

Classical **MUSIC**

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Meet the Maestro: Sarah Ioannides

The music director of orchestras in Spartanburg and Tacoma was born in Australia, studied in Oxford, Philadelphia, New York and St Petersburg, and is putting in dates for Europe. She talks to Toby Deller.

Ever since she was born in south-east Australia, Sarah Ioannides has found herself moving west – first to England where she grew up, then to the US eastern seaboard for advanced conducting studies and her first musical directorship at the Spartanburg Philharmonic Orchestra. Then further west still, to posts in Texas (the El Paso Symphony) and, most recently, the west coast state of Washington (Tacoma Symphony). Her life as a conductor began in earnest as a music undergraduate at Oxford, having previously been a violinist with the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain. ‘I was already interested before Oxford. That’s actually one of the reasons I chose to go to Oxford, because although I was still playing violin and French horn to some degree, I knew that if I went to Oxford I would get a lot more time on the podium.’

Indeed, her commitments as music director of Oxford University Opera were partly responsible for delaying her entry to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia. But eventually she made it there, taken on as a student by Otto-Werner Mueller. ‘Knowing it’s a pretty tough profession I wanted to really get my time in with somebody. At that

time I’d done three years at Oxford, I’d done some university conducting with the opera and I’d had private lessons and I’d done conducting camps like Canford with George Hurst. But I was looking for a teacher that would oversee me full-time. And I also wanted to move further away. I felt that there were so many young conductors in England and London and Oxford, and I really wanted to get quality podium time with a good teacher.’

She went on to win scholarships for further studies at Juilliard and in St Petersburg, and also picked up a job assisting Tan Dun on international touring projects, conducting a number of orchestras (including BBC Symphony Orchestra and London Sinfonietta) along the way.

‘The thing I was really drawn to with Tan Dun is his unique approach to drawing upon a variety of things that are fascinating. Anything from the natural elements of fire, water, earth, to bring those into music not only in a metaphorical way but also in direct tangible form: the use of water in the music physically, the use of stone in music. There’s the nature aspect. The spiritual aspect of humanity I find present in all his music, themes that are very important to us in human nature: love, war, history.’

She has since commissioned and worked on a number of multimedia projects herself. ‘For example, I’m planning right now a very

interesting project that will use the glass museum in Tacoma,' she says, noting that the city, birthplace of glass sculptor Dale Chihuly, is known as a centre for glassblowing. 'The work is celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the National Parks Association. Because Tacoma stands at the foot of Mount Rainier, where we are experiencing massive changes in our ecology with environmental warming of the earth, the piece is about the melting of the glaciers on Mount Rainier by a composer who grew up in the foothills of Mount Rainier, and we are going to use the melting of glass to give the imagery.' Or, a few years ago in Spartanburg, she helped put together a collaborative music project celebrating the city's firefighters and first responders as part of a tenth anniversary commemoration of 9/11, another project resulting from her expressed commitment to embedding her orchestras within their communities.

'Certainly the community of El Paso is very different from South Carolina and Spartanburg – very different size, demographics, the make-up of its population, whether it's Mexican or Spanish influenced or Texan. For me as music director, the key really is to absorb yourself in the community and learn about it. Certainly in Tacoma and Seattle it's a very different mentality and energy. Yet the approach is the same: to get to know what people are passionate about and make connections so that the orchestra's not isolated.'

As for her own connections with the world, of which she has now done a lap – give or take the width of the Pacific ocean – she has been looking at opportunities back east in the US and Europe.

'It's a natural timing for me to broaden my horizons. I've been very dedicated to Spartanburg and will be until I leave. I suppose I'm doing more in Europe as well as the US and that will probably open up the sphere for more opportunities. This year I was in Vienna with the Tonkünstler, I'm going to be going back to Scandinavia, I've conducted in Germany and France. We'll see what happens.'
