



Photo credit: Michael Crouser

A Life Revisited

By Benjamin Pomerance

RICKY IAN GORDON has been here before — written these notes, read these words, known these people, walked these roads. So many shadows flicker with familiarity; so many footsteps ring with the reminiscence of a time he must have known. He understands that some people would call such statements crazy. He doesn't care.

"I completely believe in reincarnation," he declares. He has just returned from a session with his therapist. He is one of the most successful composers of his generation. He writes music sung by everyone from Renee Fleming to Dawn Upshaw to Audra McDonald. But he still has plenty of questions. "There have been times in my life where I feel this force that seems to be guiding me in a way that I cannot resist. That is the level of the intensity."

The doubters may scoff. But to the skeptics, one might ask what other explanation exists for so many of the formative moments in Gordon's life. Ask them how to explain Uncle Sid, for instance. Uncle Sid worked for the New York Transit Authority. One day, he found a copy of the score of George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* discarded on the subway. For reasons unknown, he picked it up and brought it home.

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When young Gordon got his hands on that music, he wouldn't let it go. He was already an artist by this point, skilled enough on the piano to accompany his mother, a gifted singer. He had played since the age of 5. But once he discovered those pages of *Porgy and Bess*, once he dove into this marriage of opera and ragtime and musical theatre, a new universe opened. A time would come, he decided, when he would create music like that for himself.

And here came Peter, the kid who lived around the block, a walking messenger. When Gordon was 8 years old, he befriended Peter. In an act of camaraderie, Peter invited Gordon to come to one of his piano lessons. As Gordon watched his friend, his eyes wandered to a nearby bookcase. Then, almost mechanically, he walked over to it and pulled a book from the shelf. He stared down at the cover in his hands: *The Victor Book of Operas*, offering plot summaries for more than a hundred operatic works.

"Mrs. Fox [the piano teacher] could see the look in my eyes," Gordon remembers. "She told me I could keep the book. I would read it every chance I could get. And I became absolutely obsessed with opera."

Peter caught the bug, too. The friends started trekking from their Long Island community into New York City on virtually every Saturday, hoping to score standing room tickets at the Metropolitan Opera. "We saw all of the stars," Gordon recalls. "Joan Sutherland, Franco Corelli, all of them. And I started going to Lincoln Center's Library for the Performing Arts, too. I'd take out every piece of opera music I could find. It took over my life."

So, he ran away from home — 12 years old and off on his own, pounding the pavement in a horrid blizzard. Of course, the vagabond didn't remain truant for long. He was back to Long Island again, back to the tumultuous family that served as the subject for Donald Katz's book *Home Fires: An Intimate Portrait of One Middle-Class Family in Postwar America* but not until he had fulfilled his mission — seeing Roberta Peters sing at the Met, snowstorm be damned.

And it didn't take much provocation before he left again. He was seeking something lofty, something that he could sense was waiting for him, and high school drama was just holding him back. He left without his diploma in the middle of his senior year. Carnegie Mellon University opened its gates to him. And once his collegiate music studies started to flourish, new sounds took over his ears.

"Benjamin Britten, Aaron Copland, Alban Berg — all of these composers hit on something musically that felt so authentic to me," Gordon states. "It was as if they had figured something out about the inner climate of my life

and put it all into notes."

But there were decisions to make. First, he had to choose whether to perform the great works of the past or create the great works of the future. For a short period, he selected the former option. "It was boring," he recalls of the jobs that he found as a pianist. "I grew to hate it so much. Finally, I made up my mind that I was going to write music for a living and do nothing else, even if I starved in the process."

He didn't starve. Instead, tempted with a multitude of accessible excesses, he went in the opposite direction. A period that he wouldn't mind forgetting ensued. No one said that a reincarnated life was an easy life.

Finally, one night, at the age of 33, he threw in the towel. Arriving home from yet another party, he sprawled on his couch and sobbed. His friend Mary asked what was wrong. "I said, 'I feel like my whole life has become nothing more than drinks and dinner,'" he remembers. Before the sun rose on the following morning, he had committed to sobriety.

And when he did, opportunity didn't just knock; it roared, breaking down the doors at the loft where Adam Guettel, the prizewinning composer of *The Light in the Piazza*, was holding a fundraiser for the not-for-profit organization Gay Men's Health Crisis. The fundraiser included performances of some of Gordon's original works. Very few of the attendees had heard any of Gordon's creations before. Their reaction would transform everything.

"All of these people came to me," Gordon remembers. "They were all asking, 'Who are you? Where have you been?' And some of them began helping me." Within a few weeks, he had a recording contract with RCA Victor and a publishing contract with the Rodgers & Hammerstein publishing house. "All of this happened in 1989," he states. "That was the year that I got sober and the year that changed my life."

But he hadn't bargained on love. Two years later, Gordon flipped head-over-heels for a man named Jeffrey. "Then he told me that he was HIV-positive," Gordon says. "And I realized that all I wanted to do was to make the most out of every moment that we would have left together."

He turned to his piano and his writing desk. He was going to do what he always wanted to do ever since Uncle Sid brought that score of *Porgy and Bess* into his life. He was going to write an opera. "My first opera was an opera to help Jeffrey die. I had read to him from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* as a way of communicating together about the end of his life. And that is how my first subject for an opera became *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*."

The work that honored Jeffrey's death brought Gordon new life. Suddenly, the man who already had grown highly respected for his art songs was recognized as a burgeoning force in the operatic world, too. Commissions started arriving from increasingly prestigious houses, inspiring him to tackle progressively difficult subject matter.

But nothing was more daunting than the offer that showed up on his doorstep from the Minnesota Opera and the Utah Symphony and Opera: develop an operatic adaptation of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. "The story has such a dense, rich, beloved text," Gordon says. "Making it into an opera was either going to be a success or a disaster."

It was a success. If *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* had been Gordon's operatic baptism, *The Grapes of Wrath* proved to be his confirmation. "For the first time in my life, I felt like I had a seat at the table," he says of the reaction to the work's premiere in 2007. "This was the first time that people began to write about me. This was the first time that I felt like I was really on my way." He laughs. "Of course, you're never really on your way."

Which is why Gordon continues to work as if debt collectors are chasing him daily. His labors have kept him in the headlines. McDonald recorded an album of his songs.

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"I don't have kids of my own. These works of music are my kids. I want them to live as a voice in the chaos speaking about the times we live in. Each time I set pencil to paper, I'm excited about exalting another voice."



Photo credit: Gregory Downer

Lincoln Center invited him to provide the first American Songbook program for a living composer in the venerated venue's history. A stunning number of operas emerged — *Morning Star*, about turn-of-the-century Jewish immigrants on New York's Lower East Side; *Sycamore Trees*, a tale of suburban intrigue; *Rappahannock County*, based on diary entries and letters from the 1860s; and *27*, the work that the Montreal Opera will present this month at the Centaur Theatre, a chamber opera about the relationship of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, and the salons that they hosted at 27 Rue de Fleurus in Paris. Here, too, rests an instance of fate. In college, Gordon became extremely sick, leading to a long convalescence. During that time, he picked up a book that his roommate was reading: *Charmed Circle*, focusing on Stein and her multi-hued existence.

He read the entire thing while his physical condition improved. On each page, he felt that familiar sensation again, as if this were a world that he had known before. So, when Gordon received a commission to write an opera for soprano Stephanie Blythe, the notion of putting Stein onto the operatic stage practically leapt onto the page.

Then he presented librettist Royce Vavrek with an offer that sounded like a gift from Hades. "I told him that I wanted the paintings to sing," Gordon recalls. "I told him that my favorite line from Gertrude Stein was 'before the flowers of friendship faded friendship faded.' And I told him that if he could read 15 books that I would give him about [Stein] and write the libretto in a month, the job was his."

The composer laughs. "And Royce said, 'Are you f***** kidding me? Of course, I'll do it.'"

A similar pace of play occupies Gordon's life today. He's joining forces with playwright Lynn Nottage on a work commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera and Lincoln Center Theater. He's collaborating with librettist Michael Korie, his writing partner on *The Grapes of Wrath*, on a new opera. He's working with author Richard Nelson on a novel creation for the Goodman Theatre in Chicago.

But it has to be like this. It has to, because he pictured it this way. As a kid, he would go to the Boosey & Hawkes music publishing factory. Looking at the mountainous piles of sheet music, the boy would dream of what he would someday become.

"I remember seeing a score of a Benjamin Britten composition with this huge list of other works by Benjamin Britten on the back cover," the composer recalls. "Even then, I wanted to have my own list like that."

He stops. "I'm gay," he finally continues. "I don't have kids of my own. These works of music are my kids. I want them to live as a voice in the chaos speaking about the times we live in. Each time I set pencil to paper, I'm excited about exalting another voice." Even when that voice sounds familiar, almost as if it had already happened this way before, much like that kid on Long Island pawing through those pages of *Porgy and Bess*, making his way down a road uncertain toward a destination waiting to be found.

The Montreal Opera will present Ricky Ian Gordon's "27" between March 23 and March 31 at the Centaur Theatre located on 453 St. Francois Xavier St. For tickets and more information, call 514-985-2258 or visit operademontreal.com.

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