the Arts Playwriting Fellowship, and the Dominic J. Pellicciotti Award.

Given his extraordinary success, he has also chosen to give back through the American Opera Projects, American Lyric Theatre, and Washington National Opera's American Opera Initiative.

In opera, the text invariably comes before the music, but this does not mean that he can hand a libretto to a composer and then move on. There is always a lot of back-and-forth between the two creators, and he knows that "a good librettist knows when to back off and say, okay, this is yours now because no matter how beautiful my words may be, they will never compete with that soprano hitting that note and hitting that emotion at that moment with music." He says that the music is the "heart" of the opera and

“opera must first come from the heart. That’s why people go to the opera.”

STEVE JOBS

While it could be said that *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* is as much about the mythical version of its protagonist as it is about his real life, some background about the real person is needed if we are to truly understand the opera.

Steve Jobs was born and raised in the San Francisco area in 1955 and was adopted as an infant. For most of his life he refused to initiate any contact with the birth parents because he believed that such research would be an insult to the couple that he considered to be his true parents. He attended Reed College (in Portland, OR) briefly but dropped out because he did not believe that he was learning anything essential, though he did audit some classes which interested him, while his teachers looked the other way at the fact that he was not paying tuition. As for room and board, he frequently slept on the floors of his friends’ dormitory rooms. He became a spiritual seeker, travelling to India to find enlightenment (and using mind-altering drugs). Under the influence of his teacher Kōbun Chino Otagawa, he became an adherent of Zen Buddhism and frequently attended mediation retreats.

Steve’s girlfriend, Chrisann Brennan, joined him on his spiritual quest, but when she became pregnant with Steve’s child, he refused to acknowledge paternity and challenged the result of a paternity test which showed that he was the father—while, at the same time, naming one of his computers after her (Lisa). For years, he paid the minimum in child support, until, in later years, he finally acknowledged her as his daughter and began to take an active role in her life.

In 1989, when he gave a lecture at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, he noticed a beautiful young woman (named Laurene Powell) in the front row and was so distracted that he lost his train of thought during his speech. He followed her to the parking lot after the speech and invited her to dinner. (This is

depicted slightly differently in the opera). Within a year, they were married in a Buddhist ceremony, conducted by Kōbun. Together, the couple had three children, and Lisa eventually became part of the family as well. Steve and Laurene remained together until his death.

Jobs is best known as the co-founder of the Apple Corporation, the company which innovated bringing the power of the computer to everyday people. While his friend and co-creator Steve Wozniak was the more technically adept, Jobs was the superior businessman. In the early days, the corporation was so profitable that Jobs became one of the youngest people ever to make the list of the wealthiest Americans based on his own earnings rather than inherited wealth.

Realizing that the company needed more business expertise, Jobs lured John Scully away from Pepsi to serve as Apple's CEO, asking "Do you want to spend the rest of your life selling sugared water, or do you want to change the world?" While this move was a great one for the company, it was a mixed blessing for Jobs himself, as differences of opinion between Scully and Jobs led to Jobs being reassigned to a different division from the one on which he had worked, a change which Jobs saw as a demotion, leading him (in 1985) to quit the company he had founded. For the following decade (not covered in the opera) Jobs was involved in a number of other projects, including the founding of Pixar, the animation company which eventually became part of the Disney empire and was responsible for the Oscar-winning "Toy Story."

In 1997, Jobs returned to Apple in an executive role. While he was effective in running the company, employee morale suffered due to Jobs's custom of firing employees without warning, often humiliating them in public over petty disagreements.

In 2003, Jobs was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. Though usually this form of cancer is untreatable, the particular variant that Jobs had was treatable. Jobs, however, at first relied on alternative treatments while ignoring standard medical treatment, a

choice that some medical authorities believe may have hastened his decline and death on October 5, 2011.

ORIGINS AND REACTIONS

The idea of writing an opera about Steve Jobs originated with composer Mason Bates, who subsequently approached the much sought-after Mark Campbell to be his librettist. Bates explained, “I was fascinated with the tension that is at the center of Jobs’s life: how do you create these sleek and beautiful devices that miniaturize our communication when people are so messy...People are so complicated. Nobody has one button.” Bates said that he was drawn to the story because opera “can illuminate the interior thought of different characters simultaneously through the juxtaposition of individual themes. That makes it an ideal medium to explore a man who revolutionized how we communicate.” He added, “His collisions with the fact that he wanted to make everything sleek and controllable—yet life is not controllable—is a fascinating topic for an opera.”

Librettist Mark Campbell, on the other hand, found the key to Jobs’s character in the fact that Jobs was a Buddhist for his entire adult life and frequently took long meditative walks, called “kinhin.” He has said that the title actually refers to these circular walks and the self-reflection that they create.

Commissioned by a number of companies, the opera had its premiere at Santa Fe Opera in 2017, and was an immediate success with the public. In fact, word of its appeal circulated so quickly that the company had to make the rare move of adding an additional performance to its initial run.

Critical reaction, though generally favorable, was somewhat mixed. Bates was generally praised for his innovative use of the orchestra in telling the story. Perhaps the most telling comment on the critics’ response came from one reviewer who commented sardonically, “Maybe audiences like this opera because it’s designed more for them than for critics.” In other words, if audiences enjoy an opera, it can’t be very good.

The principal complaint made by many of the critics is that the story was too uplifting. As one critic put it, “If Steve Jobs the *man* is interesting, it’s because he was such a jerk....Mr. Bates and Mr. Campbell have replaced truly human, if essentially undramatic, story—of a man who by most accounts was consistently charismatically intolerable from his birth in 1955 until his death in 2011—with a sappier, staler arc: A good guy loses his way and then finds it, redeemed by the love of a saintly woman.” Other negative comments followed in the same vein. So, according to this critique, Bates and Campbell should have created an undramatic story, leaving open the question of how many undramatic operas have become part of the standard operatic repertoire.

However, these criticisms seem to be off base on a more elementary level. First of all, while Jobs never changed totally, he did reconcile with Lisa, his out-of-wedlock daughter, toward the end of his life. More to the point, however, the idea that Steve Jobs was transformed into a completely better person by the end of his life is not the story that this opera tells. There is no big “repentance aria” on Jobs’s part, nor is there any indication that Jobs has given up his nasty ways. Whereas Buddhism should have taught him to accept the fact that he could not be in full control of his life, in the memorial service, which he is able to attend due to the magic of operatic conventions, he is still trying to exert control by rearranging things until he is reminded that he no longer has such power. When Laurene speaks of how Jobs 2.0 would have reacted, the audience realizes that this is merely wishful thinking on her part.

Human beings are multi-faceted and cannot be reduced to a single attribute. By approaching this story from various angles, Bates and Campbell provide not a linear view but rather a mosaic of this complex historical figure—and, more than that, the mythical figure that he has become since his death.

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