

CIM Opera Theater: JJ Hudson
directs *Dialogues of the Carmelites*

by Mike Telin



Francis Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites* recounts a fictionalized version of the real-life story of the Martyrs of Compiègne, a group of Carmelite nuns who, during the closing days of the Reign of Terror, were guillotined in Paris for refusing to renounce their vocation.

On Friday, March 3 at 7:30 pm and Sunday, March 5 at 3:00 pm, CIM Opera Theater will present Poulenc's haunting opera directed by JJ Hudson. Harry Davidson conducts the CIM Orchestra. Tickets are available [online](#).

Since 2021, JJ Hudson has been Professor of Opera at Georgia State University and was recently appointed Artistic Director of the Harrower Summer Opera Workshop. His upcoming productions include *A Little Night Music* for Opera in the Ozarks, *Ariadne auf Naxos* for Lakes Area Music Festival, and *La serva padrona*, *Dido and Aeneas*, and *Our Town* for Georgia State University Opera Theater.

I caught up with the director by phone and began our conversation by asking him about his history with Poulenc's opera.

JJ Hudson: This is my first time directing it. Of course, I've seen it many times. It's one of those operas that has been on my wish list for a very long time. I've directed many of what we might call "nun operas." But this is a very different opera than *Suor Angelica*, but equally, if not more compelling.

Mike Telin: Will it be sung in French?

JH: Yes, with English supertitles. Cleveland Institute of Music is fortunate to have as one of its full-time coaches Dr. François Germain, who is a native French speaker. So he's been able to coach the students very well on the French language and dialects. And

having him in the process makes this extremely text-driven opera possible to do with young artists.

MT: What is your approach to staging such a text-driven piece?

JH: For one thing, this work is dramatically rich. It premiered in 1957, but it has its roots in historical truth, which was novelized by Gertrud von Le Fort. Then it was made into a screenplay that was never produced, and then a play. So by the time Poulenc gets to it, it already has a rich literary tradition.

When I'm working with a young cast, we spend a lot of time at the beginning of each staging rehearsal examining the dialogue, making sure that the English translation and our understanding of the French text is clear. And asking questions of the text — trying to find the intention behind it.

And again, because it is so text-driven, the singers are experiencing things they may not have in other works. Yes, the voice is there, but it is there as a delivery mechanism of text. There's no florid musical line to hide behind. And there are very few places where the music comes to the fore independent of text.

This is not a show of high physical action. It is a series of fifteen tableaux, almost postcards, and each one is another chapter in a narrative that takes place across four years.

MT: It is a tough piece to wrap your head around.

JH: Yes. And if anyone knows anything about it, they know the final scene — and it is an extraordinary final scene. But there is a full two-plus hours before that. And those scenes are miniatures — Poulenc is a master of the miniature, in his songs and in his chamber works. So the audience might come for the final scene the way they might come to hear Beethoven 9 — and wait for the final movement.

But we hope to present them with engaging theater so that they will forget that they're waiting for that final scene. It is in those preceding scenes that we get to know and care for these nuns.

MT: Yes, you need to know why they chose to do what they did — they could have easily just closed up shop and moved someplace else.

JH: Right. There is this wonderful scene where the revolutionaries have kicked them out of the convent and are congratulating them for having made the right choice. But the nuns

are still meeting in secret. So yes, they could have just blended into the civilian population right there in Paris, or France, they wouldn't have had to even go to another country. But they were intent on maintaining their religion.

And we've got to know the nuns as individuals: even though they're in the convent and have taken the vow of poverty, they are still human. They have desires and there is some internal politics in the convent, and some of that is very much a part of the libretto. And to bring all of that out adds additional layers of intrigue to the choices that these nuns make.

MT: How do you go about preparing a young cast who probably have never contemplated becoming a nun?

JH: There is a lot of context necessary for this show — historical and religious. The inside of the convent was not a place where outsiders were welcomed, so it's a bit of a mystery.

When working with young students — and I do the same thing with *Suor Angelica* — I have a first meeting to discuss my own study of convent life. I rely heavily on a wonderful book by Silva Evangelisti simply called *Nuns: A History of Convent Life*. It's a recent Oxford University Press book that takes us inside the convent and introduces us to the ritual and the daily life of the nuns. The scholarship is great. So I introduce them to the basics — the vows they've taken and the hierarchy of nuns.

What is interesting to me is that in this opera, we experience the Reign of Terror and the Revolution on the peripheries. We experience it like the nuns who are almost always in the convent, and the information comes to them from the outside. We hear the shouts — there's a lot of backstage shouting and off-stage singing of revolutionary songs.

But we are like the nuns. They have a cloistered life — a daily ritual — and four years pass. And so the audience is experiencing the Revolution as the nuns are — which is a very interesting way to experience the French Revolution.

MT: Since this is your first time directing it, are you having fun?

JH: Oh my gosh yes, I'm enjoying it a lot. I have to say that CIM is a very special place. I can tell in terms of the faculty involvement with students — their concern and care for them. And the students all have an excellent attitude. Not only am I enjoying the work, but I'm enjoying the process here with these people.

MT: Last question, how did you get into opera?

JH: I came to opera through a winding path. I started as a music theory/composition major and started my masters in composition. But I was always a singer and involved in theater and I just happened to fall in with the “opera crowd.” My mentor at Eastman was Steve Daigle — who is of course the artistic director of Ohio Light Opera — and when I worked with him, I said, ‘I want to be a director. I want to make good opera.’ So I did my degree in directing at Eastman and I struck out to be a freelance director. It took awhile to get going, but once you get a foot in the door, contacts grow exponentially. But when I was starting my career, if you would have told me that I would be an opera director, I would have had no idea what you were talking about.

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