

Key Change Episode: An Opera House Like No Other

SPEAKERS

Julie Mclsaac, Robyn Grant-Moran, Jack Diamond, Janice Oliver, Richard Bradshaw (recording), Angel Blue (recording), Sondra Radvanovsky

Julie Mclsaac 00:00

Hi everyone, welcome to "Key Change: A COC Podcast," where we explore everything about opera from a fresh perspective.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:18

We're your hosts, Robyn Grant-Moran...

Julie Mclsaac 00:21

...and Julie Mclsaac. Hello, everyone, and welcome to Episode 16, our final podcast of the spring.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:29

Before we get into today's topic, we really want to just stress how much fun we've had exploring opera's many facets, and how glad we are to have had you, our listeners, join us along the way.

Julie Mclsaac 00:41

We've also really loved hearing from you. Thank you for reaching out to us over email and also for the reviews you leave on Apple Podcasts, which are really great for helping people find their way to Key Change episodes.

Robyn Grant-Moran 00:52

We'll be taking a break at the end of this season but keep those comments and questions coming. Tag us anytime on social @CanadianOpera, or email us at audiences@coc.ca.

Julie Mclsaac 01:06

Now we've had a chance to speak with some of the world's greatest opera performers and creators – and, a tiny teaser here, a little later on in the episode we'll hear from renowned Canadian-American soprano Sondra Radvanovsky. So many artists, at one point or another, have either worked, performed, or spent time in one of Toronto's premier performance venues, which also just happens to be the home of the Canadian Opera Company: the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts [FSC].

Robyn Grant-Moran 01:32

We started our podcast talking about the opera house, and now we find ourselves ending this season by coming full circle and returning to the place we began – a very special space we can't wait to physically return to

Julie Mclsaac 01:44

Indeed! Now this fall marks the 15th anniversary of the opening of the Four Seasons Centre in 2006. The building was Canada's first purpose-built Opera House – meaning a venue specifically engineered to enhance the acoustics of opera singers and an orchestra. You may recall [when] we spoke with acoustician Bob Essert back in the fall for Episode Two [Sounds Like Opera].

Robyn Grant-Moran 02:04

And today we'll begin by learning more about the extraordinary crafting of the opera house, which was designed by the award-winning, Toronto-based firm Diamond Schmitt Architects, led by Jack Diamond and Donald Schmitt.

Julie Mclsaac 02:16

We were thrilled to arrange some one-on-one time with Jack himself to be able to look back on a spectacular architectural achievement and significant cultural contribution.

Robyn Grant-Moran 02:27

So let's hear from Jack. Hi, Jack. Thanks for joining us today. When people think of an opera house, they're usually envisioning heavy, decadent design – the kind of aesthetic that may have been popular over 200 years ago. But the Four Seasons Centre is really quite sleek and minimalist. What was your design inspiration?

Jack Diamond 02:56

Well, first thing to say is that architecture is an inevitable expression of its community and its culture: as much as you try to avoid it, that in itself is an expression of the culture! The traditional opera house was in a culture in which there was a really high hierarchy; there is a social structure. And, so, all of the "hoi polloi" came through the main doors, and "roos" went through the side door, at the back, up a miserable little staircase. So, the first thing to say about this shift is that everyone comes into the main entrance at the same place. And the public areas are held by everyone – there's a social integration in the design as a start. I remember going to the opera house in Paris and there's a tiny little space at the top or the upper balcony, a miserable one. The same is true in the traditional ones in St. Petersburg. So, the principal point here is that everyone comes in the front door together, everyone shares in the public spaces and there's no inhibition. Canada, in my view, is among the best in the western democracies, and part of that are the art facilities that they've held, and we were really deficient in terms of an opera house and mental health. So, the drive to "war" by Richard Bradshaw – which was... he call it the "30-year war" – it was important to have a contemporary one. It's an expression of our time, its transparency is there, it's available to everybody, and everyone who comes from the same space and mixes in the same lobby.

Julie Mclsaac 04:52

Considering the diversity of buildings that surround the Four Seasons Centre – I'm thinking about neoclassical Osgoode Hall, the Beaux-Arts style of the Canada Life building, and the modernist Toronto City Hall – how did you conceive of the Four Seasons Centre fitting into that local landscape?

Jack Diamond 05:08

Well, first of all...downtown Toronto means that you can gamble or do anything – and certainly people do! What it does, in another sense, [is] absolutely honour the urban design. If the building goes up to the sidelines and fills the block, there's no setback to destroy the continuity of the streetscape...in terms of urbanity. The second thing I would say is that it's unusual, in that it pays attention to the Canadian climate. What we've done essentially is to capture the sidewalk, what the public areas are really, almost if you've seen the transparency, and you see the public access to that, it means that we have enclosed the sidewalk – we've made it into a public space. So, there's both streetscape continuity, as well as a conditioning, which is an acknowledgment that we have snow and cold in winter.

Robyn Grant-Moran 06:13

I'm curious about the use of glass, where you're talking about transparency, and accessibility and inclusion. And downtown Toronto, in that area, the only buildings that have so much glass are condos, which aren't transparent and inclusive. So, I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit more about that design choice and the human side of it?

Jack Diamond 06:43

Well, when you're in a corner and you've got lights, and you've got a building facing you, you draw the curtains. In terms of "Toronto at night," well, first of all, glass buildings are not transparent in the daytime because the level of intensity is greater outside than inside. As the level of light intensity on the inside is greater than outside, then you have real transparency. And, of course, most of the opera performances are often after dusk, and so the lighting of those public areas create enormous transparency. And what's important, implicitly in your question, is that, in fact, what it does is remove the inhibitions that people might have about opera: we see...in jeans going to the opera, but they're having fun; it looks like a party because there's a bar there and people circulating. So, that transparency creates accessibility – not just physically but mentally. That is in part why the opera house has been as successful as it has. I know for the first few years – and I hope that that's continuing – that the average age [of an audience member] year-over-year was dropping, and that one of the things that we did to create that familiarity and accessibility were lunchtime concerts. (I think there were about 90 of them or something.) A line up in winter when it's freezing outside to get in for the free lunchtime concert, and it's held in the aerial amphitheatre, which is very visible from the outside, and I remember sitting in at a concert there with the people who were visiting us from the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. They were marveling at the fact that you could look out and see the city and contemplate it while listening to the music. I thought that was a wonderful comment! So, there's both "transparency in" and "transparency out." I think that that leads me to the next and, I think, the most important point. There's a question that the building pays attention to the rising interest in excitement of a performance. First, you're in this completely transparent room, you look out into the city, you can go to the bar, or you can circulate among friends. But, in contrast, the auditorium is absolutely not transparent, and there is a narrow opening into it. So, the sequence of the rising excitement that you would normally have at a cocktail party – with the same mix of people in the bar and so forth – here there's the anticipation, and the

anticipation is that through very narrow doorways, everybody goes into a completely enclosed environment, and then what is suspended is the rest of the world, and you focus on the drama. There's a very wonderful transition from city to City Room, and from City Room to [R. Fraser Elliott Hall] auditorium, and that sequence itself is a way of enhancing the experience.

Julie Mclsaac 10:12

Jack, I love that thinking about the drama or the dramatic arc of the experience as someone enters into the building, and how that's a storytelling... or there's a narrative that's being built there and an experience that's being built there. I've never thought of it in that way. That's really, really fascinating!

Jack Diamond 10:27

Well, also, I think once they get inside [the auditorium], they see what I think is crucial in the basic Italian opera shape, as opposed to the Germanic: it's a horseshoe, the audience see themselves. The fact that it's enclosed is one thing about focusing on the drama of a dance, but the fact is that there's also a sense of participation in a group that you're enjoying together – that there's a commonality that you seldom find outside. And I think that that sense of giving cohesion to the emotion and to the view is also part of the Italian horseshoe shape – you're not alone, the Italians are very good at that.

Julie Mclsaac 11:20

What do you hope the legacy of the building will be?

Jack Diamond 11:24

I've given a lot of thought to this question. First of all, the background to it, in my view, is that Canada is among the best Western democracies, but it didn't have an opera house, and the arts contribute enormously to the quality of life. To me, of course, all the other things are there – by that, [I mean] we need to have decent wealth distribution, which we sort of do but it's not there in the right direction, we need to have a good education system, which we do not; we have universal healthcare, but it's the arts that make a significant contribution to the quality of life. And of course the facilities for that are important. At the, sort of, not the opening but the opening test concert, Richard Bradshaw walked ... and the first violinist said to me, "I never knew my instrument could sound like that."

Julie Mclsaac 12:26

Oh...

Jack Diamond 12:27

I don't think I've ever heard a better compliment – on the emotional side, and on musical side. So, I think that I haven't designed a building which now has universal and... oh, yes. Unfortunately, the current Artistic Director who's leaving us, Alexander Neef, told me that he came because of the building from the Paris Opera House. Well, again, I mean, those are reinforcements of the fact that the house does stand well. That's too often! I'm an immigrant to Canada, so I'm not modest as most of Canadians are. The fact of the matter is I'm delighted that the opera house don't have to apologize. So, there's an important point in attracting, obviously, world-class performers in both opera and ballet, but it has another effect: I wanted to encourage the composers – Canadian composers – and ballet choreographers that the house should begin to provide Canadian-based artistic treatments through the

house as a place for its exhibition, are more likely to gain stage time ...every Canadian house. Well, I think that the legacy is not merely physical – as important as that is – but that, in fact, it turns out the encouragement of Canadian, as I said, composers and choreographers, will develop a Canadian ballet and opera house reputation.

Julie Mclsaac 14:23

Thank you, Jack. That's beautiful. I hadn't thought about that aspect of it, but what an additional gift you've given to Canada in inspiring those creators!

Jack Diamond 14:32

The opera house has been open for 10 years before the pandemic. I have never been to a performance, and I have season tickets every year, when someone hasn't come up to me, who I don't know and said thank you...

Julie Mclsaac 14:48

I can imagine. Yeah. How many performances do you think you've witnessed there, Jack?

Jack Diamond 14:55

Usually there are about six [productions per year], so, sixty!

Julie Mclsaac 15:00

Wow. Thank you, Jack. Yeah, it's been illuminating and a great honour to have this time to chat with you today. So, thank you for making the time and we know our listeners are just going to really appreciate getting this extra insight into that building that they love so much. Thank you.

Jack Diamond 15:16

Thank you for asking.

Julie Mclsaac 15:22

I'm really grateful that we actually got to meet Jack and have that conversation with him. He's someone whose name I've heard very often around the company, and it was great to actually hear from the man himself, particularly around all the intentionality and all the thought that went into the experience that people would have occupying this physical space.

Robyn Grant-Moran 15:42

Yeah, like from the transparent windows, where you can watch people from the outside, and then going into that space. And when I go to the opera, I'm always really excited because I'm going to the opera, and that's a thrilling event for me! But that he so intentionally crafted that space to continue that momentum and to make audience members excited.

Julie Mclsaac 16:13

And the rising action of that experience: first it's outside – they're in the city but outside – and then they go into that first area, and then those narrow passageways that take them into the nest of the auditorium where the magic happens.

Robyn Grant-Moran 16:26

Right? And that they're there functionally for acoustics but also to create a sense of drama – like, I love that dual-purpose of them. Speaking with Jack really made me think about what a feat it was building a venue designed entirely around sound in the middle of downtown Toronto. For those of you who might not have visited the building before, the opera house is located just blocks south of hospitals; it's across from [Toronto] City Hall, there's streetcars, and traffic, and the subway underneath. And there's even the occasional championship parade that goes by.

Julie Mclsaac 17:03

Yeah, definitely. So, plans for the building of the opera house were first announced in 2002, and there were almost four years between that announcement and the inaugural opening in 2006. So, we're guessing that timeline was absolutely necessary for the extensive planning and logistics involved in executing a project like this.

Robyn Grant-Moran 17:22

Oh, I'm sure, which is why I'm really glad we got the chance to connect with Janice Oliver as our next guest. As executive director of the Canadian Opera House Corporation, she was directly involved in the construction of the Four Seasons Centre.

Julie Mclsaac 17:35

Yeah, among her many duties, she helped to ensure the project was completed on budget and on time, and she managed the very many, many people who had a hand in the project – from the architects and builders to COC staff and donors. She was also there for the first commissioning or testing concerts held at the FSC in April 2006.

Robyn Grant-Moran 17:55

These concerts were meant to test the acoustics of the space, and local schoolchildren were actually the very first audiences for these performances.

Julie Mclsaac 18:04

We started by asking Janice, "How did she first become involved in such an ambitious undertaking?"

Janice Oliver 18:16

In the summer of 2002, I had left my position at the University of Toronto, and part of my responsibilities had been the hiring of architects and oversight of the design and construction of all the renovations and construction of new buildings. So, I had met Jack Diamond and Don Schmitt many times over the years I worked there, and when Kevin Garland left to go to the National Ballet [of Canada], they recommended to Richard [Bradshaw] that he approach and interview me for the position. And I had become very interested in opera in the prior couple of years, and so it was of interest. So, I went to the interview committee, and I think Richard was most impressed that, in the summer before 2001, I'd gone to Seattle for the Ring Cycle. So, anyway, I got the job and I think it was just wonderful; it turned out to be the best job I ever had.

Julie McIsaac 19:29

And when you think now of your involvement with this project and working that best job you ever had, what springs to mind about that time?

Janice Oliver 19:37

Well, it was such a team effort. It was really, really wonderful. Everybody knew we were building a very special building was gonna last 100 years, and it was a project of continuous creativity, I guess I would say. It started with a Diamond Schmitt, the architects. They had three young associates working with Jack, Gary McCluskie, Michael Treacy, and Matthew Lella, and they were terrific designers and terrific problem solvers, and they just rolled with the punches at whatever came new them. And what I loved was that development asked Diamond Schmitt to give presentations of the design to small groups of donors. Well, obviously Jack couldn't do all of them, so the three associates had to step up to the plate. And it was wonderful seeing them grow in their presentation skills with the donors – it was really great. And then the other part was COC. I mean, COC is not a big organization, as you know, and yet everybody pitched in and really helped with the project. We had the technical group, first of all, under Bruce McMillan and then Julian, and they worked with the architects to make sure that all the requirements for the technical needs of the building were incorporated into the design and they educated them as to what was needed. And then from the orchestra: Ian Cowie, we had a mock up of the orchestra pit, and he came in and it was quite an interesting dialogue between the acquisition, Jack and, you know, Ian as to what were the needs of the orchestra pit. And then finance: Lindy Cowan, they filled out all the forms for the government, for the grants, and then negotiated – we needed a construction loan to bridge the amount of money needed between when we got the donor money and when we had to pay the bills – so, Lindy negotiated that loan. And then the development team under Wendy McDowell was unbelievably creative: I mean, for the groundbreaking ceremony, we were up there on the parking lot – it was the site of the building – and they had had it all marked out, the whole design of the building so people could understand they were in the orchestra pit, or they were in the orchestra, and it was wonderful. But their greatest coup was getting PCL [Construction] to allow the donors to go through the building – I mean, this is a total "no no" on construction sites; you do not let anybody other than trades on construction sites. But they persuaded PCL, and so soon there was a room just full of construction boots and hard hats, and PCL said, "Okay," the development team had to take the PCL safety course, and one of them had to take the St. John Ambulance [first training], and it worked out really well. And it was really exciting going with some of the donors up the scaffolding to the ceiling – if you'd like now going up to that ceiling, it's incredible! And the acoustic plastering that was going on up there and, in fact, the contractor under PCL, had to get two guys out of retirement because it was such fine work that they had to do up there, that they really needed the the craftsmanship of these retired guys. And then we had the facilities group, Alexandra [inaudible] had to give help on getting old furniture, cycling bands, all the stuff needed to run a building. And then we had the education group under Carolyn Holloway, and they were wonderful because they set up the commissioning concert with all the school groups. And then, of course, Richard and Rob Lamb and Claudine [Domingue] were there always for advice and councils, so, it was really, really wonderful. And then the donors: we had a building advisory committee, and Jack and I had to go and make presentations to them, and discuss issues and concerns, and at one of them, Jack was talking about the fact that he would really love to have the premium glass for the facade on University Avenue, and what that means is glass, which I didn't know, has a greenish tint, and the premium glass pretty much

eliminated this greenish tint. So, it was going to be a \$500,000 and obviously that was not in the budget, but one of the gentlemen on the building committee, a donor who had already very generously given, stepped up and gave the extra \$500,000, so that we could have the magnificent facade that we now do. So, it was just such a special team effort of everybody, you know? Like, the architects, PCL, acquisition, the COC – it was wonderful. Everybody was there trying to problem solve and get the best building they possibly could.

Julie Mclsaac 24:49

We talk a lot about the opera production – you know, the act of bringing a production to the stage is such a huge collaboration – but you've really illuminated for us, Janice, the fact that the building of the building involved the same level of integration and collaboration between departments.

Robyn Grant-Moran 25:06

So, I understand that some very lucky schoolchildren were among the first to get a sneak peek at the venue. What were their reactions like?

Janice Oliver 25:15

They were great because, first of all, just even going into the facility, I was up in the fifth ring, and there was this little boy and he just stopped, he said, "Oh, I've never been in such a beautiful house in my life," you know? And they were wonderful because as part of the commissioning, the acquisition did a number of exercises, and you had to be totally, totally quiet, and all these kids were dead quiet, and we did the same concert for adults and they were not as quiet. But the best story was Richard told the story of there was a little boy behind him, and when Richard turned to the podium to begin the concert, the little boy said, "Go dude! Go dude!" which was really sweet! We also had a commissioning concert for the trades people who were involved in it, and asked them to come and participate as part of it. So, there was a really big uptake on that, that they got to show off because they could bring a guest, [or] to their family, what they have been part of and created. So, we held special concerts there in the commission.

Julie Mclsaac 26:36

Then we'd love to time travel with you a little bit, Janice, and thinking back to when the opera house then opened for an opera production, for the very first time: what are your recollections of that day, of that moment?

Janice Oliver 26:48

Excitement, relief! That we had actually done it on time and on budget, we had a beautiful building, the hall had great acoustics and great sight lines, and everyone was full of praise! I hope that Richard and the rest of the artists took great pride in the fact that the Ring Cycle was listed by the New York Times as one of the top productions of the year. So, that was a great, great accolade for it. Well, I'd like to say kudos to [Director, Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts] Alfred Caron and his crew because, you know, the building today, 15 years later, is still outstanding, you know? He's just kept it to such a high standard. So, it's wonderful walking into it; it's almost like walking in [for] your very first time again,

Julie Mclsaac 27:43

What are you most looking forward to in terms of being able to return to that building on the other side of this strange era that we're living through?

Janice Oliver 27:52

I agree. You know, I try to watch opera on the screen but it's just not the same – it is absolutely not the same. So, I'm just so wanting to be into an environment with an audience and a live production, and that whole experience. You just can't beat it.

Robyn Grant-Moran 28:16

Oh, my goodness, that story about the boy in the first row. So cute!

Julie Mclsaac 28:21

So wonderful! It's like the stuff of COC legend! Our producer Gianna actually found a clip of Richard recounting that same memory of that moment, just before he conducted the overture from The Magic Flute, and it's so charming. We just had to share it.

Richard Bradshaw 28:39

I was glad that the first audience in the house was children, and they were a marvelous audience. And, so, it was a very exciting thing to come out and realize that this was the audience of the future. And I came out and the children were very nice, and they clapped and so on. And then I turned around to start and the young gentleman in the front row, aged approximately seven, said, "Go dude! Go dude!" That was pretty nice. I felt about 40 years younger.

Robyn Grant-Moran 29:16

Well, our final guest for today's episode is someone who has personally experienced a very special view of the Four Seasons Centre: famed soprano Sondra Radvanovsky

Julie Mclsaac 29:26

Yeah, Sondra has gazed out at a full house of audience members as seen from center stage, and is one of the COC's most celebrated stars. She's sung the title roles in the company's previous productions of Rusalka, Anna Bolena, and Aida. And, since the start of the pandemic, Sondra launched and now co-hosts Screaming Divas on YouTube with fellow soprano and her good friend Keri Alkema.

Robyn Grant-Moran 29:49

Sondra has appeared on stage at some of the world's most prestigious opera houses. But as someone who spent considerable time on the COC stage, we wanted to get her take on what infuses that space with that intangible magic.

Julie Mclsaac 30:03

Yeah, we touched on this in our very first episode of the podcast, in our chat with soprano Angel Blue. This is how she remembers her first impressions of the space at the FSC, and her first time singing on its stage.

Angel Blue 30:16

Not every opera house has that where you can actually feel like you're really a part of the city, like, "This is the cultural section of the city," that's a really cool feeling. But the house itself, singing out on the stage in the theatre with such a great acoustic was awesome. You know, having that kind of support from the orchestra, feeling like, "Okay, wow, I can sing piano in here" and, you know, my vocal coach was there with me throughout that time, and he would go and, like, sit up in the very top balcony, and he'd come back down like, "You don't have to give any more. It's great. I can hear everything."

Robyn Grant-Moran 30:58

Yeah, I really felt that too, just how perfect the acoustics are while being part of the noisy city. Incredible!

Julie McIsaac 31:04

A very special combination. And, as we mentioned, Sondra Radvanovsky is no stranger to the COC and she had some very special and amusing memories to share with us.

Robyn Grant-Moran 31:24

Thanks for joining us, Sondra.

Sondra Radvanovsky 31:26

Of course! I'm excited to talk – well, I'd say "see you" but it's more like "to talk to you two," so.

Robyn Grant-Moran 31:32

So, you must have some amazing stories from the stage. Can you share one or two of your fondest memories from performing at the Four Seasons Centre?

Sondra Radvanovsky 31:41

Okay, best story from the COC stage involves my partner in crime for Screaming Divas Keri Alkema. We're doing the Anna Bolena/Jane Seymour duet – the real, you know, heavy duty duet – and I'm swearing at her and telling her, "You're horrible" and "go to mm hmm." And apparently I spat on her! And Keri and I, we are best friends. Keri started giggling uncontrollably in this extremely serious duet, and, of course, I then started giggling uncontrollably, and Keri had to get up from the floor, and I'm supposed to lift her up and she's laughing so hard, and I can't lift her up off the floor. So, she starts crawling away from me and tries to get our act together and she goes and leans on the wall, and then the whole wall started shaking because she was laughing. I mean, the things that audience members don't know and don't see because that night everybody said, "Wow, that duet was so dramatic and so exciting." I was like, "Yeah, what?" Because Sondra spit on Keri. Didn't know I was a spitter but I guess that night I was really into the character of Anne Boleyn.

Robyn Grant-Moran 33:14

Do you have a favourite COC production that you've sang in at the Four Seasons?

Sondra Radvanovsky 33:21

Oh, yes, by far, the Rusalka. That David McVicar production, once again involving Keri Alkema, David McVicar's production of Rusalka is breathtaking. It was the physically most demanding production I

have ever done in my life: crawling on the floor, cleaning up the floor with my dress, this huge train that I always had to be conscious of where it was, and a stage that was, like, rocky, you know, not an even floor at all, barefoot, and I was, you know, 50 years old at that time and a 50-year-old shouldn't have to do some of those movements that I had to do. But in Act II when Rusalka is human and I'm mute – because part of her becoming human was that, "Yes, you can become human but you'll never be able to say a word," and Keri comes up to me in a moment where she's supposed to just walk by me as the Foreign Princess and say, "Well, look, I'm with the man that you love and not you," and she comes up to me with her hands and makes a lovely little fish face. And I'm facing the audience and I just was, like, looking at Keri going, "I'm going to kill you after this. I'm going to kill you," and she just nonchalantly just keeps walking by me and goes [exhales while popping lips] like a fish. I love her. You see why we're best friends?

Julie Mclsaac 35:06

Absolutely.

Robyn Grant-Moran 35:06

Absolutely.

Julie Mclsaac 35:08

A little bit of cheekiness is essential to any friendship.

Sondra Radvanovsky 35:12

Absolutely. But you know what? I find ways of getting back, you know?

Julie Mclsaac 35:20

Well, and also for this episode, Sondra, we spoke to lead architect Jack Diamond about his intentions with the design of the space, and previously we've spoken to Bob Esser, the acoustician behind the auditorium's incredible sound. So, we're curious: for you as a performer, what's that experience like singing in the opera house in Toronto, compared to, say, the relatively modern Lincoln Center in New York, or the older Renaissance Revival style Wiener Staatsoper? What is that like, the experience of singing?

Sondra Radvanovsky 35:49

I'm going to give you guys a scoop that no one knows: I think I was the very first person to sing on that stage at the Four Seasons Centre. It was not completely finished yet, they had not done a complete opera, they were giving tours of the theatre and, god bless my mother-in-law – I just wanted to tour of the theatre, right, with my mother-in-law and my husband – and she says, "Excuse me, but my daughter-in-law is Sondra Radvanovsky," and I was like, "Oh, people..." and the tour guide said, "Well, Sondra, would you like to go stand on the stage and sing a little bit?" Like, "Can I just for once just be a nobody?" So, of course, everybody in the tour group was like, "Oh, you're Sondra Radvanovsky! Oh, please, go sing on the stage!" So, I was one of the first people to actually sing on the stage, and it was really wonderful that I got to do that because this was probably many years before my "Aida" there, and I got to test out the acoustics and you're right: it is amazing! It is, in my opinion, one of the best acoustics of any opera house, because it's all wood, and you don't have to work hard as a singer on

stage, you're never competing with the orchestra because the balance of the orchestra to the singers is so wonderful. I like hearing my voice come back when I'm on stage and, in this theatre, I always get that sense of my voice filling the theatre but not overwhelming it because they've balanced the live versus dampening levels. And, truly, my two favourite theatres to sing in are the two in Toronto: the Four Seasons and then over at the U of T... and right now the name of it... oh, come on... Koerner Hall! Yeah, Koerner Hall. The best acoustics of any theatre that I sing.

Julie Mclsaac 37:53

Yeah. Wonderful. Thank you for sharing that little tidbit of when you first sang on that stage. A good bit of a trivia: "When did Sondra Radvanovsky first sing on the stage of the Four Seasons Centre?" Thank you!

Robyn Grant-Moran 38:05

After nearly a year-and-a-half of theatres being shuttered across the city, the Fall will be a homecoming of sorts for the COC's artists, musicians, creators, and craftspeople. Just thinking ahead to when you might return to work at the FSC: what are you most looking forward to?

Sondra Radvanovsky 38:23

Seeing all of you, really. I feel like the COC is an extended family for me and, you know, it doesn't feel like work when I'm there. It's just such a family feeling from, you know, top to bottom. And Perryn Leech: we interviewed him on Screaming Divas and I cannot wait to actually meet him in person, you know? It's gonna be exciting, it's gonna be thrilling, and to be back on that stage making music again with a live audience? Yay! Yeah. That's what I'm looking forward – and not just at the COC, really everywhere in the world, you know?

Julie Mclsaac 39:08

Yeah.

Sondra Radvanovsky 39:08

All of us singers, we're one big family and to not be able to see your family for a year-and-a-half is horrible.

Julie Mclsaac 39:18

And for listeners who might not know this, you regularly perform all around the world, but home for you is actually just outside of Toronto. And what is it like having a venue and a company like the COC to be able to truly come home to?

Sondra Radvanovsky 39:35

Well, you know, I'm lucky. I'm lucky that A) I call Canada my home and Toronto my home, and B) to have such an amazing opera house, my home opera house and, you know, it's an opera house that I can, kind of, grow with as my career changes and evolves and, you know, I'm 52 now and I've been doing this for 30 years almost. You know, at some point, I'm going to start to slow down and not sing the leading roles as much and maybe sing secondary roles, and what better place to do that than here at the Canadian Opera Company. And to make that transition into the next stage of my career in my life,

and to sleep in your own bed every night, it's a luxury that I've found actually in the last year-and-a-half as well. And also to start teaching voice and hopefully be a part of the young artists there at the Canadian Opera Company and to corrupt their minds, you know, with all the information that I've been so lucky in my almost 30-year career to have culled from all of these great singers, conductors, artists that I've worked with, for all these years. So, it's all up in my brain, I just have to get it out and share it with everybody.

Julie Mclsaac 41:00

Oh, well, thank you for sharing all that. If you imagine the Four Seasons Centre, like, as a person that you could have a conversation with or speak to, what would you find yourself most wanting to say to it at this time, or for it to know?

Sondra Radvanovsky 41:16

You know, don't be depressed, don't be sad. We all love you. And we'll be back very soon, you know? I'm giving you a big hug, seriously. And it's what I tell all my artists and I think of the the Four Seasons Centre as an artist, because it's just one element of the show, and without every element we can't have a show, and right now we're missing that key element, and they are the theatres – the most key element right now – and that is having a space to perform in. And, so, I'm coming for you. Just hold out a little longer, please.

Julie Mclsaac 42:21

I think we're all longing to get back home, to get back to that opera house that we love so much, and now we have a few moments – like, for you and me, Robyn – to think about "What is the significance of that building?"

Robyn Grant-Moran 42:34

Yeah, it's community. Like, opera comes with a lot of baggage, and a lot of people hold the idea of it being elitist – and often rightfully so. But how you can use architecture to physically start to dismantle some of these ideas and help build new, and more inclusive, and representative narratives is just amazing to me.

Julie Mclsaac 43:04

Yeah. So, I think about, like, we talked about how from the moment they enter the building, we want people to feel included in the experience, but it brought my attention to the fact that it actually starts before they even get inside the building in the sense of, "What are they seeing from the outside? What is that transparency? What is that image that they're seeing that might make them feel like they might have a good time, and might be interested, and might feel included if they were to enter?"

Robyn Grant-Moran 43:25

Yeah and, like, if you're walking on University Avenue or Queen Street, you might see people in fancy outfits, but you're also going to see people showing up in jeans and khakis and just, like, coming from work.

Julie Mclsaac 43:39

Totally. Yeah.

Robyn Grant-Moran 43:40

And that variety is so wonderful just to see from the outside before you even get to the door.

Julie Mclsaac 43:48

And if you're seeing, like, a Free Concert Series, like, midday, you might be seeing a dance troupe, or you might be seeing... you know, there's such a variety of artistic expression that happens in that space and that you might witness from outside of that and want to come on in and take part. Hayden Park [Secondary School] is one of our partners in the Opera Makers program this year, and the secondary students from Hayden Park happened to be walking by the building and they saw activity happening in the Richard Bradshaw [Amphitheatre], and it made them think, "Hey, we'd like to do something with the Canadian Opera Company. That looks like fun, we'd like to take part!" And then a partnership grew out of that. So, that makes me think that the building is accomplishing exactly what Jack set out to make it do, and that is really beautiful to observe.

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:31

Yeah, because that doesn't always happen – like, you have your intention and the impact, so, it's so nice when they line up.

Julie Mclsaac 44:37

Mm hmm. I was also really struck by what Janice shared about all the cross-departmental collaboration that happened, so that there's something about the building of the opera house that brought out conversation, and collaboration, and people learning new skills and people growing through their existing skill set. And it's just really lovely to hear that that was such a part of the "building of the building."

Robyn Grant-Moran 44:59

I agree that, like, I remember watching the building go up just being in awe, like, how do you make something like this happen? And, so, to hear how much sharing there was that went into the creation of it was just beautiful.

Julie Mclsaac 45:18

Yeah, and something that Jack said, too, about him having that hope of inspiring creators, composers, and choreographers, and having this place for Canadian artists to hone their craft at home, and they can do work in a space that really reflects the level and the capacity of their talents. It's so important for us to have that here in the city, here in the country.

Robyn Grant-Moran 45:41

Yeah, like, we have so much talent in this country, and it's not accessible for everyone to just go to Europe and get trained. And, so, for us to have this space where we can really nurture our own talent, and tell our stories, and develop our stories, it's a thrilling thing, and I know he really successfully executed that vision.

Julie Mclsaac 46:11

Yeah, it's wonderful to know that there's a space that can honour the expanse of vision that we know Canadian creators have, and to serve as an inspiration for the next generation.

Robyn Grant-Moran 46:20

Yeah. And, like, within the COC, we talk about the COC family and I love that analogy – like, the building is like the cornerstone of the family, we're always trying, we're always striving to be the best that we can be. And that, like, the physicality of the actual building really inspires that, with the transparency.

Julie Mclsaac 46:46

You're making me think that, in saying it's the cornerstone of a family, it's thinking, like, of the COC, the kitchen is the Four Seasons Centre, like, it's the kitchen party of the opera company, or of the opera. And, in the absence of that this year, not being able to access that space and gathered there together, I'm just so grateful to have had this opportunity with you and with the podcast to gather and have conversations.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:10

Yeah. And, like, I have so many memories of great conversations at the Four Seasons Centre, and you and I having great conversations at the Four Seasons Centre before and after performances, and that we get to do this publicly and bring people in is an honour!

Julie Mclsaac 47:29

Absolutely! I recall, like, going early just to be able to meet up with people, and have a drink, and have a chat.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:35

Yeah, yeah.

Julie Mclsaac 47:36

And again, in the absence of the opera house, we know it's not the same, we know it's just a small little drop in the bucket. But we've had a lot of fun and we hope you have, too.

Robyn Grant-Moran 47:45

Agreed! Thanks, everyone, for listening. And that is it for Key Change Episode 16. We want to thank all of today's guests, Jack Diamond, Janice Oliver, and Sondra Radvanovsky.

Julie Mclsaac 48:02

We also want to thank each and every one of you for joining us along this journey. And Robyn, I want to thank you for being my intrepid partner this season as we took this plunge into podcasting. I feel like we've come so far, we've certainly had tons of fun and learned a lot.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:17

It's so true. And when we came up with the idea for the podcast, we were super excited about digging into angles about opera that maybe people don't often think about. And, along the way, our eyes also opened to new ways of thinking about the art form.

Julie Mclsaac 48:31

We're so grateful to everyone who spent time with us, helping us to illuminate the past, present, and future of this art form that we all love so much. Now is probably a great time to mention that all of this year's episodes live online at coc.ca/KeyChange, and so you can catch up anytime.

Robyn Grant-Moran 48:49

Key Change can also be downloaded through Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and just about anywhere else you get your podcasts.

Julie Mclsaac 48:56

We'll be taking this summer to recharge, contemplate, and hopefully enjoy some beautiful sunny weather.

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:02

But if over the next few months you catch up on an older episode and have some thoughts, we want to know! Tag us anytime on social @CanadianOpera, or email us at audiences@coc.ca. We're never too busy to talk opera!

Julie Mclsaac 49:18

For now, wishing you all a safe happy summer ahead!

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:21

Bye, everyone. Be the first to find out about free events and concerts from the COC by signing up for our monthly eOpera newsletter at coc.ca/eOpera.

Julie Mclsaac 49:42

Thank you to all of our supporters for making Key Change possible. This week we want to especially thank every COC member, subscriber, and donor for coming on this journey with us as we explore new ways to share opera's unique power.

Robyn Grant-Moran 49:56

So, to make sure you don't miss an episode, subscribe to Key Change wherever you get your podcasts.

Julie Mclsaac 50:03

Key Change is produced by the Canadian Opera Company and hosted by Robyn Grant-Moran and Julie Mclsaac.

Robyn Grant-Moran 50:09

To learn more about today's guests and see the show notes, please visit our website at coc.ca/KeyChange.