

# Key Change Episode 6: In Conversation with Perryn Leech and Alexander Neef

## SPEAKERS

Julie Mclsaac, Robyn Grant-Moran, Perryn Leech, Alexander Neef

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### **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** 00:23

Welcome to our first episode of 2021. We're your hosts, Robyn Grant-Moran...

### **Julie Mclsaac** 00:29

...and Julie Mclsaac.

### **Robyn Grant-Moran** 00:31

So, Julie, this is a pretty special episode. It's not often you get a chance to sit down for a long chat with the head of an opera company. And this week we're speaking to two!

### **Julie Mclsaac** 00:41

That's right, we're chatting with both Alexander Neef, the COC's current general director, and incoming General Director Perryn Leech, who begins his role in March. Now most of our listeners are probably somewhat familiar with Alexander, who joined the COC in 2008 and became the head of Opéra national de Paris this past September. So we'll hear from Alexander about how he's looking back on the time that he spent in Toronto.

### **Robyn Grant-Moran** 01:06

You'll also get to know Perryn. He began his career as a lighting and technical director before moving into administration. Originally from England, he joined the acclaimed Houston Grand Opera 14 years ago, and was appointed its Managing Director in 2011.

### **Julie Mclsaac** 01:22

And you want to be sure to stick around to the very end of the episode where we have some fun with a lightning round of questions to really get to know both Alexander and Perryn outside the opera house. We are so pleased to have you both here. What a rare treat for us to have two general directors joining us here today on the podcast. Welcome, Alexander. Welcome, Perryn.

### **Perryn Leech** 01:56

Thank you.

**Alexander Neef** 01:57

Thanks for having us.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 01:59

For the listeners who might not realize this: this recording is actually happening across four time zones. So how's everything in Paris and Houston?

**Alexander Neef** 02:08

It's night in Paris already. We are actually allowed to rehearse here but you're not allowed to receive an audience at the moment. So I will be going down after this conversation for a dress rehearsal of The Magic Flute.

**Perryn Leech** 02:22

Yeah, in Houston, it's a beautiful, early, winter day. So it's cold, crisp, but not cold by Canadian standards. So I'm actually sitting on my back deck doing this podcast, which is a rare treat. I started off the pandemic and then went through the very, very hot summer months in Houston inside, and now I can break out again. So it's kind of fantastic. So I'm wrapped up warm but it's it's nice to be outside again.

**Julie Mclsaac** 02:48

Lovely. And Alexander, we're curious: if you had to, sort of, pinpoint it, what will you miss the most about Toronto and the COC.

**Alexander Neef** 02:58

You know, I mean, all that has happened anywhere since March of last year, it's a little bit unreal, because we were confined in Toronto [in] the middle of March, and I left for Paris quite a few months later. But I still didn't have the opportunity to see anybody, like all you guys. We've interacted for, like, 5+ months before my departure on Zoom and, you know, on the phone. So it's been a little bit of a weird virtual existence already. So what I'm missing is real goodbyes – right? – which I hope people can do at some point. And this is all over and travel will be easier again.

**Julie Mclsaac** 03:47

Yeah, we're without those, sort of, threshold moments and ritual moments where we get to begin things together and celebrate their beginnings but, like you said, also the endings are the next chapters of things. But, yet again, that's really why we're grateful that you're able to be here with us today – just to spend some time reflecting. And, Alexander, do you have something that you would consider your proudest accomplishment during your tenure as General Director [of the COC]?

**Alexander Neef** 04:12

I don't know. I always think it's up to other people to talk about that. I feel an enormous sense of gratitude towards not only the COC but also to Canada for allowing me... you know, 12 years is

a long time and I was very young when I came to the COC. I was given an incredible opportunity to lead the company to, you know, inherit, which I maintain is one of the greatest opera houses in the world, to start programming for that building, to really, in a sense, properly activate the building – because it was only opened in 2006, two years before I arrived, and I think there was a desire to create an ambitious artistic project for the building and for the company. And to be able to embark on that together with the people in the company but also the audience in Toronto was really... it was thrilling. You know, sometimes over the last little while I've, kind of, looked back because you don't remember all the things you actually did over 12 years. And you're like, "Oh, we really did that – that was actually a great show!" Yeah, so, I mean, there's a sense of pride of having been able to do that. And, you know, again, a great, great sense of gratitude, too.

**Julie Mclsaac** 05:23

And if you were to sum up that in three words – in terms of the things that you're grateful for or have that pride around – what would those three words be?

**Alexander Neef** 05:32

Well if you really want three words... And on a personal level is "the opportunity to grow" right? And, on the other side, maybe "opportunity to build".

**Julie Mclsaac** 05:46

Lovely, yeah. And, just before we shift gears a little bit to Perryn, we are curious about: Perryn and Alexander, when did you first meet? What was that first encounter between the two of you?

**Alexander Neef** 05:56

It must have been in sometime around 2007 when I was very briefly involved with Gerard Mortier's preparation for his tenure at New York City Opera, which never happened. But, at that time, I had started traveling, actually, from Paris at the time – I did crazy things: I flew to Houston and Chicago for, like, two days to check out their young artists programs and find talent that we could use for City Opera. And one of the first trips was to Houston and, you know, at that point, Diane Zola, who Perryn remembers, was still running the young artist program – she's at The Met now – and I went to your gala, your voice competition and gala, and that was my first contact with Houston.

**Perryn Leech** 06:47

That must be about two months after I started in Houston, so that will absolutely be right, I'm sure. Wow, a better memory than I had Alexander. I was thinking we must have been on a dark street corner somewhere and had a beer or something. But, yes, I'm sure you're right.

**Alexander Neef** 07:02

I remember the weather was very nice. Houston always was my favorite destination to go to from Toronto in, like, January and February.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 07:12

So, Perryn, this seems like a really great time to ask about what drew you to the Canadian Opera Company?

**Perryn Leech 07:18**

I love that question because I got asked that by the board several times during the interview process and I think it shows a very Canadian way of the way you look at your company. COC is a major player on the world stage, literally any general director would be interested in the opportunity to come and work at the COC. You have a beautiful house, as Alexander said, that opened in 2006, and he's had a amazing decade of producing the highest quality of artistic work. So it's a fantastic organization. It feels very humble to ask that question because literally everybody should have been beating your door down for this amazing opportunity to come to Canada. But certainly, from a personal point of view, I worked with the Canadian Opera Company many years ago: they brought a show to the Edinburgh Festival, Bluebeard's Castle/Erwartung, the very acclaimed Robert Lepage show, so I knew the company from that – I was Head of Lighting at the time – so I knew the company from then. And then, obviously, I got to know the company when I'd come over here and I've been a reasonably regular visitor to Toronto as well, to see performances and shows – Houston and Canadian Opera Company have co-produced together quite a lot. So, it's a very natural progression fit and I'm thrilled that the board thought I could add value to the COC, which is a company that is already overflowing with huge talent and really great critical acclaim.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 08:40**

And what were your thoughts about the city itself?

**Perryn Leech 08:43**

Texas and anywhere is different – let's be really clear about that! Houston is the least Texan city – well, Houston and Austin, to be fair. Houston is culturally the most diverse city in the U.S. statistically, and one of the things I've loved about living in Houston is that people think they have an understanding and knowledge of what Houston is and, until they visit and actually spend some time here, you have no idea. When I flew in to see if I was interested in joining Houston Grand Opera in late-2006, I knew exactly what Houston would look like because I'd watched [1978 TV series] Dallas with my mum, Dallas was very close, it was going to be lots of people riding on horses, prairie everywhere. And I came into this beautiful little green oasis in a city. (It's very green Houston because of, as I now know, the rainfall and the temperatures.) But it's this wonderful melting pot of a city. You know, yes, I love to discover the beating heart of the city quite quickly, and when I travel I rarely sit still in a hotel; I walk the streets, I smell the city and that's a weird thing to say, but you get a feel about culture of a city from the food smell, through just the general ambience of the city. So I love nothing better than walking through a city in the early morning to go and have a walk, or go to the first meeting of the day or whatever, and feel the cultural hubbub starting and just getting into a real feel for the city. I look forward to exploring Toronto much more but, you know, we visited as a family for five days when we were... about three summers, four summers ago, and we had some friends who had a farm just outside Toronto, so we went and visited them. It's an amazing city and the number of people who've invited themselves already shows that people know what Toronto is because everyone's

like, "Oh, I'll definitely come and visit you in Toronto." "I've been in Houston for 14 years and you never once invited yourself there. Okay..." But I think you'll have a lot of visits. I'm looking forward to that.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 10:47

Well, we're certainly excited to have you come and explore and join us. You started your career in backstage and production. How do you think that impacts how you work as a General Director?

**Perryn Leech** 10:59

I think everybody brings different skills to the role of General Director. And, you know, Alexander is a wonderful resource in terms of his artistic knowledge, his breadth of repertoire knowledge, singers, etc, etc., and that has absolutely raised the bar for Canadian Opera Company in terms of the artists it can attract and, you know, the ensembles it's put together. What I bring to it is: I kind of know how to put opera on. I've worked up from the very bottom, I understand completely that every single person has a role, and a well-tuned engine has to have all parts of that engine working in perfect harmony because you can only achieve greatness if everything is... If you have one slightly thing that's out of time, at that point, it just doesn't work. What I am is someone who has a very practical knowledge, I think, a good way with people, I think I enjoy getting an ensemble together of people who create work that is greater than the sum of its parts. And that's what I've tried to do in Houston at least – that's why I've been successful in my career. So what that means in terms of skills: nobody has all the skills to General Director – the portfolio of skills that you need is just wild, far too wide. So I bring different skills than Alexander, I will rely on others to bring some of the skills that Alexander has. But any good opera company is run by a team of people. It's not... yes, the titular head is a final decision-maker but it's a team of people. And one of the things I loved most about COC during the interview process was every person I met had this kind of cool attitude about they wanted to be there, they wanted to do the best work possible, and that's a really appealing thing as a leader.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 12:40

That's been a running theme, too: that opera is really a team sport.

**Perryn Leech** 12:45

Yeah. I was in Wales – so I went down from London to Wales – and I'd been told that Welsh National Opera, where I used to work, was a "family company". And it's interesting because all three of the companies that I worked for since, at some point, somebody has used that analogy. The great things about nonprofits are that people are drawn to work for nonprofits because they have a passion for the art, they have a passion for creating performance, and that passion can always be harnessed if you have the right way of doing it.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 13:15

Since you've been at Houston for 14 years now, what's your proudest accomplishments?

**Perryn Leech** 13:21

Yeah, there's no question about the one that certainly got the most press, which is the fact that we lost our theater in 2017 to Hurricane Harvey, we were able to relocate to the convention center and, through a period of time, it was short-term relocation, a medium-term relief and, eventually, it ended up being our entire season. And to be able to get the organization through that period of time without losing a single member of staff, without losing a single performance, and to keep our donors and our supporters engaged with the organization, was an absolutely huge lift for the company. And that was one of the places where Houston got slightly lucky with the fact that I was there, I built temporary venues of large scale before at the Edinburgh Festival, and I knew how to do that. And once they'd, sort of, calm down, once they said, "Look, we're gonna build a venue within the George R. Brown Convention Center," and everybody, sort of, looks at me in that way that, "I know he's my boss but can I tell him that..." (Well, I can't say any words.) "But can I tell him how mad that is?" And then they sort of go, "Okay, well, let's..." and then you sit down and go, "Okay, I've done this before, let's just walk it through." And everyone, sort of, slowly bought into the idea and, after the thrill of doing that – the excitement, the adrenaline buzz of doing that. If there's a deadline, you kept the deadline. And we all have deadlines within the way we produce shows in, you know, Alexander has a dress rehearsal night and that leads to the first batch of performance. This was a, sort of, a deadline on adrenaline acid because, you know, we were four weeks out from opening the season, and we had to build an entire venue, and those are things which take years and years to plan normally, etc, etc. So we went for, on paper, what looked like quite a simplistic way of doing it. But one of the things that made me proud it was, at the end of that and all the people who may have been a part of making that said, "There's not much we would have done differently." We got virtually everything right – I mean, there's no right and wrong, per se. So, that was certainly, professionally, one of the real highlights and something that I'm extraordinarily proud of the work of the company, and being able to lead them through that because I think it was a big leap of faith for both the people who made the venues, but also the board. The board had to have complete and utter faith in me – this was not a situation where I was going back to the board or asking permission for anything. I said, "This is what we're doing. Hold my beer, I'll be back in a month and we'll have a venue, have a season we'll have this." So that was definitely that. I think in terms of the organization, we are in a much better fiscal footing than we were nine years ago, and we've been through now an economic downturn in Houston through the oil and gas industry, Hurricane Harvey, and a pandemic, and I still leave the organization in a better fiscal position than we were before. And we've also done the right thing by our artists and our staff. So we've had ongoing programs about equity, diversity, and inclusion; we've substantially increased pay in some areas, which were, in my opinion, gender-related pay issues; we have honest, proper conversations now about the value of everybody in an organization rather than just a few. And, personally, I find that to be really rewarding work because I think it's a very fair organization to work for now, in a way that I don't think was true a decade ago.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 16:59

That's an incredible list of accomplishments. We're really excited to have you. I know I've said that before, and we're very sad to be saying bye to Alexander as well.

**Perryn Leech** 17:08

Yeah. You've had some brilliant years under Alexander; I will bring something different. But great organizations are built around stability and people who have vision for an organization.

**Robyn Grant-Moran 17:21**

Now, before I throw it back to Julie and Alexander, I have one quick question: what operas had the biggest impact on you?

**Perryn Leech 17:30**

Yeah. So, actually the answer to that has to be The Coronation of Poppaea because it was my first opera. So I was at drama school, I got to work on this production at the Royal Academy of Music of The Coronation of Poppaea, first opera I'd ever seen. All I remember is how long it was and how you had pre-scene changes to do during this entire opera. And the challenge was to keep awake and make sure you had done it. But that was the opera that then gave me the opportunity to work with Glyndebourne Festival and brought me into the world of opera. So, in terms of impact, unquestionably that is the biggest impact as it brought me to opera. You can't do a Ring Cycle without that having an enormous impact on you both personally, professionally, and organizationally – those things are things that bring an organization together. And I know you didn't ask for three answers, but you're getting three answers anyway: the piece that I love the most and really resonates most with me is Cruzar La Cara De La Luna, which is the world's first mariachi opera, which we've toured extensively all over the world, including the Châtelet in Paris, and that piece just sits in my heart in a way that I was part of the creation of it from day one. And world premieres are very special like that: you know that you've had a thumbprint on that. And that piece will always remain one of the artistic highlights of my life. I think unquestionably digital continues to grow and become a more central part of the art form – already we've heard of companies commissioning new work purely for digital production – I think that's sensible, I think it's part of it. But, as Alexander said, the main event – the thing that will draw you back to opera – is performances. It's part of the same symbiotic circle, if you don't have the live part then it will be very difficult. You know, we've had success with our digital programming in Houston, but it's already starting to drop off people. Some people just don't like watching opera on a small screen and, you know, we have amazing capabilities in our own homes now. When I was growing up, we had one black and white TV in our house and then color TV and it was, like, the size of my house because it had this huge tube on the back. And now we're at 70-inch screens and everyone's like, "Oh, you only got a 70-inch? Oh my god, you need an 80". Everything's moved on from that and you've got sound systems now that support that, but it's still not the same because part of seeing a live performance – and this isn't just opera – part of seeing a live performance is feeling the reactions of the people around you, feeling a community with people who are experiencing the piece of art at the same time, and one of the reasons that the High School Nights was one of my favorite nights of the opera that we do in Houston. Those kids don't know how they're supposed to react at an opera. The outpouring of emotion at different parts of the opera is pure and real because they don't know that this is coming up – it's the first time they've seen it, they don't know that Rodolfo is going to kiss Mimì. And you get this, sort of, intake of breath. And everyone... you know, majority of people, if you've been to performing arts, you, kind of, don't get surprised very often, but those kids do and that's a completely normal reaction. So it's absolutely thrilling to have that going on

around you and especially for pieces that you maybe don't know so well. So, we did a production of Saul, which is a Handel oratorio that was staged brilliantly by Barrie Koski, and you could just see the entire auditorium dazzled by this theatrical brilliance, and also had some controversial moments in which one or two people chose to vote with their feet and leave. And so it wasn't all plain sailing but even the people who left, the vast majority of them wrote saying, "I'm really thrilled you did this. It's a fantastic thing, just not for me." Based on a biblical story, we are in the deep south, so, you know, we were aware of it, we tried to educate before people came but it was too much for some people and, you know, that's their right. I think Alexander would agree that you would much rather someone said, "I loved five of your operas this season and hated two," than went, "Yeah, this season was okay." Because, at that point, you're not really engaging with your audience; they're experiencing it on a very superficial level. If you can't remember performances from three months ago, then it really didn't make much of an impact on you. Whereas, if you're still talking about it years and years later, good or bad. So, the curation of a season is very much about having that mixture, and making sure that people come on a journey with you, understand what the story is that you're trying to tell, but they're not necessarily going to like everything.

**Julie Mclsaac** 22:50

And, Alexander, I'd love for you to have the opportunity to answer that question around the transformation that opera may be experiencing right now. But, also, what Perryn just mentioned about risk: I'm curious, if you could share with us, what is the greatest risk that you feel that you took while you were at the COC?

**Alexander Neef** 23:07

It's the risk, and sometimes the rigor, also, of trying not to please. What I mean with that is that I think you also need to program with convictions and you need to build a relationship with your artists and with your audience, where there's a dialogue that works between all of us. Of course, you want to program what people like but you can't only program what they want to see, because it would mean you would only program things that they already know, right? And I think that the proudest moments for all of us are the ones where you do something and you don't really know where you're going and what the result is going to be. You get hate mail for everything you do, that's fine, but then you get, you know, letters from people that say, "Wow, we had no clue that this would be good," and, "Please do more of this." And that's, I think, how you start building something with your audience and with the artists, you know. I always jokingly said, when we presented Dmitri Tcherniakov's production of Don Giovanni in Toronto, I jokingly said, "Well, the fact if I'm going to be out of a job or not after we do that show will tell me a lot about my audience." The interesting thing about that show for us was that, yes, of course, we got quite a bit of hate mail but we also... actually, I think my very first show at the COC, we got a big number of letters from people [who] said, "This was great. Do more of this." because they knew there would be hate mail and they knew that they also needed to get the positive voice heard. And that was really interesting. And what I've always liked about the COC audience is that they are curious and they don't judge it before they see it and I think that's a huge quality for an audience.



**Perryn Leech** 24:57

Hate mail in Canada sounds like it might be quite muted compared to hate mail in Texas.

**Alexander Neef** 25:01

And hate mail, of course, is, I admit, a bit of a harsh word in the age of just typing something in your computer and sending it off without reading it again – that's easy. And then people do it more when they're angry; they don't do it when they're happy.

**Perryn Leech** 25:18

No, I think that's the thing – that's very, very true and it is interesting. So we did *Dead Man Walking* in Houston, which is, you know, an opera about the death penalty. And again, doing that in Texas, which is a state that still has the death penalty, the conversations it opens up, allowing the community to have a piece of art as a starting point for a debate about the death penalty, the rights and wrongs of the death penalty, whether it still has a place in modern society, etc, etc. were absolutely fascinating. And, of course, very, very hot conversations at various points because, you know, it's not an area that most people are ambivalent about – you have a very strong opinion: you're either for it or you're against it. And, you know, I think one of the challenges we have as a society now is that people are becoming more and more polarized; they don't want to hear somebody else's view, they want to tell you why their view is right. And one of the challenges we definitely face as a society is how do we have conversations in which you are actually talking about the issue, rather than just positioning yourself to have your heart part heard, and then not listen to the other part.

**Alexander Neef** 26:30

And it's becoming more and more of a worldwide issue. I mean, it might be a little bit more pronounced at the moment in your current home country, Perryn, but, you know, I think the ability to listen to each other and the ability to sometimes just agree in a civil way that you disagree with each other, I think that's the original idea or theatre: together the citizens – in a space that is dedicated to performance, that allows them to share an experience – go through the same thing, collectively and individually and then, in a way, you know, put issues of society on stage and allow people – by removing it from the daily lives and turning it into art, putting it on a stage – to reflect on their own, you know, being their own reality, their own issues. And then for them to not all reach the same conclusion but they still have shared that moment, and then – what you said is very profound, Perryn – years after that, still talk about it, and maybe still not agree but that culture of exchange and debate, I think that theater was invented to foster that. And if we can help mend some of the wounds of society currently, that way I think we've done a lot by producing meaningful art that's more than just entertaining. And, of course, it should be entertaining but it shouldn't only be entertainment.

**Perryn Leech** 28:06

Yeah, that's exactly right.

**Julie Mclsaac** 28:09

Wonderful. And it's a great reminder that as we heal from COVID, or as we move forward and look at what opera's going to look like in the next 10 years, there's also this question that you've raised about the increasing polarization and what role do we have to play amongst citizens and as a point of gathering and a place where we can exchange respectfully around ideas and disagree together as well and what role opera has to play in that. Lots to come in the next 5-10 years. I think it might be time for our lightning round. Robyn.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 28:37

Okay, question one: favorite pre-show meal.

**Alexander Neef** 28:42

Oh, usually no time to eat before the show!

**Perryn Leech** 28:44

That is exactly what I thought. Whatever is put in front of me, I'll wolf it down.

**Julie Mclsaac** 28:53

First opera?

**Alexander Neef** 28:54

Fidelio – like, in the theatre,

**Perryn Leech** 28:58

Poppaea backstage; Carmen, the first ticket I bought.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 29:03

Do you guys have pets?

**Perryn Leech** 29:05

I have George.

**Alexander Neef** 29:06

Harry the poodle.

**Julie Mclsaac** 29:08

What type of dog is George?

**Perryn Leech** 29:11

He's very much an eclectic mix. So he's some Labrador, some terrier, there's some poodle in there, we think. I'll see if I can capture at the end of this, when we're done with the questions, I'll see if I can get you a picture of him. Yeah.

**Julie Mclsaac** 29:29

We'd love to meet him! And what's the thing that makes you smile when you first walk into the opera house?

**Alexander Neef** 29:36

Well, I mean usually [I] come in through the stage door, right? So, the first thing you see is the security agents – the people you smile at, you know, because they keep us safe.

**Perryn Leech** 29:48

I'm not even in the opera house. I'm outside it and I hear the sound of it. You hear musicians warming up, singers warming up. There's no sound like... You walk towards the building and you know... It quickens your heartbeat because you know that you're about to create something or be part of the creation.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 30:06

What's the last opera you saw live?

**Alexander Neef** 30:12

As a performance was actually Ambur Braid as Salome in Frankfurt on the 1st of March of last year.

**Perryn Leech** 30:25

Yeah, I guess mine would be the last performance of Aida at Houston Grand Opera in February of last year.

**Julie McIsaac** 30:32

What's your favorite HGO-COC co-production?

**Alexander Neef** 30:35

Oh, we did a couple of really good ones. We did [A] Midsummer Night's Dream, we did Peter Grimes, which...

**Perryn Leech** 30:42

Both of which were fantastic.

**Alexander Neef** 30:45

Peter Grimes is one of my personal all-time favorites – great, great show. Well, most recently Turandot. I also liked our [La] Traviata. We did we did a lot together. Yeah. And the [La] Bohème is... I really like the Bohème, it's very immediate. We haven't actually done a clunker, which is, again, that's always nice as well!

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 31:08

What's your favourite sports team?

**Perryn Leech** 31:10

Okay, this is where I can get myself into a lot of trouble, so I'm gonna stick with the easy answer, which is Arsenal Football Club, which is my British football club – not gonna call it "soccer"; it's football because it's played with a foot and a ball, not throwing a ball, which is called football as well. I love my Texan sports teams but I'm not gonna get myself into trouble by picking those over the Blue Jays. So, Arsenal Football Club is my answer to that.

**Alexander Neef** 31:40

So, sports and I is not necessarily a love affair. But I've been to great games over time – you know, the Blue Jays and other things in Toronto. I remember very vividly a [St. Louis] Cardinals game in St. Louis a long time ago of all places. My first time in St. Louis and I was told you have to go to Cardinals game, so we went to a Cardinals game. What I like about it is the energy, which is, you know, not dissimilar to the energy of a theatrical performance, somehow magnified by the sheer number of people.

**Julie McIsaac** 32:19

And right now what would be your go to album or recording?

**Perryn Leech** 32:22

Interesting. Actually, you know, I've been listening to a lot less music through lockdown because I'm on the phone the whole time. I tend to be listening to podcasts and things outside of that. So actually, bizarrely, I haven't been listening to as much music, I've actually just started listening to more of the plans that COC have got to the next 2-3 years of repertoire just to, you know, remind myself and get myself deeper into some of that repertoire. But running a company in COVID times, you spend an awful lot of time not doing that. And because I am a very keen sports person, my time outside of that is tends to be watching sporting events and listening to podcasts rather than music.

**Alexander Neef** 33:04

Well, maybe just sort of a more general remark: I mean, I've always been a big, great listener of music – first on the radio when I was very little, and later you started that time it was music cassettes, like tapes, and then later came to CD, and then came streaming. And, you know, there's been a huge shift because when you actually needed to buy the stuff, there was always this, like, soul searching, how to invest your money, like, which was the album that you could settle on when you would, kind of, go to the record store and listen and compare. What I like about the streaming stuff is that I listen to much more and different music. In a way it's it's become more casual but it's also allowed me to discover a lot of things by the sheer, you know, fact that, kind of, it's the "subscription effect" in many ways, like because you're free to wander and I love that and I don't have nearly enough time to listen to as much music as I would like to. And I rarely listen to opera because if I don't have to study a piece – which is one one thing of course... I prefer it live but there's other things: I like to listen to chamber music, a lot of piano solo, and jazz, too, and ideally with headphones. I also don't like to listen to music while doing something else: when I listen I want to listen. That didn't answer the question about the album, really...

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 34:36

What's your favorite pop artist?

**Perryn Leech** 34:37

Oh, favorite, favorite pop artist? You go back to The Clash for me. Very, very instrumental in growing [up]. I grew up in a wonderful time in British music history: the end of punk going into new wave. Yeah, I go back that far, I'm afraid!

**Alexander Neef** 34:56

Well, I mean just the classics, right? I mean, I had a phase when I was actually still in Toronto, when I was driving my older daughter to school some mornings, and we would make this habit of listening to only one album all the time – it was A Night at the Opera, [by] Queen.

**Perryn Leech** 35:18

It's good one to listen to!

**Alexander Neef** 35:19

Amazing! The confirmation is you listen to it, like, you know, 100 times and you still are not done because there's still things that you discover. And those are the experiences that... I think that's why we're in this business.

**Perryn Leech** 35:33

They were a group and an artist that transcended what was there. My favorite Montserrat Caballé quote [which] was she was asked, you know, "Who is the greatest thing you've ever sung with?" and she just turned around and said, "That's easy: Freddie Mercury." And for her to say that after all the amazing artists that she worked with through her career, she was, like, "Hands down, easy: he could do anything. If he wanted to sing opera, he could've done that! Whatever!" He is the greatest artist she'd ever worked with.

**Julie Mclsaac** 36:25

Right, we're gonna jump to the last question on the list: three words to describe opera.

**Perryn Leech** 36:30

Thrilling, powerful. I had to think of a third one. Alexander can do the third one.

**Alexander Neef** 36:39

Well, obviously: beauty, truth, and maybe – it doesn't really sound so good in English – depth.

**Julie Mclsaac** 36:48

Perryn, you can keep thinking about it and when you join in March... ...you can let us know. Thank you so much for spending this time with us. Wishing you both so much luck in the rest of your day, the rest of your evening, and in the months ahead.

**Perryn Leech** 36:50

Yeah! Bless you.

**Alexander Neef** 37:01

Thank you, guys. It was a pleasure.

**Julie Mclsaac** 37:11

I'm coming out of that conversation really excited. Like, we know that there's a lot of challenges that we're dealing with being still in this COVID era but I was really excited listening to Perryn speak and listening to Alexander reflect on his time.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 37:25

But, yeah, it feels like we're at this precipice within the pandemic, where it's been going on long enough that we recognize that digital media is really important in a way that it wasn't before. And vaccines are rolling out. So who knows what that means in terms of when live theatre will begin again but it does provide some sense of optimism for live theatre beginning again. And where Alexander has... with the work he's done and then Perryn picking up the torch and running with it, however he's going to do that. It's just really exciting. It's all these things happening at once.

**Julie Mclsaac** 38:08

Mm hmm. So Alexander's moving away from the company but having left it in a really good position.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 38:13

Yeah!

**Julie Mclsaac** 38:13

In a good way and he's talking... that analogy of the horse, sort of...

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 38:14

Yeah!

**Julie Mclsaac** 38:16

The horse just wanting to get out there on the racetrack and just wanting to race. You know, I certainly feel that energy and myself as well and speaking with them today, I do. It's a good reminder that there's a lot to look forward to.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 38:29

Yeah, even though our present is really challenging and difficult, there is that light at the end of the tunnel; there's something to look forward to.

**Julie Mclsaac** 38:37

Mm hmm. And that the learnings that we're taking away from this time – like the digital technology that you mentioned – we'll carry that with us and we'll take it forward. But we know it's never going to replace that live gathering. And we're so excited for that eventual future.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 38:52

I have to laugh. One thing Perryn said about that TV when he was a boy was black and white and then moving into colour TV... and my first TV was about the size of my laptop screen and black and white until I was, like, six or seven – I think we got a colour TV then and it was still about the size of my laptop screen, and it was very exciting.

**Julie Mclsaac** 39:19

Oh, yeah!

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 39:20

And that natural flow of technology – the progression of technology – that we need to embrace it but, it's true, it will never replace being in a live theatre, with live performers, with 1,000 people all around you, feeling that excitement, waiting for that production to begin, hearing the orchestra tuning up.

**Julie Mclsaac** 39:49

The TV that we had, Robyn, it's like you got two channels fairly reliably, and then there was a third that you could sort of get if you move the bunny ears into the right position, but it was always a bit grainy and you couldn't quite see, so, that's sort of how I feel right now: there's, like, this third channel that's emerging.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 40:03

Opera's thrilling and the future: we don't know what it's going to look like but it's going to be thrilling because it's going to be a progression from now.

**Julie Mclsaac** 40:13

Powerful, thrilling, truth, beauty – here we come! We can't wait to hear more from Perryn as this new era begins at the COC, and we'd love to hear from you as well!

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 40:34

Yeah. Are you optimistic about the return of opera and theatre? Do you think it can happen anytime soon? Let us know! We want to know what you think and feel.

**Julie Mclsaac** 40:44

Feel free to send us your questions, your comments, your ideas by emailing [audiences@coc.ca](mailto:audiences@coc.ca) or tagging us on social media @CanadianOpera.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 40:55

See you next time...

**Julie Mclsaac** 40:56

... when we'll be having a great chat with Rena Roussin about how opera can serve as a sphere for activism.

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 41:04

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](http://coc.ca/eOpera).

**Julie Mclsaac** 41:16

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** 41:30

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**Julie Mclsaac** 41:37

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

**Robyn Grant-Moran** 41:44

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